Marc Michael Epstein, ed.

Skies of Parchment—Seas of Ink: Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Marc Michael Epstein's most recent effort in the field of Jewish Art History is easier to read than it is to review. *Skies of Parchment—Seas of Ink: Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts*, a collaborative work edited by Epstein and also containing substantial contributions by him, is difficult to categorize. Pitched to a general audience yet published by an academic press (Princeton), replete with state of the art questions and methodology yet lacking footnotes, the book is a thematic treatment of Jewish illumination from its earliest surviving witnesses until well beyond the development of printed books, with a geographic scope to match. In addition to its thematic chapters such as, "No Graven Image: Permitted Depictions, Forbidden Depictions, and Creative Solutions," and "In the Royal Court: Jewish Illumination in an Age of Printing," the book perhaps idiosyncratically contains a well-illustrated technical excursus by illuminator Barbara Wolff (40–45) and concludes with a chapter on contemporary Jewish illumination as well as an annotated bibliography for those wishing to continue their explorations. Many of its thirteen chapters are further thematized into sections that are often written by Epstein and another author. On the one hand, its collaborative spirit reflects the complexities of a field whose generally unsigned objects have origins ranging from thirteenth-century Iberia to nineteenth-century Persia, which makes a learned, polyglot crew a necessity for their interrogation. On the other hand, it reflects Epstein's stated interest in engaging with scholars of various stripes, both within and outside the field of Jewish Art.

As material produced by and for Jews—a generally marginalized if not oppressed minority wherever they lived—nearly all Jewish Art can be considered "an encounter" with the majority culture. This situation is intensified by Judaism's complicated relationship with the image and the host culture's reliance on the image (in the case of Christianity) or denial of the image (in the case of Islam) in religious settings. Epstein's book presents this ongoing and essential confrontation in a variety of case studies. But the material he and his collaborators present is not limited to encounters with the host culture; some may also be encounters between Jewish constituencies as well. Far flung Jewish communities in the Diaspora are shown to encounter one another in Rome in the second section of chapter four, which maps the four corners of the medieval Jewish World. Similarly, artistic renderings of Jerusalem bear witness to yet another—albeit idealized—encounter both in section one of chapter four, "Erez Yisrael/The Land of Israel: Homeland and Center," authored

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by Epstein, and in chapter ten, "Zion and Jerusalem: 'The Sum of all Beauty, the Joy of all the Earth,'" authored by Shalom Sabar.

In his introduction (11), Epstein explains what makes this book different from a traditional survey of Jewish Illumination, stating, "We'll look at the way the flow of the narrative is conveyed over sequences of illuminations in various manuscripts, and at the ways in which themes are transmitted, comparing and contrasting East and West and the Jewish and non-Jewish use of motifs throughout various time periods." These various time periods referenced by Epstein bring us to the second question concerning the relevance of this book to readers of *Medieval Encounters*: what constitutes the Middle Ages for Jews? A number of the examples discussed in the volume, the Rothschild Miscellany, for example, come from Italy. This is not surprising since scholarly investigations of Italy's Jewish communities are particularly vibrant. But the manuscripts produced in these communities date from the second half of the fifteenth century, a period the rest of the art historical world would call the Renaissance. Likewise, in chapter six, "Iconography: Telling the Story," Epstein's examples include fourteenth-century Iberian Haggadot, seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Judeo-Persian works, and the fourteenth-century German manuscript formerly known as the "Birds' Head Haggadah" (here renamed by Epstein "The Griffins' Head Haggadah"). A Yiddish *Minhag* manuscript (book of customs), dating to the early sixteenth century and containing marginal drawings, is discussed by Diane Wolfthal in chapter eleven. It is clearly an eclectic mix.

Epstein addresses the question of periodization thus:

> It used to be thought that the Middle Ages continued for the Jewish minority in Ashkenaz until the French Revolution swept away their chains—both political and psychological. Such a simplification, born out of the desire of nineteenth-century scholars to usher in a new, modern, free, and enlightened Jewry, does violence to the richness and complexity of Jewish and non-Jewish European cultural history, removing "Jewish" from "European" culture. Rather, in a peculiarly Jewish way, Jews were always part of European culture, whether medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, or revolutionary. Often, they were even its touchstones. (72)

Despite Epstein's curtailment of the Jewish Middle Ages, there is still much of interest for readers of *Medieval Encounters* to find in *Skies of Parchment/Seas of Ink*. Chapter four, which maps the four corners of the Medieval Jewish world (Israel; Italy; Ashkenaz; Sepharad and Arav), concludes with a historiographical section discussing the problem of "national style" and how this has limited

study of Jewish art. Written with Eva Frojmovic, chapter five ("No Graven Image: Permitted Depictions, Forbidden Depictions, and Creative Solutions") investigates the complications implied by the Second Commandment prohibition against graven images for medieval Jews in a thoughtful way. In addition, a section written by Epstein revisits the so-called Birds' Head Haggadah—material that is probably familiar to many readers. Chapter six ("Iconography: Telling the Story") is a rich exploration of narrative sequences made by and for Jews in Ashkenaz, Sepharad, and Arav. One topic addressed in this chapter is the role midrash and religious polemic played in developing biblical illuminations. Chapter eight ("This World: Centered on the Home—Women, Marriage, and the Family"), with contributions by Shalom Sabar, Agnes Vetõ, and Epstein himself, examines the connections between Jewish women—as makers, users, and depicted subjects—in manuscripts. Two sections are written by Epstein: one which appropriately questions whether the "glimpses of Jewish life" we find in illuminated manuscripts present reality or illusion, the second which introduces the topic of marginalia. The chapter concludes with a brief excursus by Vetõ on "the Sacred and the Profane," which discusses images of naked women in the Haggadah. Chapter nine ("Other Worlds: Fantastic Horizons and Unseen Universes"), written with Hartley Lachter, investigates a little-studied realm: the relationship between Kabbalah and illumination. All of these chapters highlight medieval examples, although the discussion at hand is often expanded to include materials from much later periods.

Most likely, chapter seven, "Dialogue and Disputation: Cultural Negotiation," would constitute the heart of the book for readers invested in things medieval and in cultural encounters. Epstein begins this chapter with a discussion of the medieval ghetto, problematizing what he deems largely to have been a myth in terms of physical limitations on Jews but a reality in terms of their social interactions with non-Jews. In this chapter, the newer scholarship that recognizes a dialogue between Jews and non-Jews in the medieval world—rather than enforced separation—informs Epstein's analysis of a variety of illuminated manuscripts. Epstein recognizes the "deception" yielded by the superficial similarity that some Jewish manuscripts bear to Latin or vernacular Christian manuscripts. Since Jewish illumination was stylistically syncretistic; viewers might expect the meaning in borrowed imagery to remain the same in its new setting. On the contrary, Epstein's careful reading of these transplanted and adapted motifs reveals the adaptive creativity of medieval Jewish illuminators/patrons.

A gifted communicator with an infectious enthusiasm for his material, Epstein is a master of visual analysis. Here, he is at his best when revisiting the Golden Haggadah's narrative sequence—images and connections he has

pondered for many years. In a single image and across a narrative sequence, Epstein is able to synthesize Jewish lore and iconographic motifs to reveal a deeper meaning that pervades the manuscript as a whole. This meaning is then interrogated within a larger context that includes art making as well as other cultural, political, or theological preoccupations. Given the depth of Epstein's analysis, the lack of footnotes can be frustrating at times. For example, in his study of the Golden Haggadah's depiction of the Drunkenness of Noah (fol. 3r discussed on p. 134), Epstein references Noah's sons Shem and Japhet covering their father's nakedness and the evidence of his castration. One searches in vain for an account of youngest son Ham's castration of Noah in Genesis 9:22; this is a later rabbinic interpretation which builds on Noah's reaction upon waking. Most readers would welcome an explanatory footnote here.

Because of its untraditional aims and format, *Skies of Parchment/Seas of Ink* contains a treasure trove of illuminated materials made for Jews. These are lavishly illustrated throughout the volume; thanks are due to Princeton University Press for making these objects accessible. Superstar manuscripts such as the Golden Haggadah make appearances here, as do lesser known examples—not books—such as the Scrolls of Esther (Megillot) and the devotional placards known as shivitis meant to hang on the wall of a home or on a reader's desk. A connection between these diverse objects is forged by virtue of their handiwork and their Jewishness, whether or not their makers were actually Jews. Due to its eclecticism and intended audience, Epstein's book teeters on the edge between being an old-fashioned survey book and a forward-looking study of objects in context. Teeters, but never quite falls, due to his and his co-authors' ability to thematize the material and subject it to contemporary questions and methodologies.

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