

What Constitutes Jewish Art?

Ezra Mendelsohn

In what follows I consider the question: What constitutes “Jewish art?” In the realm of ceremonial art (Judaica) this is not a serious problem, but what about the realm of so-called “high art” in modern Europe and America – painting, sculpture, etc?

It may be that this is not a very interesting or fruitful question. It is, after all, closely tied to Jewish apologetics, Jewish pride, and Jewish nationalism, and for this reason its ridiculous, ludicrous side is all too often in evidence. Still, we cannot brush it aside, all the more so since the same question is also posed in other contexts. What constitutes Irish literature, or American art? Was Mickiewicz a Polish or a Lithuanian poet? What about Conrad? Chopin? Mucha? And so forth. Some scholars take these questions seriously. The Jewish case, of course, is particularly complicated, given the lack (in the Diaspora) of a Jewish territory.

1. We might approach the problem by asserting that every work of art by a Jewish artist (leaving aside the issue of “who is a Jew”) is by definition “Jewish art.” But would this not be absurd? It would be like saying that Felix Mendelssohn (born Jewish, in his youth converted to Christianity) wrote “Jewish music.” Did Modigliani create Jewish art? Did Pissarro, or Lichtenstein, or Rothko? Such claims have been made, of course, by serious art historians, but I do not find them very persuasive. Rothko and Lichtenstein are American artists, but are they in any meaningful sense “Jewish artists?”

2. Another possibility is to claim that every painting that presents the viewer with Jewish subject matter should be placed in the category of “Jewish art.” The trouble with this idea is that numerous paintings of this sort were made by non-Jews, just as writers and composers created works on Jewish themes. Did Ravel, Musorgsky, and Bruch compose “Jewish music?” Does *Daniel Deronda* or Longfellow’s beautiful poem on the Jewish cemetery at Newport belong to the realm of Jewish literature? In Poland virtually every major nineteenth-

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century artist painted Jews – should their works (I am thinking, for example, of Aleksander Gierymski’s beautiful and moving painting of *tashlikh*) be considered part of the corpus of Jewish art? Perhaps, but this is not what most people mean when they talk about “Jewish art.” Is *Carmen* a contribution to Spanish music?

3. So what are we to do? Again, we can throw up our hands and say, “Let us forget the whole business, art is universal, never mind ethnicity and nationalism, leave that to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* and other such publications.” If we do not take this option, then I would suggest the following: We may describe as “Jewish art” works created by men and women of Jewish origin that possess either a Jewish text or a Jewish sub-text. Some of these works might even present to the viewer a “Jewish agenda” – political, cultural, religious – of one sort or another. A perfect example would be the representations of traditional Jewish life made in the 19th century by Moritz Oppenheim, which clearly promote the agenda of emancipation and Jewish-German acculturation. As an example of a painting with a Jewish sub-text, I would suggest Raphael Soyer’s well-known *Dancing Lesson* of 1925, in which we see a young couple dancing, while their parents, clearly identified as East European Jews, the man holding a Yiddish newspaper, sit watching them. The sub-text of this painting is Jewish acculturation in America, and to read it properly it certainly helps to be aware of the artist’s own Jewishness and of the Jewish American immigrant milieu in general. To take an example from another discipline, the musical *West Side Story* might be considered in a way a Jewish work of art; not only were its creators Jews (Bernstein, Sondheim, Robbins), but the text is ethnic conflict in New York, and it is possible that the Puerto Ricans are Jews in disguise.

4. This suggestion does not solve all our problems. Did Proust, who was partly Jewish and certainly wrote about Jews, write “Jewish literature?” We should also remember that some Jewish artists who produced what I would call “Jewish art” also created works that were in no way Jewish – an early example is Maurycy Gottlieb, a contemporary one is R.B. Kitaj.

5. Finally, I wish to make clear that my remarks are limited to artists living in the Jewish Diaspora. As for Israeli art – how to define it, and whether it is or is not “Jewish” – I leave these contentious questions to more qualified observers.