

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Most of the contributors to the present volume met at the International Medieval Congress (Leeds) in July 1999 to discuss issues surrounding the self-representations of Jews and representations of Jews as the Other in Medieval visual culture. The papers discussed illuminated manuscripts and prints across the Jewish/non-Jewish disciplinary divide, in Hebrew, Yiddish, Latin, French, German and Italian. The overall aim of the session was to explore the interconnectedness and tensions between the ways in which the Jewish self was represented in the Middle Ages, and the ways in which the marginal(ized) Jewish Other figured in the visual culture of Medieval Christian Europe. Recent studies have indicated that the Jewish and Muslim Other were integral to Medieval assertions of Christian identity.¹ Our book, then, is neither just about Jewish art, nor is it just about 'Western' (read non-Jewish) art; it is a book that shows how both of those categories are based on specific historical structures of marginalization and exclusion. We felt that such structures of marginalization and exclusion need not be replicated by scholars today. We have much to gain by weaving the Other back into the fabric of the Self.

Many methodological issues were discussed fruitfully on that July day. In particular, we debated the connotations of the term 'influence', one of the more poisonous terms of traditional art historical analysis. 'Influence' is a term at once suggestive and vague. It suggests a unilateral relationship in which an active partner acts on a passive partner. Depending on an author's political persuasion, the 'fact' of Christian influence could mean the deplorable lack of national backbone on the part of the Jewish nation, or the desirable extent of Jewish social integration within another nation.² In each case, artistic

¹ For example A. Derbes, *Picturing the passion in late Medieval Italy: narrative painting, Franciscan ideologies, and the Levant* (Cambridge: 1996); S. Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible Moralisée* (Berkeley: 1999). D. Weiss, *Art and Crusade in the Age of Saint Louis* (Cambridge: 1998).

² I am indebted here to R. Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley: 1994), who argues that the term 'influence' bespeaks a kind of cultural colonialism, in which a one-way relationship between a strong (Italian) and a weak (Jewish) term is perpetuated (145f.).

practices were believed to be *owned* by nations, or by Christianity. And so the Gothic could be thought of as Christian, or French, or English—depending on the author's position—but never as Jewish; only as *borrowed* or imitated by Jews. This 'proprietary approach' to art history shines through some of the early 20th century texts discussed in the introductory essay and elsewhere in this volume.

The 'proprietary approach' to art history is an outflow of the nationalist obsession with narratives of pure origins and of authenticity. The nation states, forming at the same time as the discipline of art history, needed to claim nationhood by denying hybridity of any kind. The unclassifiable (in national or racial terms) raised fears of miscegenation, which themselves derived from the ultimate impossibility of making credible claims to radical differences within a Europe united by many old cultural links predating modern national borders. Jews played the part of the notorious border crosser in this scenario.³

Against a set of teleological national narratives (Jewish or otherwise), I proposed to investigate a series of historically specific moments, each overdetermined by multiple contributing and conflicting factors. Then we can see how the Jewish presence and difference in medieval Europe can help us to question received models of art history, based on nations.⁴ How in fact it can help us to discover the exciting complexity and hybridity of medieval art across and beyond the unstable boundaries of Latin Europe. The contributors to this book have tried to see both Jewish and Christian artistic and cultural practices as constitutive of a common and at the same time contested visual culture. And this visual culture was part of a set of common mentalities recognizable even in their specific Jewish or Christian inflections.⁵

As my introductory essay indicates, the historiography of medieval Hebrew manuscript illumination—just as the invention of Jewish art

³ See M. Olin, "From Bezal'el to Max Liebermann: Jewish Art in Nineteenth-Century Art-Historical Texts", in C. Soussloff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History* (Berkeley: 1999) 19–40; Z. Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: 1991).

⁴ J. Alexander, "Medieval Art and Modern Nationalism", in: *Medieval art: recent perspectives; A memorial tribute to C.R. Dodwell*, ed. G.R. Owen-Crocker and T. Graham (Manchester: 1998) 206–23.

⁵ Another recent example of such an approach is Ivan Marcus' study of the rituals and cultural practices associated with the initiation into elementary education in the Middle Ages. I. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Culture and Acculturation in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: 1996). Marcus offers a layered 'thick' description of a rite of passage which allows him to understand the amorphous world of values and mentalities, shared and contested between Jews and Christians.

as a whole—was intimately linked to the nationalist and racializing paradigms of art history followed widely until very recently. As Linda Nochlin observed a few years ago:

This Jewish identity is interwoven with the complex formation of anti-Semitism as an ideological position. Indeed, one might say that Jewish identity and the Jew of anti-Semitism are brought into being by the same representational trajectory.⁶

And the invention of Jewish art, as one important element of the nascent imagined community of Jewish nationhood, was also brought into being by the same representational trajectory.

The contributors to the present book grapple with the central issue of interwovenness in different ways: my own essay proposes to see the iconography of illuminated Hebrew Bible manuscripts in their relationship to the shibboleths of Jewish-Christian polemics. That means interpreting Jewish iconographic choices as strategies either to assert that which Christian anti-Jewish polemics negated (the hope in the Messiah) or to avoid representing contents invested with Christian meanings.⁷

In this horizon, Marc Epstein argues for a reinterpretation of the 'fact' that the "Return of Moses' family to Egypt" in the Golden Haggadah is couched in the Christian typology of "The Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt". Epstein shows the subversive meanings which could be generated by Jewish appropriation, rather than imitation. As Epstein points out in his book *Dreams of Subversion*,

If Congress were to commission a mural depicting an eagle and an American flag to hang in the rotunda of the Capitol, and a group of Latino youths were to paint a mural with an eagle and an American flag on the wall of a building in Spanish Harlem, no one would argue that both eagles and American flags mean the same thing despite their vastly different context . . .⁸

In his line of argument, "medieval Jewish iconography" was "reactive rather than merely assimilatory".⁹ Accordingly, the use of the

⁶ L. Nochlin, "Starting with the Self: Jewish Identity and Its Representation", in: *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, ed. L. Nochlin and T. Garb (London: 1995) 7–19 (10).

⁷ See K. Kogman-Appel, 'Coping With Christian Pictorial Sources: What Did Jewish Miniaturists Not Paint?', *Speculum* 75 (2000) 816–58.

⁸ M. Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Art and Literature* (University Park, PA: 1997) 11.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 12.

"Holy family" typology for Moses' Return could be used to assert the superiority of Moses' family over Joseph's family, and by implication—scandalously—that of Judaism over Christianity, thereby standing the theology of Christian supercession of Judaism on its head.

In a similar vein, Michael Batterman's essay takes up a different aspect of Sephardi Haggadah illustration: the stylized illustration of the Matzah (unleavened bread). Noting the approximation of Matzah illustrations to contemporary Christian emblems of power and glory, such as seals and heraldic compositions, Batterman interprets the Matzah images as Jewish ways of expressing notions of (God's) power and glory as matching or even surpassing Christian signs of worldly glory: "a strategic appropriation of Christian power emblems".

In Christian visual culture, the figure of the Jew tended to have a meaning at once simpler and more complex, as the contributions of Sara Lipton and Annette Weber show. As Lipton framed the issue in her book, *Images of Intolerance*:

Jews and Judaism are a central—I would even suggest in some ways the fundamental—theme of the artistic program of these manuscripts. Why should this be so? After all, the *Bibles moralisées* were made by and for Christians . . .¹⁰

Lipton has followed the pictorial and exegetic strategies employed by the authors (including the illustrators) of the *Bible moralisée* with reference to the allegorical figure of Synagoga. The multiple levels of meaning ascribed to Synagoga are protean and have very little to do with 'real' living Jews. Synagoga is a trope of Otherness, even Otherness within, of carnality and of the feminine, and is sometimes deployed to signify deviant Christian positions such as those of 'heretics' and 'philosophers'. It is an abstraction similar to the metaphor "living letters of the law" analyzed by Jeremy Cohen in his recent book—a theological construct fulfilling specific social needs.¹¹

Annette Weber's essay argues that the naturalistic sculpture of the hanged Judas in the porch of Freiburg cathedral visualizes as much 13th century anxieties about urbanization and spread of the money economy, as it does anti-Jewish attitudes. The figure of Judas the

¹⁰ S. Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible Moralisée* (Berkeley: 1999) I.

¹¹ J. Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: 1999).

Jew becomes a trope for all that is threatening in the modern world of the 13th century.

In the late Middle Ages, the impact of traditional tropes of Judaism/Jewishness was increased by the advent of the modern technology of printing. But new strategies of the self also surface. In the Yiddish custom book discussed by Diane Wolfthal, we encounter a community which did not represent themselves as the victims of Christian persecution. In the custom book, the early 16th-century draftsman has utilized the artistic language of the early Renaissance to create detailed scenes of Jewish life as it was—or as it should have been. Men, women and children, while meticulous in their observance, act in a spirit of *joie de vivre*. The discourse of the custom book allows them and us to ignore the harsh realities of life as a minority, but neither is this an instance of eschatological escapism: the diasporic present is considered good.

It is sometimes said that the Middle Ages lingered among the Jewish community of early modern Europe. Tom Hubka's essay indicates the continuity of a symbolic world ultimately derived from classical and medieval Jewish texts. Scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* would undoubtedly have cited the supposed backwardness of the *Ostjudentum*, a backwardness due to the oppressed status of those communities, as well as to the alleged oppressive nature of rabbinical learning and Kabbalah. Today we are inclined to examine structural transformations and structures of *longue durée* in a less modernist partisan spirit. We can see that what we call 'the Renaissance' was a cultural sea change predicated on specific conditions obtaining only in Christian culture, because Jews did not have a *pagan* antiquity to be 'reborn' into—although Christian Hebraists of the Renaissance saw the flowering of philosophical and kabbalistic learning of their time as a Jewish form of reclaiming their own ancient traditions. Yet traditional motifs could and did acquire new meanings with the transformations of early modern Judaism, and the medieval motifs we encounter in Polish wooden synagogues speak a traditional language to express new desires.

It is too early to say whether a challenge to the canon is possible through the simultaneous consideration of Jewish and Christian visual cultures. I believe there is something to be gained from confronting the *Bible moralisée* with the Golden Haggadah, and the *Mikdash-yah* Bibles with the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. Such conjunctions and

disjunctions beyond the search for formal or iconographic influences allow us to question some canonized notions of medieval visual culture.

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