

# What is Jewish Expression in Art and/or Design?

**Avigdor Shinan**

If we ignore the problematic presupposition on which the question hinges, i.e. that there is, indeed, such a thing as Jewish expression in art and/or design (for one might claim that there is no such thing, making it a non-question), we can try to address it, in my opinion, from only one angle. My approach will be an analogy with the study of literature, using the broadest of generalizations, as I have experienced it, and our question, which deals with the plastic arts,

When I began studying literature, as a high-school student, I was repeatedly asked, “what did the poet/author intend?” What did Hayim Nahman Bialik mean by his poem, *Hamatmid*? What was the aim of the writer of psalm 137, “By the rivers of Babylon,” or that of Melville, in writing *Moby Dick*? These questions always received only one answer, that of the teacher, who was apparently familiar with the hidden intentions of these poets and writers mostly on the basis of their biographies, from the historical contexts in which they wrote, and perhaps even from their own writings.

When a bit older, a student at the university, I learned that questions regarding a writer’s intentions are often irrelevant. My instructors taught me that an author may have wanted to express a particular idea, to convey a certain message, and yet the text, itself, fails to do so. My studies thus shifted from focusing on authorial intention to looking, instead, at the meaning of the piece of literature, on its own. I was told to leave the authors and their worlds behind and to allow the works, first and foremost, to speak for themselves, “the poem on its own,” etc. It quickly became clear to us that readers of a particular text did not generally agree about its intention or meaning, and that there was scant possibility of reaching consensus on the matter.

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**Avigdor Shinan** is a professor in the Department of Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His fields of research include Aggadic literature and Midrash, the ancient Aramaic translations of the Bible, and the Jewish prayer book. Professor Shinan is happy to be a member of the Steering Committee of The Adi Foundation and serves as consultant on cultural and educational programs for the Avi Chai Foundation.

And so we reach my final phase, the present one, in which I tend to ask myself a different question: What does the particular work say to me? What do I feel or understand when I read or look at it? And if the composition conveys something different to me every time that I turn to it, and if it speaks differently to different people, then that is precisely the diverse, many-voiced, and inclusive statement of the work; that is its inherently polyphonic meaning. A work of art is like a mirror in which each of us sees, first of all, ourselves, and hears, amongst all the composition's voices, mostly our own.

That is to say:

Authorial intention: A question that no longer has relevance.

A composition's inherent meaning: A question concerning which consensus is impossible, so that its value is limited.

The meaning of a piece of work for a particular reader: Here we have a decided answer from every reader. Perhaps others will not be convinced of the truth of one reader's answer (if it is at all possible here to speak of "truth"), but concerning the conviction of the answer, they will.

And so, to move from analogy to the subject at hand. An artist's biography (i.e. whether Jewish by birth or a non-Jew, a convert to Judaism, or Jewish only according to non-Orthodox practice) is clearly irrelevant regarding our inquiry, just as with writers and poets, biography proved useless for unlocking the secrets of their writings. The issue of the composition's content – a painting of Jews praying, an innovative design of the objects used for the havdalah ceremony, a movie showing views of Jerusalem, or a sculpture that memorializes the victims of the Holocaust – is insufficient, in that we are not concerned, here, with identifying and classifying subjects from the Jewish world, but rather with the question of Jewish expression that emerges from the work of art, and the two are not necessarily the same. In fact, we can find "Jewish expression" – a term soon to be described – also in a work in which we see an African mother of unknown religion, gazing with compassion and pain at her son, who lays dying in her arms, or in a painting of a Eden-like view of the untamed plains of southern Argentina. All that I can offer as the single remaining key that we have for answering our question revolves around the reception of the work of art: What response does the work trigger for a Jewish viewer?

A Jew – and we'll not try to define that term, since the question "Who is a Jew?" has used up considerable ink – stands before a work

of art. If this person senses deeply that the work is “Jewish,” that it touches the indescribable depths of his/her inner self, relates to memories, fragrances, and sounds that cannot be exactly defined, and connects with his/her hopes as part of the Jewish people and with its uncertain future – then the Jewish expression in that work is indeed present. Conversely, if a work of art does not convey – does not plant in the viewer’s mind – something that would, in Jewish-American slang, be called “goyish” (the term brings up almost forty-thousand references in a search on the all-knowing Google), then it can be said to have Jewish expression.

The crux of the matter thus moves from the writer and the written text, and from the poet and the poem, to the reader – and, in the same way, from the artist and the work of art to the viewer. Only the viewer can determine the degree of Jewish expression in a work of art. And if there are many different viewers – as there are many different Jews – so we will find a multitude of different answers to both our questions: Is there Jewish expression in art? What is it? The answers will vary, but concerning the presence or absence of that expression, in the opinion of each viewer, there will be no argument. If I find Jewish expression in a work, then it is there, whether or not you agree with me regarding its presence or whether or not I am able to persuade you that my impressions compel, also, others.

I suppose that I didn’t answer the question “What is Jewish expression in art and/or design?” Perhaps doing so is an impossible task, but I have tried to claim that there is indeed such a thing, and that the individual viewer of a work of art can feel it, or feel its absence, whether or not s/he is able to verbalize that feeling.