

Is There an Identifiable Jewish Element in the Works of Jewish Artists?

Daniel Sperber

The questions, “What is Jewish Art?” or “Is there such a thing as Jewish Art?” have troubled scholars for well over a hundred years. I myself tried partially to confront these questions over forty years ago, in an article published in the journal *Judaism* in the winter of 1963. (It was reprinted in a volume entitled *Art in Judaism: Studies in the Jewish Artistic Experience*, edited by Robert Gordis and Moshe Davidowitz, New York 1975, pp. 81-88: “Trends in Modern Jewish Art”.) The questions are complex and probably need to be broken down into a variety of categories. Firstly, there is the issue of the portrayal of Jewish themes, both on the part of Jewish artists and on the part of non-Jewish ones. Very frequently one can discover clearly different interpretations of the same theme depending upon the religious, and even ethnic identity of the artist. This is most obvious in the Christological iconographic details found in the portrayal of Old Testament scenes by Christian painters. On the other hand, Jewish themes painted or expressed by Jewish artists usually display something of the Jewish viewpoint, or conversely react against it, thus revealing the artist’s inner struggle with his Jewish roots. (See my discussion in the article referred to above, pp. 84-87.)

Then there is the question of style. Do, for example, paintings by Jewish artists, which have no clear Jewish thematic content, such as still lifes, landscape paintings, etc., nonetheless have some underlying stylistic element or characteristic of some kind that we can identify as Jewish? Do the portraits of Modigliani and his prostitutes (!), or the landscapes and streetscapes of Pissarro reflect a glimmering of “Jewishness?” In my article I argued that they do. But, here again, really there is no single clear answer, and some may say yes, as indeed I did, and some may not. Does an Antokolsky sculpture of Ivan the

Prof. Daniel Sperber is President of the Institute of Advanced Torah Studies at Bar Ilan University and recipient of the Israel Prize in 1992 for his rabbinic research. He has been active in setting up educational frameworks for art education in schools, colleges, and universities. Sperber is a member of the Steering Committee of The Adi Foundation and has served as a judge for the Adi Prize for Jewish Expression in Art and Design.

Terrible or Peter the Great have something of Jewish expression? – I am doubtful. Does his sculpture of *The Kiss of Judas Iscariot*? – I think maybe. Of the Jewish impressionists I then wrote, and still agree with this assessment forty-three years later (ibid. p.87):

The Jew could never approach art purely intellectually: It was from intellectualism that he tried to escape to the freedom of emotionalism (and no doubt that is why there were no Jewish Pointillists – except, perhaps, the late Pissarro). Thus, we find Jewish artists instilling a deeper emotional dimension into the impressionistic framework (Israels, Liebermann, Hirzenberg).

The objectivity of the impression (if one can speak of such a thing) is tinged with the tenderness of associations, at times perhaps sentimental but sometimes attaining to the zeniths of Romanticism. It is more than mere Impressionism; besides recording the impression, it explains it. It is four-dimensional Impressionism, where the fourth dimension is conscious personality.

That is what makes Israels so outstanding among Impressionists, and renders it difficult to place him in any ordinary category.

This also holds true of Liebermann and, perhaps, Max Weber (who was more a Post-Impressionist), if to a lesser extent.

Was there something intrinsically Jewish in the artistic expression of the so-called “Jewish School of Montparnasse?” Maybe in some of the works of some of its members, most obviously Chagall, but perhaps also Chana Orloff, Ossip Zadkine, Jacques Lipchitz, and at times Moise Kisling. But in many one may look in vain for any traces of Jewishness.

The questions are legion, and perhaps unanswerable. Can, for example, an “authentic” Jew occlude all Jewishness from his artistic creativity? I am doubtful. Hints will lurk within his works, be they symbolic or stylistic, or deeply hidden or vaguely associative. But the discerning viewer ultimately will reveal them. This is my personal view, a “gut feeling,” not based on comprehensive analysis, and not grounded in “hard fact.” And others may well argue that this conclusion is the result of a subjective self-deluded desire. Each position probably has its element of truth as seen from its own individual viewpoint.