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Jews, Judaism and the Visual Arts

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It seems almost obligatory for explorations of “Jewish art” to begin with a discussion of the allegedly crippling effect of the Second Commandment upon the entire production of visual culture by Jews. In reality, rabbinic interpretation of that commandment was quite circumscribed and eminently reasonable, banning only the creation of three-dimensional works of art intended for worship by Jews. Jews, therefore, were free to create works of visual culture, and did so throughout the ages, with enthusiasm and creativity. In earlier periods, the works they produced were usually more in the realm of material culture than fine art *per sé*. Before the sixteenth century, by far the largest number of monuments of “Jewish art” were two-dimensional, ranging from synagogue ornamentation and decoration to the illumination of books and manuscripts. The primary role of such works of art was *hiddur mizvah*, the beautification of the performance of the commandments, and so although they can be very beautiful, they function more as material culture— in this case, tools of religious observance— than as monuments of aesthetic creativity.

A signal transformation took place in the sixteenth century—not the only one by any means, but a very important one because it represents the quantum shift towards a more self-conscious artistic production that I would argue characterizes this period in the realm of Jewish visual culture: Moses and Esther began to matter. Previously, for instance, the illustrated Passover *haggadah* had been as empty of visual reference to Moses as the traditional *haggadah* text is devoid of literary reference to him. But with the advent of printed *haggadot*, one begins to note the increasing importance of depictions of

events from the life of Moses. At the same time, emerging from similarly monied and often courtly *milieux*, one witnesses the creation of Esther scrolls illuminated with the narrative of the Purim story, and featuring depictions of Esther and the ladies of Ahashverosh's court in pearls and *decollete*, and of Mordekhai and the gentlemen of the court in black velvet and satin-lined capes. While it is indisputable that ritual objects and illuminated manuscripts were produced throughout the Middle Ages in order to enhance the observance of the festivals, and that the narrative of the Exodus or the story of Purim was important to medieval Jews, these valorizations of the protagonists of the Passover and Purim narrative are extraordinary — a new phenomenon ushering in a new era of Jewish visuality.

Why should this be? Perhaps it was something about the printed text: Though the structure of the illuminated manuscript — in terms of the format and placement of illustrations — was fairly rigid, its decoration and scribal embellishment could evince fluidity and capacity for improvisation. Notes could be added in the micrographic form of animals, plants and abstract designs; if a line ended short, the scribe could *s t r e t c h* the final word or letter to justify the edges of the column, etc. The illustrations painted free-form here tended to serve as visual *midrash*, illuminating particular associative, even political junctures in Jewish consciousness with reference to the story of the Exodus or of Purim. The format of the new printed *haggadot* was more rigid, more literal, if you will, engraving on the mind a particular and “official” story of the Exodus even as replicable, identical engravings were used to illustrate the text. Just as in the earliest days of the collation and redaction of the Oral Law, when the rabbis realized that creating a portable, user-friendly canon would preserve the tradition while at the same time fixing and solidifying it, leading to its potential ossification in the wrong hands, Jewish visual tradition loses something of its fluidity in the “age of mechanical reproduction.”

But it gains something as well.

Jewish visual culture in early modernity differs from that produced in the medieval period that preceded it in its self-consciousness as art. It becomes more sophisticated in terms of its self-understanding as a medium of communication, commodification and cultural reproduction. The early modern period is really the first historical context in which we find elaborately and finely crafted ritual objects in significant numbers. Very few ceremonial accoutrements survive from the Middle Ages. This may be due to the vicissitudes of history which resulted in such objects becoming casualties of a certain kind of “cultural mobility,” that type brought about by persecutions and expulsions. The fact that more examples survive from the early modern period attests to the increasing wealth and perceived stability of communities, not only in decorating public contexts like synagogues, but in private homes as well.

Jewish visual culture in the early modern age imports a courtly style characteristic of certain monuments of medieval Sephardic and Ashkenazic art. In the Middle Ages, the Jews commissioning illuminated *siddurim* and *haggadot* did so in an environment in which wealthy and powerful Christians were also engaged in patronage of illuminated manuscripts— in their case, books of hours and psalters. In a Christian context, paintings of biblical events and the lives of saints might depict everyone but the main protagonists (and sometimes in fact, including the main protagonists) wearing contemporary clothing, or portraits of the donors of the work itself might appear among the spectators of the event depicted. In medieval Jewish visual culture, those who commissioned the works of art (primarily manuscripts) often “put themselves in the picture” by depicting biblical protagonists as contemporary Jews, and even more interestingly, by juxtaposing them with dignified, courtly portrayals of the non-Jewish protagonists. These characters, such as Pharaoh, for instance, are afforded this visual courtesy in spite of the understanding both in the text and in the culture that these persons are morally evil. The non-Jewish “villains” are visually undifferentiated from the Jewish “heros.” This trend is continued among the courtly individuals in the early modern era who had the wherewithal to

commission beautiful ritual objects, illuminated *haggadot* that followed printed models, and elaborate *megillot*. These works bear witness to a similar, but even more dramatic sort of reflexive self-fashioning.

No one knows exactly why illuminated *megillot* begin to appear in this period. It certainly seems reasonable to cite the increased prominence of Spanish exiles who had converted to Christianity, and now, in places like Italy and the Lowlands, were re-joining the Jewish fold. They brought with them a veneration of Esther, who is the quintessential *conversa* —concealing her Jewish identity in order to better the plight of her people. Court Jews and others in the community could doubtless relate to, and quite likely had a great deal of respect for such a figure.

This example brings to light the fact that the most salient and lively characteristic of early modern Jewish visual culture is the the transposition of forms and motifs present in the wider culture in a distinctively Jewish key or idiom. This tendency—which had been percolating throughout the previous millenium and a half (at least) of Jewish visual culture in the context of a variety of societies in which Jews lived—comes to the fore in the early modern period and provides fascinating examples of cross-cultural collusion, even if unconscious, and the transference of motifs between milieux.

As the religious absolutism of the Catholic church is challenged, and Protestant architectural forms begin to dot the landscape, so too does synagogue architecture flourish in relationship with the variety of forms of sacred architecture among the Christian majority. Just as the rise of Protestantism broadens the stylistic possibilities for church architecture, so it does as well for synagogue architecture. One finds examples of fine Counter-Reformation-style Baroque synagogue architecture in Italy, not only in Venice and Padua, but further afield, in places like Casale Monferrato and Pitigliano, as well as in the Czech lands and Poland. In these synagogues, the elaborate Baroque altar at the front of the Christian structures is replaced as the focal point of the building with

Torah shrines (*'aron kodesh*) of similar design, though devoid of the ubiquitous angelic figures populating Counter-Reformation Baroque architecture. The *bima*, the raised platform at the center (or towards the back) of the synagogue used for the reading of the Torah, is increasingly a simulacrum of Bernini's *baldacchino* which marks a space similarly centrally situated and ritually significant in St. Peter's in the Vatican.

At the same time, the magnificent Amsterdam 'Esnoga (completed in 1675), and its imitator, Bevis Marks in London (1701) exhibit the clean lines and relative simplicity of classical Protestant churches, with pew-box style seating and the elimination of the too-explicitly Catholic Berninian canopy. The predilection here is for wood rather than marble or wood painted to imitate marble found in the Italian, Czech and Polish synagogues. In the 18th century, as tastes in architecture—both Catholic and Protestant—begin to merge into a distinctly “Empire” style, so too do synagogues in Vienna and Paris mingle clean Biedermeier lines with touches of ornament. In each case, the synagogues tend to fit harmoniously within the architectural settings of the majority cultures while maintaining the features necessary for a synagogue building. These include an eastern orientation when at all possible, skylights in appropriate locations to illumine the liturgical activity in particular parts of the building, specific architectural volumes, concavities and symmetries designed to accommodate the distinctive needs of Jewish worship. At the same time, for various reasons (some internally generated, and some externally legislated), synagogue architecture strives not to stand out overmuch in the larger urban context. Very often, as in the case of the London and the Vienna synagogues, for instance, the buildings are set back from the street, within courtyards bounded and fronted by secular buildings, or are built in such a way that one descends a flight of steps upon entering them. This of course, accords with the Psalmist's declaration, “from the depths I have called unto thee, O LORD,” (Psalms 130:1) but it also allows the buildings to conform to the stipulation legislated at various times in diverse places that synagogue buildings should not exceed church buildings in height.

This practice and its justification speak to the fact that in early modern synagogue architecture, formal parallels with the architecture of the larger society and practical considerations exist side by side with symbolic content in easy confluence. In the sixteenth century, one sees examples of fortress synagogues in the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, designed to resist invasions from the east by Ottomans, Russians and Walachians. Though fortification was clearly deemed a necessity and there were architectural parallels in fortified churches, the symbolic valence of a fortified stone synagogue—simultaneously defensive and defiant—may also make a statement about the particular mentalities of Jews in this place and period. Similarly, the less defensible but more phantasmagorically-decorated wooden synagogues of Poland/Ukraine, with their carpet-like interiors replicating the feeling of the Ottoman tent have their own, complex and more mystical/poetic symbolic language. They both parallel (and exceed in the elaboration of their interior design) the jointed wooden churches of the region.

Printed books are an important artistic context for Jews in the early modern period. A variety of type-forms develop, particularly in Italy and Amsterdam, some growing out of Christian Hebraist interest, others pioneered by the Jews themselves. These imitate the various types of manuscript handwriting, from square script to rabbinical hands, striving at the same time for balance and uniformity. It is in the early modern period that the configuration of Jewish printed books— all the paratextual elements that Jews eventually come to regard as *sine qua non*s of “Jewish” books, what is called *tsurat ha-daf*, “the configuration of the page”—come into being, in many cases the invention of non-Jewish printers. Illustrations— woodcut or engraved— borrowed from the wider printerly repertoire are Judaized in various ways, either by means of captions or by actual alteration to the plates themselves. This forms an interesting parallel to a phenomenon that has been going on since Hellenistic Judaism and certainly throughout the medieval period, wherein the formal and stylistic structure of distinctly non-Jewish literatures is adopted and adapted by Jews— in a Hebrew Arthurian romance, a joust held at Pentecost, for instance,

becoming one held at *Shavu'ot* time. The title pages of Jewish books are generally chosen from among templates available to both Jewish and non-Jewish printers, but they promote a particular aesthetic that becomes part of the Jewish symbolic universe. It stands to reason, for instance, that an element like a pair of columns flanking the title of a book, forming as they do a “gateway” through which the reader must enter in order to access the wisdom of the work in question is as susceptible to reading and interpretation as any text within that book. Accordingly, it is in this period that such elements as the *sha'ar*— the gateway— architectural, columned, or flanked by biblical figures— Adam and Eve, Moses and Aaron etc., develop as immediately recognizable “Jewish” motifs, even to the extent of being ascribed symbolic and in some cases mystical significance.

In the synagogue as well as in the home, there is an efflorescence of a variety of aesthetically embellished ritual objects. It is difficult, due to the aforementioned dearth of medieval examples of such objects, to say whether the creation of such objects is new to the early modern period. When, for instance, do Jews of a certain class stop using simple silver cups for *kiddush* (the prayer over wine sanctifying Sabbaths and holidays) and begin using cups designed— or at least elaborately decorated and inscribed— for the particular purpose of *kiddush*? When do they stop simply lining up clay or glass vessels on windowsills to form a Hannukah lamp and start commissioning integral Hannukah lamps in bronze or in silver? In the early modern period, for instance, spice boxes begin to resemble city towers, Torah finials are constructed in the form of particular church spires familiar to the denizens of particular towns, and the backplates of Hannukah lamps are made of the same elements which— with their Tritons, mermaids and seahorses, harpies, Pegasi and putti— were used in the wider cultural sphere to frame mirrors. Jewish religious objects that evoke a particular skyscape, or echo the religious architecture of a different faith, or incorporate elements from a distinctly Hellenistic mythology to celebrate a holiday ostensibly commemorating the victory of Judaism over Hellenism may seem jarring and strange to us, but they were part of the fusion of cultural

valences that was distinctive to Jewish early modernity. Each of these objects placed its user squarely within the stylistic and cultural context of her or his historical moment, proclaiming that Jew's membership in an aesthetic community that stretched beyond the constituency of Jews into the realm of the stylish, the *au courant*, the culture of luxury goods and fine living accessible to people of means regardless of religious commitments.

Elaborately decorated objects could also have political significance, though such significance could cut in more than one direction. A Polish brass or silver Hannukah lamp from the reign of Maria Theresa, ornamented with the Austro-Hungarian double-headed eagle could serve to project an image of loyalty to the Empress. At least, that is what would be seen from "outside the house" where such a lamp was lit. At the same time, the use of such a lamp in a ceremony traditionally commemorating the Jewish overthrow of religio-cultural tyranny, and the singing before it of a liturgical poem (*Ma'oz Tsur*) that hymns the overthrow of "the evil nation" (understood by early modern Jews to mean the political dominance of Christian Empire) would certainly invite another reading of this object from "inside the house": the desire for the overthrow of a regime that was calculatedly cruel and oppressive to Jews. Yet, these two very different readings of the object are deliberately juxtaposed and are not, in essence, contradictory. Jews did see themselves as loyal citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and behaved accordingly. At the same time, they hungered for justice and equity. Like disenfranchised and underrepresented populations in America, they felt a strong degree of anger at the inequities of their lot, but still felt that the system at least theoretically and idealistically had the potential to be a good one, and that, moreover, that this inequitable and sometimes inhospitable country remained their country, for all its faults. The Austro-Hungarian eagle is used on Hannukah lamps in the same manner in which the American eagle is used in mural painting in ghettos and *barrios* all over the American landscape—to betoken an ambivalent patriotism with all the very complicated associations characteristic of such a mixed understanding of the minority position in society, whether

that “minority” status is a product of actual demographics or of representation. It is important that the location for the lighting of such Hannukah lamps was the home. Hannukah lamps for synagogue use were larger, and tended to resemble the lampstand of the Temple in Jerusalem (substituting the eight branches prescribed for the celebration of Hannukah for the Temple lampstand’s seven). In some cases, Hannukah lamps made for synagogues might include a very small central finial depicting the eagle of Empire, but for the most part, examples of lamps in which this motif was dominant rather than peripheral were designed to be set on the windowsills of private homes. This situated the home as the primary site of the playing out of the political ambivalence I have adumbrated.

At the same time as political ambivalence was played out in the early modern Jewish home, that venue was equally a site of clarification, of *less* ambivalence with regard to other identity issues. Jews became more and more “at home” as it were, with art. As a middle or merchant class developed, so also did the middle class home become the site of figurative art, a form hitherto relegated to illuminated books and manuscripts owned by the very wealthy. Although there are scattered references in various medieval sources to what seem to be frescos painted in Jewish homes, it is only in the seventeenth century that we begin to see (or to read about, since not many survive) free-hanging paintings displayed on walls in the homes of “middle-class” Jews. As might be expected, given their origin in manuscript illumination and in emulation of the household art of the wider culture, these most usually depicted biblical and religious subjects, either framing texts or independent of them. But this period sees the first Jewish ventures into the creation of portraits of individuals— members of the family or prominent rabbinic figures. It is not without significance that early modernity, an era of increasing Jewish self-awareness, is also the locus of the burgeoning self-consciousness of portraiture. This new and quite literal way of “putting oneself in the picture” recalls more generalized medieval attempts to view the experiences of Jewish history through the lens of the present. But it

also echoes the distinctly new practice of valorizing Moses and Esther. The creation of rabbinic likenesses (with the attendant justification that “your eyes [should] see your teacher” [Isaiah 30:20]), and, most strikingly, of family portraiture, emphasizes that quintessentially early modern sense of self-conscious self-valuation. It says, effectively, “*Hineini*—here I am.” This seemingly simple statement in reality demands a triple self-consciousness: it requires a sense of situation in an historical context (“here”) a sense of self as individual (“I”) and an awareness of the force of the individual being can exert on the historical context by virtue of her or his existence within it (“am”).

Given the power of this self-assertion via the commissioning of portraiture by Jews, if we could be invisibly present to examine the furnishings of the room in which, say, an upper-middle class woman like Glückel of Hameln—with the self-awareness, the literacy, and the motivation to pen her memoirs—did her writing, it would come as no surprise, then, to find, alongside her purpose-designed Sabbath candlesticks, kiddush cups, and Hannukah lamp, an image of a biblical scene— David kneeling before Samuel as he is anointed King of Israel, and a portrait or portraits of her beloved husband or other family members. Such paintings and portraits were the intermediate steps in the direction of the involvement of Jews in the commission, and eventually in the creation of the “secular” or “fine” art. It is a large jump from the use of art in a strictly liturgical context to its employment in a secular context, yet, as I hope I have demonstrated, conditions in the early modern period conspired to make this not only possible, but relatively easy. It is a much smaller jump from the painting of free-hanging paintings and portraits to involvement in the creation of fine arts. Accordingly, besides their inherent importance in the cultural context of early modern Europe, the new purposes to which visual culture was put by Jews in this period and the questions they raise— in terms of politics, aesthetics and identity— are essential to the the development of the fine arts in the modern period, a development in which Jews would play an indisputably prominent role.