

What is Jewish Expression in Art and Design?

Israel Hadani

You say: "My spirit is in the word
My spirit that sanctifies the everyday
The moment in the festival days
The sound of silence.
My spirit which lifts the needy out of the ash heap,
Which repairs the world in the Kingdom of the Almighty,
My spirit which builds and destroys is not in that which is
seen, my spirit is in that which is heard."
And I, who sees the words, stand before you ashamed.
I, who learned to speak in the language of forms and colors,
Know not how to say in my language: "Remember" and "For
Who" and "These are the Words"
But know how to say in form that which cannot be said in
words:
"Red Love" and "Infinite Blue."

"What is Jewish expression in art and design?" was the topic the Adi Foundation presented for discussion at the conference that took place last November in Neve Ilan. The phrasing of the topic question supposes that there exists in art something that can be called "Jewish expression," the meaning of which we are trying to understand. This basic assumption is worth clarifying, in other words opening up the discussion to the questions: does something exist in art that can be called "Jewish expression"? Does an art exist that can be called "Jewish"?

The question being asked here has to do with the plastic arts, whose tools of expression - material, volume, color, and form - are trans-cultural and universal.

Are the iconographic characteristics of Jewish culture, the graphic symbols that it produced over generations, what cause us

Israel Hadani is a sculptor and environmental designer, who, for more than forty years, has been exploring through practical experience the relationships of forms and structures to the workings of the soul.

to define art that contains them as having Jewish expression? Or is the field different, belonging rather to what we call Judaica: design of various types of Jewish ritual objects, design of the Hebrew letter, and decoration of sacred texts.

Another question that needs to be asked is more open-ended, one that examines the present and anticipates the future: Is it possible for “Jewishness” to find expression of its uniqueness in contemporary art in the creation of something new and significant?

Curiosity, which moves the artist forward toward self-discovery, is also what connects him to the world, to the creations, to the experimentations, and cultures of others. This is not only true of today, when the world is a global village awash with electronic communications and more; it has always been the case. Jewish artists of all periods were aware of and influenced by the art of their surroundings. Their works, even if inspired by Jewish sources and daily life, were also connected to that period’s contemporary art world. The essence of a work by Josef Israels, Maurycy Gottlieb, Chagall, and Soutine, is no less Dutch, Polish, French, or Russian than it is Jewish. The great monolithic periods during which nations, cultures, and styles joined into an almost hermetic whole, have passed from the world along with the ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians, and Greeks. The more a culture opens up, whether by choice or by force, to the stimulation and influence of other cultures, it is safe to say that the art that is produced as a result will exhibit more heterogeneous characteristics. The question of whether in the face of these cultural influences an artist must define the cultural uniqueness (in our case Jewish identity), and give it expression in his work, is a personal question between the artist and himself. The more essential question is whether, beyond the external folkloric signs, there even exists something that can be called “Jewish expression in art.” I tend to feel that there is not, because everything that is cleansed of external signs and touches upon Jewish spiritual essence will be wide-ranging and universal, and therefore, cannot be attributed to or separated from it

Textual creations (poetic, literary, and Jewish thought) that deal with Jewish and religious content are very different from the three-dimensional work of art. The nature of the content and the language inherently bind them without mediation to the Jewish source. One may speak of Jewish poetry, or Hebrew poetry; one cannot speak of Jewish or Hebrew painting.

For thousands of years, Jewish civilization has been nurturing its spiritual creations without them becoming assimilated in the immense surrounding wealth of artistic creativity.

The world was created by commandment. The command, “Thou shalt not make thyself any graven image or any likeness,” which for generations distanced the Jew from taking part in the visual arts, is not just a prohibition due to the fear of idol worship; the commandment marks the demarcation between the imminent reality of God and the seeming reality of which the graven image and the likeness are the symbols.

In this age-old irresolvable struggle between the pagan-sensual worldview and monotheistic conceptualism, the word and the idea are opposed to the graven image and the likeness. The visual arts, which are part of the pagan world, were adopted over the last centuries by Jews as artifacts that were influenced by the surrounding foreign world and in most instances in opposition to the traditional Jewish spirit.

In order to examine the topic question that I raised at the start, it seems necessary to somewhat remove ourselves from the immediate discussion and examine these issues with regard to other nations. As opposed to the question, “What is Jewish expression in art?” let us ask what is English expression in art, what is French or Spanish expression in art? Let us ask whether the paintings of the interior of Jewish study halls by Isidore Kaufmann are more Jewish than the painting of Rabbi Efraim ben Menashe by Rembrandt? Or, for example, keeping to a more local and chronologically limited level, we may ask: what is Israeli expression in art in, let’s say, the past fifty years? It seems clear that the more a certain culture is exposed to other cultural influences, the harder it is to categorize the art that is created within that culture, and this is true not only for great expanses of time, but also for the immediate “here and now.” What type of answer would we receive had we asked what is Israeli expression in contemporary art? The answer is clear, there is no such thing! The Impressionist movement was created in France, but can it be said that it points to a French expression in art? What of all the foreign artists who were part of the creation and development of the movement in France? What of the Impressionist artists working in other countries? Is Van Gogh French or Dutch expression in art? English or Dutch landscape paintings that have clear characteristics are not British or Dutch expression, but are rather the way in which British or Dutch artists portrayed their particular native landscape when influenced by the

other. The paintings of Velasquez, Goya, El Greco, are not Spanish expression in art, even though their Spanish origins (at least of two of the artists) influenced their personality and their creative output.

An artist's work expresses in many different ways a broad composite of influences. His childhood home, his education, artistic training, the history of his visual efforts, the breadth of his cultural background, his surrounding political environment, personal life, psychological world, other artists' influence, cultural conventions, and more. I do not know what Jewish expression in art is. Do Chagall's paintings present Jewish expression in art because they depict the Jewish experience in the small towns of Eastern Europe? Do Mordechai Ardon's paintings present Jewish expression when they include symbols and motifs from the Kabbalah?

When we strip away the cultural symbols and folkloric motifs and study the depth of these works, we discover a humanistic affinity to cultures and artists whose pasts are not necessarily connected to the Jewish world.

The language of the visual arts is the language of the senses, universal, accessible to any individual of any culture, needing no intermediary and no translation. The iconographic and folkloric symbols that are intended to accompany it will be significant, but secondary, depending upon their real necessity and they are not a mere stamp of approval for works with characteristic identity. True art is not that to which culture has assigned the role of keeper of traditions, but rather it is the free one that asks the questions and yearns for the open spaces of the *terra non cognita*: It is slightly suspicious of the need to use symbols.

A not insignificant amount of effort has been expended in the past and is still being expended by groups and individuals attempting to create Jewish art that is relevant to time and place, to giving modern visual interpretation to subjects taken from Jewish tradition. There is no doubt that this encompasses a creative and intellectual challenge which bears rich results in the field of modern Judaica. Traditional subjects challenge the arts, and the language of modern design dresses Jewish ritual objects in new attire. This is an art that is open to the give and take of contemporary design, yet its very essence is simultaneously anchored in the roots of tradition.

Nor do I make light of the attempts of certain artists and sculptors to express their religious and nationalistic connections through their works. These limited endeavors in the broader totality of their artistic

oeuvres did not delimit the territory of expression, and were not defined as “Jewish art.”

The visual arts are meant, if anything, to present us with a certain spiritual experience of consciousness through the senses that express the artist’s spirit. The artist’s spirit is influenced by many ideas. Many Jewish artists were influenced, probably not insignificantly by *Aggadah* [Legends], the Talmud, Kabbalah, and *midrashim* [biblical homilies], from the world of Jewish tradition. As Jews we carry (as a people and as individuals) the wonderful yet terrible weight of our past and there is no doubt that these influences join in the multi-dimensional cultural mix of the contemporary Jewish artist, who is open to the modern world and to the creations of other cultures. The language of art is the language of synthesis. Often we are not aware of the components that make up the whole or of how this whole functions. It is as impossible to separate Jewish influences from the whole, to isolate them and label them as Jewish expression in art, as it is to separate other psycho-cultural influences from the whole without ruining its authentic existence.

Over the past few years, The Adi Foundation initiated a number of competitions in an attempt (even if this notion has not been officially voiced) through the means of creative experimentation, to answer questions that we are asking today: What is Jewish expression in art? And is there an art that we can call “Jewish”? The proposed topics were “Borders of Sanctity,” “Light and Matter in Judaism,” and “Individual and Collective” (The I and the We). There is something challenging that can bring about unexpected results whenever an artist treats a subject not deriving from his routine subject matter/work, but which was initiated by an outside source. The academic-intellectual component that preceded or accompanied the creative process initiated by The Adi Foundation was inter-disciplinary, rich, interesting, and fruitful. At the last meeting at Neve Ilan, during a discussion on the significance of Jewish expression, Professor Rachel Elior said that the spirit of Judaism is in the word, in what is heard, not in what is visible. Despite my many misgivings with regard to the existence of a visual artistic language that can be called “Jewish” and with regard to the wisdom that lies at the basis of the desire to purposely create such a language, it would be a wonderful artistic experiment to explore the space between the seen and the heard, between the language of forms borrowed from the natural world and the meanings of works and ideas that are the direct and

immediate creation of man. Judaism charged with thousands of years of fascinating verbal conceptual creativity has something to offer artists who want to see the voices.

As for myself, until I am convinced otherwise, I will continue to hold on to my reservations with regard to the existence of real, Jewish, visual art, excepting that which belongs to the realm of functional art. Nonetheless, and despite all that has been said, from the depths of my soul I know and respect the visual arts that can be called “religious art.” This is not necessarily art that deals with religious subjects. This is art that crosses the boundaries of culture and place, art that during certain periods served as a central axis in the work of man and exists along the cultural margins to this day. Unlike the secular work of art that is the pure product of culture (comes out of, relates to, and expresses its time and place), religious art is the product and expression of spiritual values.... It is true that every work of art is a cultural product in that it is the result of a time-place, influenced by its surroundings and using for its needs characteristic expressions that belong to its time. What makes art that is essentially religious unique, is its striving for that which is beyond time and place. It is an art that moves us from a position of the linear time of existence and connects us to the infinite oneness that is beyond it, the experience it offers is one of expansion (spiritual, emotional, intellectual).

When we say “Jewish wisdom” we are of course not implying that there exists a separate Jewish wisdom, but rather we are referring to those same Jewish cultural characteristics that exist within wisdom as a whole. At the same time, it would be correct to say that there is no separate Jewish art, rather particular Jewish cultural characteristics that find their expression in art as a whole.

With regard to religious art, it is absolutely possible to say that its transcendental strength and its striving for infinite oneness are shared by it and by the qualities that are in Jewish values.