

What is Jewish Expression in Art and Design?

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The evolution of cultural tradition, the needs that shape it, and the intentions that are alluded to in what it produces, are not usually made clear to us. Often they are open to varied and conflicting interpretations. Sometimes a legend takes shape that is far removed from the myth and cultural creation that continues along its path from place to place, from country to country, from era to era.

The Jewish religion, despite all the changes that it has undergone, always recognized man's natural compulsion to set before him features of his religious understanding and deeds, even allowing artistic expression for this purpose. It took into consideration the cultural factors in which the People of Israel continued to endure throughout history, and directed it toward those aims. As the outcome of this, do parameters that define Jewish expression in art exist? And if they do, what are they?

The question is not a simple one. One must take into consideration that this is a people with an ancient culture that believes in an abstract God, and which has enjoyed continuous habitation in many countries with different and varied cultures of their own.

With regard to the abstract God, Freud claimed that the Jews chose to develop the sense of hearing, and neglected almost completely the sense of sight and the visual world, because the Jewish God is invisible, having no form or bodily image. He appears only through His words. In the Classical world, on the other hand, the centrality of the form of the gods, their physical appearance and their corporeal deeds, were well known. Judaism emphasized inner beauty, that which cannot be seen, while the aesthetics of the Classical world placed physical beauty, the sensual, and the external on the highest plane of its value system.

Those dealing with the history of art contend that Jewish art is not characterized by its own style. Underpinning this viewpoint is

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the dispersion of the Jewish people throughout the world. Conversely, the world of Jewish imagery stems from common sources.

In the past, the accepted identifying mark for a “Jewish” ritual object was the Hebrew script. In the last decades, the use of Hebrew script as an identifying characteristic of Jewish ceremonial art has declined, and has been replaced by formal syntax. This syntax uses elements from the formal Jewish iconography, be it original or something that has become a metaphoric feature but rooted in the world of Jewish plastic arts.

Ceremonial art, whose designs draw from the same common sources as well as from the particular cultural surroundings in which they were created, whether executed by a Jewish or non-Jewish artist, holds a special place in the world of Jewish ritual art. According to the Jewish perspective, the ritual object is not an end in itself; rather it exists to convey a message, an object designed to transmit the concept of upholding a religious commandment, carrying within it the weight of ritual and visual identity. Jewish ritual objects have, over the generations, endured whatever adventures and circumstances their owners experienced; they disappeared with them and reappeared with them. They are part of the surrounding environment and generation, borrowing from their surroundings what they can take, while at the same time joining the foreign to their essence, merging all this to forms and functions, and suiting them to Jewish tradition.

When we look at the Jewish work of art from after the establishment of the State of Israel, a work created under the new reality of independence, it would be interesting to consider whether a Jewish work had developed that was different from what had preceded it from the two-thousand year Diaspora. It seems that movements and styles in the various fields of art since the late 1970s have gone on to deal with fundamental questions of Jewish identity and characteristics of Israeli society. Is this Jewish expression in art? Is any creative work, that carries within it Jewish subjects, necessarily Jewish expression?

For the last few years an exciting discussion on this subject has been taking place at the Bezalel Academy for Art and Design, with the participation of scholars from the Hebrew University. It has become a focus of inspiration for cultivating the link between artistic creation and the value concepts of Judaism. This is an art-design dialogue that relates to Jewish expression at the juncture where theoretical discussion, which depends upon scientific research, meets visual

expression. This process, like the activities of The Adi Foundation, constitutes another level that sustains the Jewish work of art in all its material and spiritual components.

I see a work of art as a philosophical argument. For the sake of comparison, I wonder whether a contemplative work on a Jewish topic, written by a non-Jew would be included in a definition of “Jewish expression”? Or would we define it as something that is about a Jewish subject, but that cannot be defined as “Jewish expression” in the work of art? If we accept the assumption that a work of art is a philosophical proposition, can we put to the test the question at hand along the same parameters?

The question, “What is Jewish expression in art and design?” will remain unanswered, and will continue to be a factor and a fulcrum for creation, and good that this is so.