

# Jewish Art A Modern History



Samantha Baskind & Larry Silver

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# Jewish Art

*A Modern History*

Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver



REAKTION BOOKS

*To our children:  
Asher and Naomi  
Zachary and Laura  
Our own precious legacy.*

*And to all those who have no one to mourn for them.*

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# Contents

Introduction	7
1 A Prequel to Modernity	15
2 Inventing the Jewish Artist in Europe	39
3 Revolutions in Art and Politics	75
4 Art, America and Acculturation	115
5 Art and the Holocaust, Survival and Remembrance	163
6 Home to Israel	203
Conclusions: Diaspora and Homeland(s)	241
References	259
Select Bibliography	283
Acknowledgements	297
Photo Acknowledgements	299
Index	303

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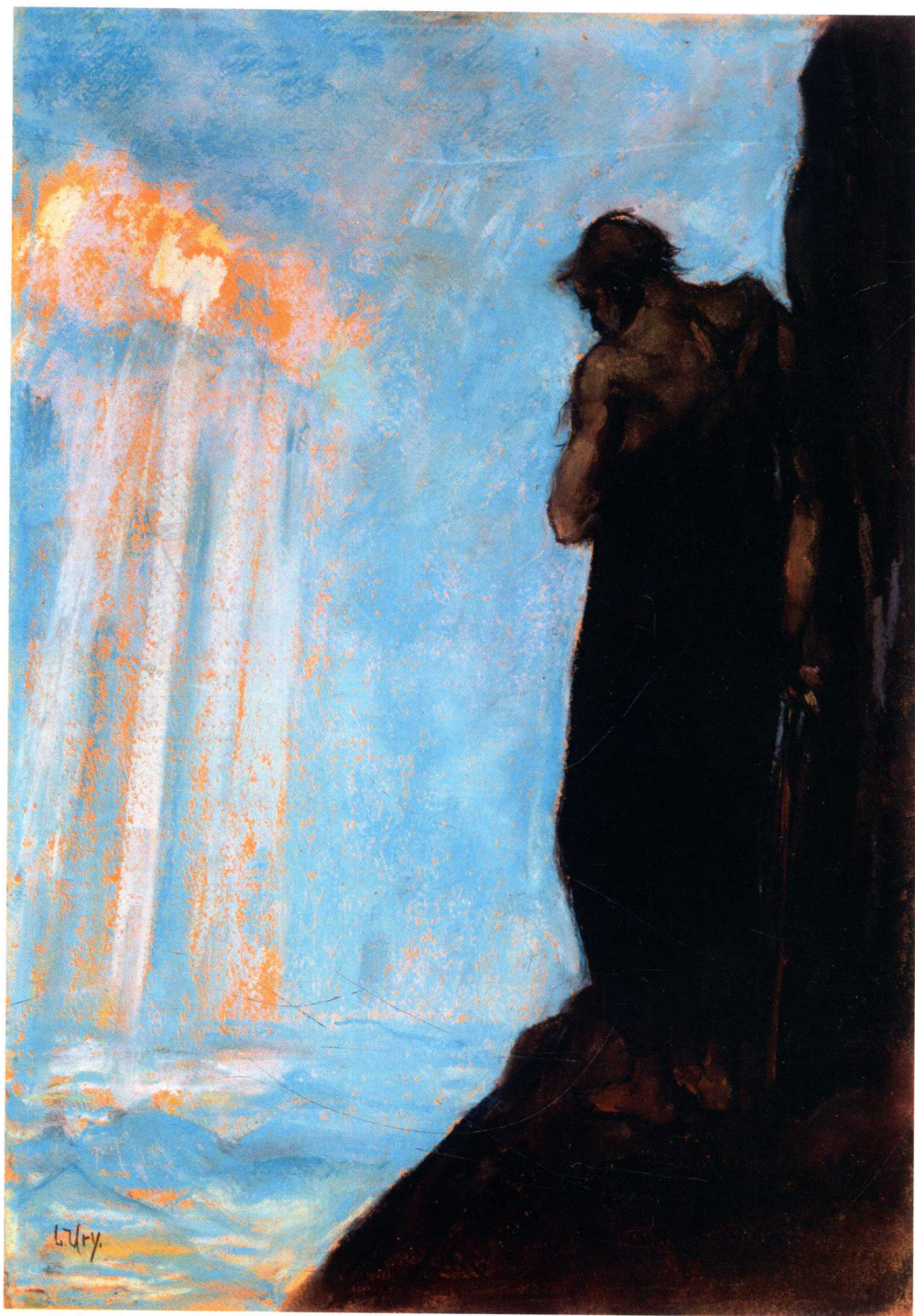
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Frontispiece: Lesser Ury, *Moses Sees the Promised Land before his Death*, 1927–8, gouache.

# Introduction

*What would make an art object Jewish: its so-called subject matter? But, if that is the case, what about a menorah made by a gentile craftsman? Or the religion of the artist? If so, what about a crucifixion scene painted by a Jew?*

— STEVEN SCHWARZSCHILD, 1987

*I wanted to make tangible artifacts that were Jewish, simply so unmistakably and unapologetically Jewish work would exist in the fine arts.*

— ARCHIE RAND, 2006

Consider two paintings: Camille Pissarro's *The Haystack, Pontoise* (1873) and Claude Monet's *Haystack, Morning Snow Effect* (1891). Both paintings were created in late nineteenth-century France, both artists worked in a style known as Impressionism, both painted in oil on canvas and exhibited together in the Impressionist exhibitions in Paris (1874–86). The theme of haystacks interested these artists because Impressionism was concerned with the effect of light and shade on different surfaces but also because life in the French countryside evoked national self-awareness, particularly in the urban cultural capital, Paris. While Pissarro's and Monet's techniques and ambitions were very similar, Pissarro's contemporaries in the Impressionist circle often singled him out as a 'Jewish artist'. What makes Pissarro's depiction of haystacks different from that of his contemporary Monet, a non-Jewish artist? Can we determine what distinguishes Pissarro's painting as an example of 'Jewish art'? This juxtaposition of Pissarro's and Monet's paintings raises the oft-debated topic of defining

modern Jewish art, plus the related query of who makes it. Moreover, is Jewish art even a legitimate genre, worthy of separate interpretation, in modern art? Exploring the work of European, American and Israeli artists, this book presents nearly two centuries of Jewish art in a concise and accessible manner.<sup>1</sup>

Some Jewish art is defined by distinctive subjects and symbols from the tradition, which have been incorporated into art by artists of Jewish descent. Yet Jewish artists have also participated in, and inflected, the main currents of artistic modernism. Jewish art of the more recent past, most notably and egregiously the 'School of Paris', has been excluded from the dominant, often nationalistic, canon of modern art.<sup>2</sup> But in the main, contributions by Jewish artists to modern art need to be examined within their differing settings in Europe, America and Israel and at different moments across the past two centuries. Consideration of the distinctive political, cultural and social conditions in which such art was produced, for example, frequently focuses on immigrant

and diasporic experiences, since Jewish artists repatriated like their co-religionists. At the same time, we remain mindful of the distinctive objecthood of the works we discuss, not simply relegating Jewish art to 'illustrations' or monuments that exist to educate or memorialize.<sup>3</sup>

The crucial question of definition haunts these initial pages. First and foremost, 'What is Jewish art?', and why should it matter in studying painting and sculpture of the modern era? Critics debate whether Jewish art should be limited only to any art made by a Jew, independent of content, or if both the artist and the artwork must be identifiably Jewish, expressly engaging the 'Jewish experience'. In other words, a portrait by Moritz Daniel Oppenheim (chapter Three) of a gentile sitter would be considered a 'Jewish' work of art, just as much as a Holocaust memorial by George Segal (Conclusions) or a landscape of Palestine by Reuven Rubin (chapter Six).

Indeed, in 1984 a group of scholars debated the subject of Jewish art and subsequently agreed that 'Jewish art is art which reflects the Jewish experience'.<sup>4</sup> That group cited art created for purposes of worship, especially ritual art; synagogues; and Hebrew illuminated manuscripts; but they did not address painting or modern art, leaving the question open as to how more contemporary Jewish artists would fit into their definition. Further, what comprises the 'Jewish experience' remained undiscussed. Jewish experience

and history differ in each country or continent, and across each generation. Moreover, Jewish worship itself comprises different denominations and levels of prayer. This general ambiguity concerning the Jewish experience, both religious and cultural, is only magnified by anthologies on Jewish art and survey texts, where the general term 'Jewish art' is used without precision.<sup>5</sup> As this book will show, Jewish art is far from monolithic in style, form and subject, because of the remarkably multifarious Jewish experiences across both geographies and time.

At times Jewish artists make art that does not overtly appear to be Jewish (religious or cultural), but close observation reveals that Jewish identity is encoded in the work.<sup>6</sup> For example, in discussing the paintings of Ben Shahn, Ziva Amishai-Maisels argues that for a period Shahn avoided direct reference to the Holocaust but still expressed his Jewish identity by employing allegorical subjects. She arrived at this conclusion by uncovering Shahn's use of Holocaust photographs as source material for his paintings on other socially conscious topics with implications about the plight of Jews as well.<sup>7</sup> Some artists deliberately deny their Jewish identity as an influence on their work. For much of his life, Raphael Soyer disputed that his art was affected by his Jewish heritage, preferring instead to adopt the moniker 'New York Painter', yet recent scholarship has demonstrated that he

was profoundly shaped by the Jewish American acculturation experience.<sup>8</sup> Helen Frankenthaler, a post-painterly colour field artist, presents a similar case; in 1998 she described her views: 'My concern was and is for good art: not female art, or French art, or black art, or Jewish art, but good art.'<sup>9</sup> Omitting Frankenthaler as a Jewish artist solely on the basis of her personal claims, while including Soyer, seems uncritical. Before Soyer was examined along these new lines, most scholars understood him as having eschewed Jewishness in his art.

In sum, whether Jewish artists should be defined by their sociocultural characteristics or by their subject matter remains an open question. Clearly, no sole definition of Jewish art has universal applicability; indeed, many historians have avoided the topic altogether. As Steven Schwarzschild put it: 'Treatments of Jewish art invariably feel constrained to begin by discussing whether there even is such a thing as "Jewish art", and, if there is, how it is to be defined.'<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Michael Awkward calls attempts to pass tests, identify qualities, or to label, 'border policing'.<sup>11</sup> Rather than employing labels, this book asserts that investigating Jewish art can help to establish elements of artistic identity within the larger analysis of artistic production. Avoiding any reductive classifications or essentialism, we hope instead to consider a neglected, often rejected, element of individual formation in considering the

variety of definitions asserted by artists both for themselves and for their works during the past two centuries.

Western art is typically understood as a product of national 'schools of art', and its imagery created within a dominant Christian society. Moreover, until recently, art – especially from the modern period – has been viewed as progressive, an evolution of one style from or in reaction to the next. Jewish art cannot be understood within this rubric; Jews stand outside Western, Christian-based norms by virtue of their (often marginalized) religion and because of their status as a diasporic people. No doubt, Jewish life, unstable and continually displaced, remains central not only to the prejudices suffered by Jews of the ages, but also to the artistic and cultural development of Jewish art.

While some interpreters focus on the negative consequences of the Jewish exile, others view the diaspora as fostering creativity.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, the themes and art by many Jewish artists described herein were only possible in a diasporic (or immigrant) situation. Those ever-present reminders of one's religiocultural differences under a host culture often enabled Jewish creativity, and exchanges between Jews and non-Jews contributed to the myriad responses to modernity described in this book. As Stuart Hall so eloquently observed: 'Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing

themselves anew, through transformation and difference.<sup>13</sup>

In any case, how challenging it is to try in vain to define Jewish art when Jews themselves resist classification, variously identified by detractors or internally labelling themselves as a religion, a people or a culture. One would hope that such terms might be exhausted and finally unnecessary after the Holocaust, but the establishment of the Jewish state and the flourishing of a new Israeli art (see chapter Six) to complement an already nationalistic art of Palestine only adds to the complexity of the situation. Thus typical art historical classification cannot easily apply to Jewish art, at once the art of a religion but also of a distinctive culture, variously modified within diverse nationalities. Indeed, for centuries Jews have been seen as a separate nation living within various nation-states, and they were pressured ever since emancipation after the French Revolution to assimilate into the dominant national cultures of Europe.

Thus, one crucial caveat for this book is to clarify that the study of Jewish art cannot be analogized to the study of Christian art. 'Christian art' is often erroneously limited to a specific period – usually the 'medieval' era – in the history of art, but properly understood, 'Christian' can encompass such artistic endeavours as Carolingian manuscripts and Byzantine icons, to a French Gothic church, or famous paintings of the Italian Renaissance, such as

Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (1513–14) – in other words, all art made for Christian worship.<sup>14</sup> So if we allowed Christian art to provide a model, then Jewish art would mean all art made in the service of the synagogue. In actuality, Jewish art incorporates a wide variety of subjects, including secular images, whereas Christian art is identified primarily by religious iconography.

It is no coincidence that substantial numbers of Jews entered the profession of art precisely at a moment when modernity altered many of the motives and subjects of art. After the French Revolution European artists began to disengage their creations from dedicated religious or political purposes; instead they took an interest in wider culture and worked more frequently without direct commissions from patrons, and increasingly explored subjects of a more personal nature. In short, comparing Judaism to Christianity can be misleading, because of the Jewish people's peculiar, ambiguous and shifting position as both a religion and a culture, an idea that permeates this book.

Jewish art needs to be studied for this very reason: art by a Jew – a person not raised within the dominant majority – is continually shaped by difference. We intend to explore through a range of examples how that difference, both consciously and unconsciously affects the art made by Jews. When marked by gender, race or religion, such Otherness

inevitably colours an individual.<sup>15</sup> For example, when nineteenth-century European Jews emerged from ethnically homogeneous ghettos or shtetls into larger society, suddenly their difference was foregrounded, influencing perceptions, interactions and ultimately personal creations. Some Jews of the modern period submerged their marked identities; others completely renounced their Jewishness, even undergoing conversion. Many tried to find a way to negotiate Jewish life in their new social spaces, and this book will attempt to elucidate how these issues manifest in works of Jewish art.

The sociologist Georg Simmel delineates this situation, which he terms the 'web of group affiliations':

As the individual leaves his established position within *one* primary group, he comes to stand at a point at which many groups 'intersect.' The individual as a moral personality comes to be circumscribed in an entirely new way, but he also faces new problems. The security and lack of ambiguity in his former position gives way to uncertainty in the conditions of his life . . . external and internal conflicts arise through the multiplicity of group-affiliations, which threaten the individual with psychological tensions.<sup>16</sup>

W.E.B. Du Bois, too, describes the conflict inherent in a marked existence, here for

African Americans, as a 'double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others . . . one ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.'<sup>17</sup> In relation to the American Jewish experience, such double consciousness has been modified to describe Jews as 'insiders who are also outsiders' – as a people who are 'standing somewhere between the dominant position of the white majority and the marginal position of peoples of colour'.<sup>18</sup> Over a century later Du Bois' observation remains very relevant to both the black and Jewish experience, considering both groups' status as Others within a prevailing host culture. Importantly, African American art is now a recognized area of study. Also akin to the position of black artists and Jewish artists are female artists within a male-dominated, often chauvinistic world; copious current scholarship describes how women articulate and bear witness to their marked experience in art.

A principal reason why students of Jewish culture, from the nineteenth century onwards, have accepted uncritically that Jews did not make art is that they assumed that an obedience to the biblical proscription against 'graven images' in the Ten Commandments perennially denied Jews the opportunity to make conventional religious representations. Interpreted stringently, the Second

Commandment has been understood as prohibiting the creation of any art: 'Thou shalt not make any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in the heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth' (Exodus 20:4). Deuteronomy repeats and broadens this ban:

[L]est ye deal corruptly, and make you a graven image, even the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any fowl that flieth in the heaven, the likeness of any beast that is on the face of the earth, the likeness of anything that creepeth on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth [Deuteronomy 4: 16–18].

A closer reading of the text shows, however, that the commandment was directed against figuration used for idol worship, not other types of artistic expression.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Jewish art *was* fabricated in ancient times, but was not visibly transmitted to later visual traditions – likely a result of the Jews' diasporic life and subsequent inability to transport art rather than any literal adherence to the biblical injunction. Clearly, the Second Commandment did not by any means preclude art. Human renderings appear in the third-century synagogue murals of Dura Europos in Syria (see chapter One) along with other significant works made for and

by Jews. Even earlier, in the book of Exodus, Bezalel – the first Jewish artist and the only artist mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 31:2 and 35:30) – designed the Tabernacle and its holy vessels.<sup>20</sup>

Recently, Kalman Bland deconstructed some myths behind the Second Commandment, demonstrating the belief that Jews are aniconic is a mischaracterization, steeped in anti-Semitic perceptions and modern constructions of Jewish creativity.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, to some degree, the heritage of this 'prohibition' still affected Jewish artists. As late as the twentieth century in America, the European-born Maurice Sterne – who, in his own day, was famous enough to command the first one-man exhibition by an American artist at the Museum of Modern Art (in 1933) – recalls being chastised for his love of art at an early age:

[T]he graphic arts had absolutely no place in our lives. Religious Jews took very seriously the Biblical injunction against 'graven images,' and I was punished badly one day by the rabbi of my school for drawing his picture on the ground with a stick. He said that I had broken the Second Commandment.<sup>22</sup>

A seminal figure from the next generation in American art, Jack Levine, began painting biblical works in 1940 in an attempt to augment



Jewish pictorial expression, which he felt was hampered by the prohibition against graven images: 'Because of the Second Commandment, against graven images, there is a relatively sparse pictorial record of Jewish history or the Jewish imagination. I felt the desire to fill this gap.'<sup>23</sup> Archie Rand, whose recent monumental exploration of rabbinic law provides one of the last images in this book, felt a similar imperative to create: 'I realized that one of the rights and obligations of any culture is to manifest a visual exponent of that culture. Judaism had been forced externally and internally to ignore that impulse.'<sup>24</sup>

Chaim Potok's novel *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972), a book that Levine references when talking about the challenges of a child-artist born to observant parents, also addresses this issue.<sup>25</sup> The protagonist Asher, the son of a Hasid, chooses the profession of painter, enduring the condemnation of his family and community because of his rejection of the Second Commandment. Poignantly characterizing himself as an outcast, Asher offers the opening words of the novel in the form of an introduction:

I am Asher Lev, *the Asher Lev* . . . So strong words are being written and spoken about me, myths are being generated: I am a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflicter of shame upon my people.<sup>26</sup>

Undoubtedly, the Second Commandment's legacy, however inflated, still persisted in some Jewish minds and thus conditioned some of the art described here.

The following pages provide an analytical survey and reconsideration of the richly textured varieties of Jewish art-making in Europe, America and Israel across the past two centuries. Because of space constraints we cannot be comprehensive; instead we have chosen topical or typical works across a wide range of media and by representative artists. Ranging from biblical narratives to modernist experimentations, portraits to synagogue scenes, Holocaust memorials to explorations of diasporic life, from history paintings to genre paintings to landscapes to still-lives, the art described herein provides the reader with a broad understanding of the issues and ideas influencing modern Jewish artists. Employing both a chronological approach and a regional orientation to create a historical framework, this book describes how aspects of the diverse and complex Jewish experience find expression(s) in modern art.

Since this book focuses on figural art, primarily from the modern era, it necessarily excludes important dimensions of Jewish creativity: the built environment, whether synagogues or other major buildings by Jewish artists; and decorative objects, especially items for ritual use (usually marginalized under the rubric of 'Judaica'). Geographically, some