

Jewish Expression in Modern Art

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Jewish expression in the plastic arts had once been confined to objects made for Jews. It never developed its own style but only some guidelines pertaining to subject matter. Whereas this lack of a Jewish style is equally true in modern art, these guidelines have been tossed aside and new parameters have been created. One area of Jewish expression that has stayed tied to tradition involves the artist's personal relation to the foundations of Judaism. This can be expressed, as in the past, by depicting Biblical scenes, prayer, or the spiritual quality of Jerusalem, or by depicting God in a new abstract way appropriate to Judaism, as in Barnett Newman's paintings of *The Name* of 1949-50. However, one could also express negative feelings about Judaism and anger with God because of the Holocaust, as Samuel Bak did in painting the broken Tablets of the Law from the mid-1970s on.

Portraying Jewish experiences is another traditional way to express Judaism, although the experiences have expanded to include immigration, assimilation, pogroms, and the Holocaust, as well as Zionism, the State of Israel and its wars. These last experiences could involve an expression of empathy with the Holy Land through landscapes, or criticism of Israel's politics and status as was clearly seen in the *Borders* exhibition, held in 1980 at the Israel Museum.

These new types of Jewish experience also caused artists to deliberate over the problem of their personal identity, often changing their minds under the influence of external events and through contact with anti-Semitism. Thus in 1876, Maurycy Gottlieb affirmed his feelings of alienation from European society by depicting himself as Ahasver, the Wandering Jew, while in 1878, he stressed his feelings of belonging to, but being different from, the Jewish community in *Yom Kippur*. In like manner, R. B. Kitaj could "come out of the closet" as a

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Jew in his *Marrano* (The Secret Jew) of 1976 and stress his constant feelings of alienation as a Jew in his *Diasporist Manifesto* of 1989.

The counterpart to this inner dialogue is found in an external dialogue with the Christian world. Whereas this dialogue had been inherent in Jewish art for many centuries, it had remained hidden, understood only by the Jewish community, while the modern dialogue is straightforward. It can take the form of apologetics, as when, in 1876, Gottlieb depicted Shylock as a loving patriarch betrayed by his daughter. Or this modern dialogue can be an attempt to change Christian behavior, as when Mark Antokolsky portrayed Jesus as a Jew in 1873 to express the idea that in killing Jews, Christians were killing Jesus' people. This use of Christian imagery to communicate with Christians became common in Jewish art after Marc Chagall began to use the crucified Jesus as a symbol of martyred Jewry in the 1930s.

New forms of Jewish expression will doubtless be added to in the future as our experiences of Judaism and of our place in the world changes.