

# Jewish Art?

Sander L. Gilman

Let us begin with what “Jewish Art” (or anything else) is *not*. Michael P. Kramer has attempted to provide a set of criteria to define “Jewish” literature.<sup>1</sup> For him Jewish literature is either literature written by Jews (however defined), or evidencing specific culture-based Jewish criteria. Such a literature can be written in what is agreed upon through consensus as a Jewish language, but as such it may well not deal with any Jewish questions or indeed even be written by a Jew (*pace* the Hebrew fiction of Anton Shammas). It may focus on the fantasies of Jewish characters or emerge from a fictional recounting of Jewish historical experience. In their responses a wide range of critics undertook their own definition of “Jewish” literature. It may thus be anti-iconic (Geoffrey Hartman); liturgical (Cynthia Ozick); therapeutic and prophetic (Leslie Fiedler); marked by laughter and trembling (Saul Bellow); or even by the absence of any common language, territory, or culture (Sacvan Bercovitch). (298)

Kramer, on the other hand, states that “to be considered a Jewish writer, in my view, one need not use a ‘Jewish’ language, or exhibit certain ‘Jewish literary characteristics, or address certain ‘Jewish’ subjects, or even know how to ask the ‘Jewish’ question. One need only be a writer of Jewish extraction, a member of the Jewish race.” (290) Or, “We cannot escape race, not if we insist on a category called ‘Jewish literature.’” (313) “Race” seems to demand to be translated as ethnicity rather than biology, but it does have strong echoes of both the earlier use by Horace Kallen and the more recent use in the discourse of multiculturalism.<sup>2</sup> Kallen’s early view of the Jews was that they possessed primarily a cultural rather than national identity and thus the creative impulse as defined in Europe (high art, music, theater) defined their contribution to Diaspora culture.

Kramer’s article was followed by critical responses from other literary scholars in the field for whom the confusion between ethnicity

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and that horrid, dated, frightening category of “race” needed to be teased apart. (322-349). While Kramer clearly conflates and confuses “extract” and “race” as the former does not necessarily contain a biological sense, the latter does. There is a heavy, meaningful, and non-reductive use of “race” within the claims of “Jewish” culture, today re-enforced by the pseudo-scientific claims of a “Jewish” genotype. For all of its claims of culture as the product of individual endeavor, the ghost of race haunts much of this literature.

What can we do to abandon such unwieldy and untenable definitions of “Jewish culture”? Perhaps it is to link overt or covert artistic intent with a “Jewish” visual vocabulary that is so recognized by a community of viewers. This does not simplify but rather makes the issue much more complex.

Artistic intent may be manifest or unconscious (depending on your theory). It may reduce you as a critic to “mere” biography-ism (how Jewish was Balthus?), or force you to root out the highly submerged (but present) sublimated or repressed signs of Jewishness (whatever you decide they are) as in the case of Camille Pissarro’s world. What do you do with the Israeli artists (who will remain nameless) who paint in a nostalgic “Jewish” style for the tourist galleries, a nostalgia for a world that never existed? How different is this from the intent of Jewish artists (such as Arthur Szyk or Boris Schatz or Ephraim Moses Lilien) who wished to create a “Jewish” art for the Zionist promise?

A “Jewish semiotics” of art may, likewise, be multilayered and contradictory. Is the use of the Hebrew alphabet a sure sign of the communication of Jewish identity? (The alphabet engravings of Ben Shahn or the paintings of Samuel Bak but what about the New Zealand Christian artist Richard Thompson, who also uses the Hebrew alphabet.) Is the use of “Jewish” titles or “Midrash”? (R. B. Kitaj’s work is often accompanied by such titles and explanations, but most have to do with a “Jewish” Diaspora identity. Any one seeking a “religious” reading of such work, as is regularly done with Bak, is clearly on the wrong track to understanding Kitaj’s sense of “Jewish” art, but this is equally true of the readings of Charlotte Solomon’s work.) What about the use of an overt “Jewish” reference (such as Max Liebermann’s kosher chicken)? Can even “Christian” semiotics carry “Jewish” meaning (Barnett Newman’s or Marc Chagall’s “Crucifixions”)? If the sign systems are unconscious then we have even greater problems, for, as Freud was quick to point out, we dream and desire in visual signs, each of them adapting our daily experience to the needs to

the unconscious. Is there a “Jewish” unconscious that enables even those who subscribe to the prohibition against graven images to have a “Jewish” semiotic system? (Or do we always look at day residue in terms of what aspects or importance things “Jewish” have in such appropriations?)

Then we are left with the community of the interpreters. And here we may well have the true litmus test for “Jewish” anything. For if pornography, *pace* US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in 1967, is in the eye of the beholder, then the community that sees the work of art as “Jewish” defines “Jewish.” For the entire multiple histories of the Jews, there have always been consensuses about what is or is not Jewish enough to be Jewish. These claims have always been contested. They exist parallel in differing communities from the Hellenistic settlements to the medieval Rhine Valley to 17th-century Amsterdam to today’s Jerusalem or Brooklyn or New York and beyond. At any moment, like Robert Frost’s seemingly impermeable wall, each seems to be ridged and uncompromising, labeling *its* tradition as authentic. Yet over time and space there is always constant negotiation, compromise, and contestation about what is or is not “Jewish” enough. In 1996 Norman L. Kleeblatt created the *Too Jewish?* exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York. Works such as Dennis Karden’s *Jewish Noses* (1993-1995) or Adam Rolston’s *Nose Job* (1991) dealt with the double question of using uncomfortable, indeed anti-Semitic images about the Jewish body images to expose them to ridicule but also use them to shape a new “Jewish” artistic language. The show’s origin, as Kleeblatt noted in the catalogue, was when he saw the work of Archie Rand who commented that his work might be “‘too Jewish’ to show even in the Jewish Museum.”<sup>3</sup> But “‘too Jewish’” art has come now to be comfortably understood as “Jewish art.”

The pace of this negotiation was slower in the Hellenistic period than in the nineteenth century. The given assumption was that the community had to see itself as cohesive, often localized in a physical space (even if existing in a Diaspora from that space), and seemingly long-lived. Thus we can speak of local traditions of “Jewish” art in North Africa, Western and Central Europe, Russia, and perhaps even China. Indeed, within seemingly isolated geographic area multiple notions of “Jewish” art and culture developed. One always seemed to predominate but the truth is that the consensus about any given definition wiggles and wobbles as other views are articulated. Each

of these clusters in turn was contested internally over time; as consensus appeared they became the community's definition of "Jewish" art.

By the twenty-first century the ability to create virtual communities, which may exist for a fleeting moment, shows how powerful yet malleable all such definitions of "Jewish" culture are. Multiple views can exist simultaneously and visibly, each arguing its own case globally to audiences that may either acknowledge or doubt its claims. While I find the science of "Jewish genetics" unpersuasive, even this has created a sense of "cousinhood" which some virtual communities find sufficient to define a shared "Jewish culture," now that of a shared predisposition to illness.

Today the pace of the generation of "Jewish" art and culture is rapid; the forms multiple, the audiences rabid in their claims for their own authenticity. Even "Jewish" kitsch now has collectors, who revel in its post-modernity. In the end it is the competing notions of "Jewish" authenticity that makes "Jewish" art "Jewish." Walter Benjamin was right in the sense that there is an aura that permeates the work of art; what he was wrong about was that it came from the art itself: it comes from the commitment of the individual, seeing him or herself as part of a self-defined collection, to see and feel (for good or for ill) the "Jewishness" of the work of art.

- 1 Michael P. Kramer, "Race, Literary History, and the 'Jewish Question'," *Prooftexts* 21 (2001), pp. 287-321 as well as the responses, 321-65; see also Hana Wirth-Nesher, ed., *What is Jewish Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002).
- 2 Horace Kallen, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot: A Study of American Nationality (1915)," in Werner Sollors, ed., *Theories of Ethnicity* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1996), p. 86. see also Erika Sunada, "Revisiting Horace M. Kallen's Cultural Pluralism: A Comparative Analysis," *Journal of American and Canadian Studies* 18 (2000) pp. 51-76.
- 3 Norman L. Kleeblatt, ed., *Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1997), p. ix.