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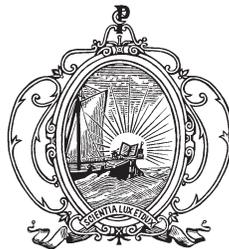
**Jewish Art in Context:  
The Role and Meaning  
of Artifacts and Visual Images**

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## Jewish Art and Visual Culture: A Century of Academic Achievement

VIVIAN B. MANN

IT IS NOW MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED AND TEN YEARS since the first publication on Jewish art appeared, David Heinrich Müller and Julius von Schlosser's analysis of the Sarajevo Haggadah.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the same questions continue to be raised today that were posited soon after Müller and Schlosser's pioneering work. For example, "Is there such an entity as Jewish art?" given the disparities in style, art forms, and iconography between one work and another. The brief remarks that follow are an attempt to set the conceptual difficulties that still plague the field of Jewish art within the context of similar discussions within other branches of art history.

The discussion formed part of the opening session of a conference "Jewish Art in Context: the Role and Meaning of Artifacts and Visual Images," convened under the auspices of the Goren Institute of Tel Aviv University in January, 2008. In his remarks, Shalom Sabar discussed the historiography of Jewish art in the context of Jewish studies, blaming the marginal position of Jewish art today on its exclusion from the canon of Jewish studies by the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judenthum* movement, which began in the early nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> In his view, their devaluation of the notion of Jewish art led to the rejection of its existence by the academy. There is another approach to

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1. David Heinrich Müller and Julius von Schlosser, *Die Haggadah von Sarajevo. Eine spanisch-jüdische Bilderhandschrift des Mittelalters* (Vienna, 1898).

2. On the attitude of the *Wissenschaft des Judenthum* toward Jewish art, see most recently Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art. Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln and London, 2001), 77-79, and Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew. Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, 2000), 20-23.

this history in contemporary scholarship, notably that of Margaret Olin, who studied the development of art history in the context of nationalist movements of the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The result of her research is to see the denial of Jewish art as less an endemic problem, but as camouflage for antisemitism. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, art history departments were ruled by nationalists “who set the terms of discourse, where works were placed in a unified evolutionary scheme” that followed the history and growth of recognized nations.<sup>4</sup>

A very useful part of Professor Sabar’s discussion was heralded by his statement that “very few historians consider the role of the visual in Jewish life and culture.” Perhaps he wrote this statement as a result of our joint participation in a Modern Jewish Studies Workshop held in the Summer of 2008, in which we were the only two art historians in a group of historians. After one day, I was (as an Israeli historian colleague observed) “in shock.” And I was, at the lack of knowledge shown by the historians of all the published research on Jewish art and material culture, and by the historians’ failure to see that art could be, if properly interpreted, a source of historical knowledge. I want to emphasize the phrase “properly interpreted.” Most historians do not recognize that art history is its own discipline with its own methodologies. They often look at a painting or sculpture as a re-creation of fact or as a “photographic” rendering of a particular event without comprehending the integral role of discourses and archetypes with the production and consumption of art. Even contemporary art reflects art created earlier and cannot be fully understood without knowing the models used by the artist.

Another participant in the conference session, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, suggested enlarging the field of Jewish art to include visual and material culture in order to create a more comprehensive and, hopefully, a more accepted discipline. I would agree that there is merit in studying visual culture and material culture and that there are instances when the methods of studying one field may prove enlightening to

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3. Margaret Olin, “C[lement] Hardesh [Greenberg] and Company, Formal Criticism and Jewish Identity,” in Norman Kleeblatt “*Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Jewish Identities* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1996), 39-59; Eadem, *The Nation without Art. Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln and London, 2001), 3-31.

4. Olin, *Nation without Art*, 5-18.

the other, but if we have problems defining Jewish art – as Professor Kirschenblatt-Gimblett phrased the issue: “Jewish art has figured more as a “question” more than as a phenomenon” – that is not a reason to desist from the task of addressing it.

In 1982, while I was Chair of Judaica at the Jewish Museum, I broached the possibility of establishing a graduate program in Jewish art to the then Provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), the museum’s parent institution. His reaction and that of other JTS professors to my proposal was to say that they had difficulty defining this field called “Jewish Art,” and only having defined it could they consider establishing a new program at the Seminary. Their need for definition led to an application to the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1983 for a planning seminar, which brought together historians from the Seminary faculty who specialized in periods for which there is a corpus of Jewish art, together with notable art historians, among them Richard Brilliant, Walter Cahn, Colin Eisler, Joseph Gutmann, Meyer Shapiro (by correspondence), Leo Steinberg and Irene Winter. After nine months of meetings, the Seminar concluded that enough resources existed in New York for the establishment of a Master’s program in Jewish art, which they defined as “art which reflects the Jewish experience,” a definition to which I will return.<sup>5</sup> The Seminar accomplished its purpose, and today one of the Master’s programs at JTS is in Jewish Art and Visual Culture.

Some may consider it embarrassing that only 28 years ago people were still in the process of defining Jewish art. But then we should consider and compare the still recent efforts to define art historical fields considered basic to the discipline, ones that occur in all surveys of art history, namely Roman art and Islamic art. And I would like to suggest how some of the points made about these recently established fields might apply to Jewish art.

In 1953, Otto Brendel published an essay titled “Prolegomena to a Book on Roman Art,” in the *Memoirs of the American Academy of Rome*, vol. 21, in which he addressed the problem of defining Roman

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5. Vivian B. Mann and Gordon Tucker, ed., *The Seminar on Jewish Art. January-September 1984. Proceedings* (New York, 1985), 10.

art.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to review the points Brendel made about Roman art that led to his attempt to establish its essential nature. The first was the uncertain aesthetic evaluation of Roman works; the second was the lack of authentic documentary evidence which would have provided the basis for a reconstruction of its history.<sup>7</sup> And third, was the problem of definition: what could be called Roman art? He noted that we lack adequate critical tools to deal with the variety of works encompassed under the rubric “Roman art,” which is a main branch of ancient art. Unlike Greek or Egyptian art, however, Roman art does not consist of a “coherent body of works, which present an obvious unity of style, of intentions, and means of expression.”<sup>8</sup> Roman art is, instead, uneven in quality, uncertain in origin, oscillating between a neo-classic acceptance of Greek standards and an often crude popular realism.

A history of the literature shows that, since the Renaissance, the various problems associated with a definition of Roman art are, Brendel wrote, symptomatic of changes in European thought, many of which led to a new theory of Roman art.<sup>9</sup> (Think here of Margaret Olin’s connections between perspectives on Jewish art and the growth of nationalism, and that the lack of acceptance of Jewish art may have less to do with the corpus than with the mind-set of those considering it.) After the Renaissance, Greek art and Roman art were distinguished as separate entities, rather than constituting an unbroken corpus as they had previously. The severing of Roman art from Greek art raised the problem of its aesthetic evaluation emphasized by J. J. Winckelmann in his “History of the Art of Antiquity” published in 1764, the first work according to Brendel to meld “the methods and viewpoints of several disciplines into a new discipline, the history of art.”<sup>10</sup> Winckelmann posited that Roman art was an organic development with an “origin, growth, change and decline.” He further stated that there is no one specific Roman style.<sup>11</sup> Other art historians who influenced the definition of Roman art saw the innovative

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6. Otto Brendel, “Prolegomena to a Book on Roman Art,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, XXI (1953), 9-73.

7. Brendel, “Prolegomena,” 10-13.

8. *Ibid.*, 11.

9. *Ibid.*, 12.

10. *Ibid.*, 18.

11. *Ibid.*, 20.

elements in late Roman art as the gift of the Orient, that is Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt.<sup>12</sup> But Brendel pointed out that despite influences from Hellenistic and oriental art, the resulting body of work was more than the sum of contributed elements: it was something independent, called Roman.<sup>13</sup> Brendel then proceeded to examine those theories of Roman art that attribute use of an artistic style to a single ethnic group, theories that rely on the assumption of innate and immutable national characters. But, he wrote, there is an alternative conception of Roman art as a cultural phenomenon in a state of continuous evolution; a product of tradition, not of inheritance, on which both the past and foreign contacts impacted.<sup>14</sup> If Roman art was not a unified corpus, then the opposite must hold true: it was diversified, encompassing contrasting aims according to time and historical circumstances.

The following points of Brendel's discussion seem most relevant to the study of Jewish art:

1. First, what he termed "the uncertain aesthetic evaluation of Roman works." The disparity in aesthetic quality found in Roman art can be shown in one monument, The Arch of Constantine dated 313 CE, on which reliefs range in style from the classical to the popular. In ancient Israel, the contrast between the mosaics of the synagogue of Hammath Tiberius and those of Beit Alpha shows a similar range of formal variance. Or we can contrast folkloric Torah curtains from the Bohemian countryside with those those made in professional embroidery workshops in the capital of Prague during the eighteenth century.
2. Then Brendel cites the problem of the lack of documentary evidence for Roman art. This is a point that does not always pertain to Jewish art. In fact, the penchant for dedicatory inscriptions on works donated to synagogues and to community organizations can be used to date whole groups of similar works of art made for other populations. In contrast to the many Ottoman rugs that must be dated by

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12. J. Strzygowski, *Orient oder Rom: Beiträge zur Geschichte der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst* (Leipzig, 1901).

13. Brendel, "Prolegomena", 31.

14. *Ibid.*, 49.

their appearance in western paintings, a rug from Giordes, Anatolia, made as a bier cover in 1789/90 and bearing a lengthy Hebrew inscription that includes the date of its manufacture may be used to date similar works from Giordes made for Muslims.

3. Brendel's third point is very relevant to a definition of Jewish art. Like Roman art, Jewish art varies in style, in quality, and in its expressive character. He quoted Winckelmann who had acknowledged in the eighteenth century that there is no single Roman style. So, too, there is no such thing as Jewish style, since like Roman art, Jewish art has been subject to influences from Central Asia to the West. Despite the disparate influences on Roman art noted by his predecessors, Brendel stated that in the final consideration, there are works, whose totality is more than the sum of their parts, which can be called Roman. So, too, Jewish artists have been influenced by a broad span of cultures as the result of their history, but like Roman art, Jewish art transcends its constituent elements to emerge as something unique.

As historians of Jewish art, we should embrace Brendel's alternative conception of Roman art and adapt it to Jewish art, which then becomes a cultural phenomenon in a state of continuous evolution; a product of tradition, not of inheritance, on which both the past and foreign contacts impacted. Not a unified corpus, but a diversified body, encompassing contrasting aims according to time and historical circumstances.

I would now like to turn to the discourse on Islamic art to examine what light it may shed on the definition of Jewish art. In 1973, twenty years after Brendel's prolegomena on Roman art appeared, Oleg Grabar published a book titled *The Formation of Islamic Art* in which he raised the issue of the difficulties in defining the term "Islamic art."<sup>15</sup> He noted that the words "Islamic art" do not necessarily connote religious art, and that the best definition of the phrase is the art of a country or region whose majority or ruling class professes the faith of Islam. Works could be made by non-Muslims, principally Jews who constituted a large

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15. Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, rev. and enlarged ed. (New Haven and London, 1987), 62-64.

minority in Arab lands. Their specialization in various genres was influenced by legal traditions, the *hadith*, which stated, for example, that metalwork was a noxious form of endeavor, best left to non-Muslims. As a result, Jews came to dominate the making of metalwork from Yemen to Morocco until the middle of the twentieth century when large-scale emigrations decimated the Jewish populations of Arab countries. Jews were also active in all phases of the textile industry: weaving, dyeing and trading in silks. Although in the western world, some of the most important genres of Islamic art have been considered less important than painting, sculpture, and architecture (the European fine arts) and labeled with the lower status term “decorative arts,” in Islamic lands, textiles and metalwork have always been considered prestigious art forms and given as gifts by rulers to those they favored.

Furthermore, Grabar noted there is not a single time period that may be tied to Islamic art, whose flourishing in a particular area may be due to local historical circumstances and vary in time from its flourishing in other areas. Still, since the Arab conquests were rapid and far-reaching, a substantive body of art developed between the seventh and tenth centuries in far-flung conquered territories.

Almost thirty years later, in 2001, a new edition of Richard Ettinghausen’s *Islamic Art and Architecture* appeared as part of the the prestigious Pelican series on the history of art, edited by Oleg Grabar and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina. They began the preface with the sentence “A great deal of occasionally acrimonious confusion surrounds the use and meaning of the word ‘Islamic’ when applied to art.”<sup>16</sup> Part of this confusion, they wrote, is due to the limited comments on art in the Qur’an where idols are condemned, but nothing is written about all other types of art: paintings, sculpture, textiles, and metalwork.<sup>17</sup>

What can be applied to a definition of Jewish art from this discussion is, first of all, the fact that Islamic art is geographically diverse and yet considered to be a single category of art. This is an important analogy for the Jewish art produced by a people dispersed through all of Europe, Western and Central Asia, North Africa and the Americas. Secondly, the

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16. Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250* (New Haven and London, 2001), 3.

17. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

Jews who lived under Muslim rule as *dhimmis*, a protected minority with a sacred literature, could always participate as artists in the larger society.

Finally, Grabar referred to a process of filtering that occurs when confronting another's culture. This is also true also of Jewish art. There is a wonderful responsum of Rabeinu Asher written after his emigration from Ashkenaz to Toledo when he was asked on the appropriateness of hanging a rug depicting the *ka'aba* in the synagogue.<sup>18</sup> After a lengthy analysis of the purpose of Muslim prayer rugs, the etymology of their name (*sajjada*), and the iconography of the rug in question, he rules against hanging it in the synagogue since it was created for the use of another religious group. The problem was solved by the Sephardic Jews who settled in the capital cities of the Ottoman Empire. They made Torah curtains in the form of rugs that bore Hebrew inscriptions. The Ottoman prayer rugs whose iconography and forms parallel the Jewish rugs never include inscriptions since these prayer rugs were laid on the floor. Where parallel ideas existed (Paradise as a garden, God as light), the same motifs could be incorporated into both rugs for synagogues and rugs for mosques. But if the concept was alien, borrowing was avoided.

Earlier, I mentioned that the Seminar in Jewish Art held in 1984 defined Jewish art as "art that reflects the Jewish experience." Although sounding simplistic, the definition avoids the identification of art with nationalism, and it avoids identifying Jewish art with a particular style or styles. Rather it is a very open definition that allows inclusion of both European art and art that was created in the Muslim world, as well as the hybrid forms created in the Bezalel School in Jerusalem during the first decades of the twentieth century that fuse art nouveau with Ottoman forms and techniques. The definition clearly states that Jewish art is the result of the various historical experiences of the Jewish people, such as migrations and expulsions. As Brendel said of Roman art, Jewish art is in a state of continuous evolution. It is not a unified corpus, but a diversified body, encompassing contrasting aims according to time and historical circumstances.

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18. Asher ben Yehiel, *Responsa Asheri* (Jerusalem, 1965), no. 5:2 (Hebrew). For a discussion on the responsum, see Vivian B. Mann, "Jewish-Muslim Acculturation in the Ottoman Empire: The Evidence of Ceremonial Art" (Princeton, 1994), 562-568.