

# The Nature and Essence of Jewish Art

Adin Steinsaltz

Any discussion about the nature and essence of Jewish art depends, first and foremost, on its definition. Being that no long-standing, single tradition of Jewish art exists (and, so far as it does exist, it is connected to specific places and times), we must begin any inquiry with the question: What is Jewish art? The question yields three fundamental definitions, each of which, to a certain extent, is called upon when discussing or exhibiting Jewish art.

One definition concerns content: themes from the Bible or other Jewish literature, topics from Jewish history, Jewish customs, or even ritual articles. One practical but significant problem with this definition is that many works of art that are included in it were made by non-Jewish artists, and they belong, essentially, to other fields of art, which are, themselves, well-defined. Many paintings and sculptures that depict Jewish characters belong to the domain of general art or Christian art. Many masterpieces of the great artists can be included in this definition, although whether they are Jewish art is questionable. The problem exists not only when we speak about art located in churches or in general, public exhibitions, but also regarding objects in synagogues, and even patently Jewish, ceremonial objects. Even an artist who receives exact instructions about certain features is still bound to alien, non-Jewish, motifs and artistic styles. We see this not only in synagogue architecture, but also in the design of various ritual articles. One finds synagogues in which the specific features accord to the *Halakhah* (and the *halakhic* rulings regarding this are not many), but which, generally and primarily, correspond to the artistic trends of that particular place and time. Also Hanukkah lamps or objects used in the havdalah ceremony may be alien to anything Jewish, to a great extent. From the Middle

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In 1965, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz founded the Israel Institute for Talmudic Publications and, from that time on, has dedicated himself to the monumental goal of writing a translation and commentary to the Talmud. In 1984 Rabbi Steinsaltz established the Makor Haim Schools in Jerusalem, schools that reflect his unique educational world-view. In 1988, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz received the Israel Prize for his life's work. He has served as a judge for the Adi Prize for Jewish Expression in Art and Design.

Ages on, we have portraits of Jews that were made by non-Jews, even including genre paintings. While such works (whether they represent important art or not) may be used as historical sources, there is nothing distinctively Jewish about them.

Another definition concerns the artists: works of art by Jewish artists. Also here we find an essential problem. Certainly many works of art in the last generations were made by Jewish artists, and are counted among the great artworks of their time. And yet, these works essentially belong with the general art of the period (even when the subject is Jewish – from Jewish sources or from the Jewish milieu), and their Jewish facet is of a nationalistic, not essential, nature. There is justification for displaying or assembling such works, in that they make us proud of the potential of Jewish talent, but no more than that. In truth, it is like displaying the work of Jewish innovators in medicine or mathematics – where the product, itself, represents nothing intrinsically Jewish.

Consequently, there is meaning only in the use of another indicator, i.e. defining Jewish art according to its style and means of expression, and not by content or artist. Stating the situation clearly, we see that the difficulty is not in finding a Jewish artist's depiction of a biblical figure, but in searching for a "Jewish tree" (*"etz yehudi"*): a depiction of anything that, merely on the basis of its artistic style, expresses its singular character.

Because of artistic styles – which belong to particular periods or places – we know how to discern and recognize even when the subject matter or artist is not from that period or place. One can define Baroque art or Impressionism, and one distinguishes a Japanese painting or a Persian miniature not only when the painting depicts a Japanese or Persian figure but also a tree or waterfall. In the same way, Jewish art must be discernable in and of itself, on the basis of its unique style.

Such a style does not now exist, and, actually, it is what must be the object of this quest, the quest for a mode of expression (not subjects for art but an artistic style). The mission is twofold. On the one hand, it includes a theoretical search that begins with the review and appraisal of Jewish art from the past, and an attempt to find some common denominator between them: similar modes of expression, comparable idioms. Attempts have already been made in a number of fields to find common features between Jewish art from different places and periods, but mostly what is needed is to seek

out and evaluate. In the same way, a more abstract study would be useful for reflecting on internal guidelines, which are connected to the fundamental fields of Judaism. There is also, of course, the other quest: It is through the work of the artists themselves, not only in the modes by which they express their individual nature, but also in the way they strive to express Jewish qualities and essential ideas in idioms unique to them, that the style might be discovered: the expression of Jewish art.