
Coffee with the Cantor

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TBS



Judaism and the Visual Arts

From the Jewish Encyclopaedia

ART, ATTITUDE OF JUDAISM TOWARD:

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Art, the working out of the laws of beauty in the construction of things, is regarded in the Bible as wisdom resulting from divine inspiration (Ex. xxxi. 1-6, xxxv. 30-35, xxxvi. -4), and is called in the Talmud "hokmah" (wisdom), in distinction from labor (, R. H. 29b; Shab. 131b). It is, however, somewhat incorrect to speak of Jewish art. Whether in Biblical or in post-Biblical times, Jewish workmanship was influenced, if not altogether guided, by non-Jewish art. Roman architecture was invoked in the building of Herod's Temple just as Phenician architecture was in the construction of those of Solomon and of Zerubbabel (I Kings vii. 13; Ezra iii. 7). Plastic art in general was discouraged by the Law; the prohibition of idols in the Decalogue (Ex. xx. 4) being in olden times applied to all images, whether they were made objects of worship or not (see Josephus, "Ant." xvii. 6, § 2; xviii. 3, § 1; ib. "B. J." i. 33, § 2; ii. 9, § 2; 10, § 4). In accordance with this view the pious in Talmudical times even avoided gazing at the pictures engraved on Roman coins ('Ab. Zarah 50a; Pes. 104a; Yer. Meg. iii. 2 [74a]; Hippolytus, "Refutation of All Heresies," ix. 21). It is possible, however, that these figures formed an exception because they were, as a rule, representations of kings or emperors worshiped as gods by the Romans.

Influence of Idolatry.

Rabbinical tradition, however, follows more rational rules in interpreting the law prohibiting images. Referring the law, Ex. xx. 23, "Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold," to beings beheld by prophetic vision at the throne of God, or to anthropomorphic visions of God himself, the Rabbis forbade only the fashioning of the four figures of Ezekiel as a whole or of any other angelic being, and especially the making of human figures, as these might be made objects of worship (Mek., Yitro, x.; 'Ab Zarah 42b, 43b). In view, however, of the fact that only carved figures or statues were, as a rule, objects of worship, the prohibition was not applied to images not projecting ('Ab. Zarah 43b). Portrait-painting,

therefore, was never forbidden by the Law. As a matter of fact, far more potent than the Law was the spirit of the Jewish faith in putting a check on plastic art. In the same measure as polytheism, whether Semitic or Aryan, greatly aided in developing art as far as it endeavored to bring the deity in ever more beautiful form before the eye of the worshiper, Judaism was determined to lift God above the realm of the sensual and corporeal and to represent Him as Spirit only. In particular, the lewdness of the Astarte worship, which still exerted its evil influence in postexilic times (Isa. lvii. 3 et seq.), offended the Jewish sense of chastity, so that idolatry was termed "to go a whoring" (Num. xv. 39; Hosea i. 2, and elsewhere). Nor was the Syrian or the Greco-Roman idolatry any purer in the judgment of the Rabbis, as may be learned from 'Ab. Zarah ii. 1, where it is stated that the heathen in Mishnaic times were still suspected of sexual intercourse with beasts. They saw too often in artistic beauty the means of moral depravation, and insisted, therefore, on the mutilation or destruction of every idol (ib. iv. 5). And whatever the Church did during the Middle Ages toward developing art, in the eyes of Judaism the images of Jesus and the Virgin, of the apostles and the saints, presented a relapse into pagan idolatry, warning the Jew all the more strongly against the cultivation of the plastic arts, since both the making of or the trading with any such images as might be used for the Christian cult was forbidden (Shulḥan 'Aruk, Yoreh De'ah, 141, 3). In all probability the extensive use made by the Church of symbolic figures caused the Jew to shun applying them.

In the Middle Ages.

Still, both ecclesiastical and secular art existed to some extent among the Jews of the Middle Ages. While it was a rule not to decorate the walls of the synagogue with figures, lest the devotion of the worshiper should be distracted by the sight, the doors of the synagogue and the Ark were frequently ornamented with representations of animals (among which the lion was a favorite subject), occasionally also of birds and snakes, and of plants (such as flowers, vines, and the like). In all cases where fear of idolatrous worship by non-Jews was excluded, liberal-minded rabbis saw no reason for prohibiting such ornamentation, whereas rigorists would discourage it altogether (see Berliner, "Aus dem Inneren Leben der Deutschen Juden im Mittelalter," p. 117; D. Kaufmann, in "Jew. Quart. Rev." ix. 254 et seq.; Abrahams, "Jewish Life in the Middle Ages," p. 29).

Of home utensils, cups and lamps used for Sabbath and festival days were occasionally, despite the opinion of rabbinical authorities, embossed with figured designs. Platters painted and inlaid, tablecovers embroidered with golden birds and fishes, wooden vessels edged and figured, were in common use (Abrahams, l.c. p. 146). The walls of the houses of the rich were sometimes decorated with paintings of Old Testament scenes, and on the outside secular subjects were portrayed (Berliner, l.c. p. 35; Abrahams, ib.). Portrait-painting, though not common, was not unknown among the Jews of Germany in the eighteenth century; while in Italy it existed as early as the fifteenth century. Especially was the illumination of manuscripts and the artistic binding of books carried to great proficiency by Jews, who probably acquired the art from the monks (Abrahams, l.c. p. 220). According to Lecky ("Rationalism in Europe," ii. 237, note 2), many of the goldsmiths of Venice who cultivated the art of carving were Jews. Of recent years greater attention has been paid to the subject of Jewish ecclesiastical art, especially since the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition of 1887. Societies have been founded at Vienna, Hamburg, and Frankfort-on-the-Main devoted to the collection and study of artistic objects used in Jewish acts

of worship, whether in the synagogue or the home. In bibliography, also, attention is now being paid to titlepages, illustrations, initials, and the like, in which Jewish taste has had an influence.

Modern Jewish art no longer bears the specific character of the Jewish genius, but must be classified among the various nations to which the Jewish artists belong. See America, Architecture in; Almemar; Ark; Cemetery; Numismatics; Megillah; Scroll of the Law; Synagogue.

Bibliography:

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A. Freimann, *Die Abtheilung der Isr. Ritualgegenstände im Städt. Histor. Museum zu Frankfurt-am-Main* (privately printed, 1900);

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D. H. Müller, *Die Hagada von Serajevo*.

—Art in the Synagogue:

This is restricted for the reason that it distracts the thought of the worshiper at prayer. A prohibition against copying the forms of the cherubim of the sanctuary or the four animals of the Chariot for synagogue use was deduced from the words of the Decalogue, "Ye shall not make 'with me'" (Mek., Yitro, 10; 'Ab. Zarah 43a), but it was held not to apply to the lion alone, when shown without the other animals of the Chariot group; hence this animal was extensively used as an ornament on the Ark and as the ensign of Judah. The synagogue of Ascoli in Italy had an Ark of gilt walnut with two life-size lions, carved out at the bottom, flanking the steps leading to the doors behind which the scrolls were deposited. After the expulsion of the Jews in 1569 the Ark was removed to Pesaro (D. Kaufmann, in "*Jew. Quart. Rev.*" ix. 254-269). R. Moses Trani, in answer to an inquiry, decided that a bas-relief sculpture of a lion should not be permitted to remain within an Ark of the Lord (Responsa, i. 30, quoted in "*Leḳeṭ ha-Ḳemaḥ*," p. 36b).

David ibn Zimra, in the case of one who built a synagogue in Crete and wished to place a crowned lion on the top of the Ark—the design of his coat of arms—decided against it (Responsa, No. 107).

Judah Minz of Padua would not allow Hertz Werth, a rich member of his congregation, to place before the Ark an embroidered curtain with a basrelief of a deer set in pearls, being his coat of arms, while other rabbis permitted it. Finally, a compromise was reached by Rabbi Isaac Castiglione, who allowed the figure of the deer to be embroidered on the curtain without forming a bas-relief (J. Caro, "*Abḳat Rokel*," Responsa, No. 65). Joseph Caro, in reply to a question, permitted figures of birds to be embroidered on the curtain (ib. No. 66). While R. Eliakim ordered paintings of lions and snakes to be erased from the walls of the synagogue at Cologne, R. Ephraim permitted the painting of horses and birds on the walls of the synagogue (Mordecai, 'Ab. Zarah iii.; "*Bet Joseph*" to *Tur Yoreh De'ah*, § 141). Indeed, curtains embroidered with figures are in use in almost every country where the Jews are scattered, without any fear of disturbing the thought of worshipers in the synagogue, for the reason that artistic decoration in

honor of the Torah is regarded as appropriate, and the worshiper, if he be disturbed by it, needs not observe the figures, as he can shut his eyes during prayer ("Abkat Rokel," Responsa, No. 66).

On the other hand, Elijah Capsali decided against any decoration in the synagogue which employed figures of animals as part of the design. R. Samuel Archevolti objected to the decorations of the Safed synagogue, and his opinion received the approbation of Moses Alsheik and R. Jacob BeRab ("Jew. Quart. Rev." ib.). Moses Sofer ruled against a stained-glass window above the Ark bearing the figure of the sun with rays and inscribed: "From the rising of the sun even to the going down of the same the Lord's name is to be praised," on the ground that the people bowing to the Ark, on entering the synagogue, would be worshipping the sun ("Hataam Sofer," Responsa, No. 129).

A case occurred where a representation of a "menorah" (Hanukkah lamp) had been painted on the Ark, with a different verse of the Seventy-seventh Psalm for each of the seven branches, and on the occasion of its renovation the ambitious artist signed his name to it. R. David ibn Zimra (Responsa, No. 107) said he had no objection to the replacement of the old design by a more artistic painting; but he ordered the signature to be erased, as that innovation was likely to attract attention, and was disrespectful in a synagogue. The same decision is rendered by Mendel Krochmal ("Zemañ Zedek," Responsa, No. 50).