

IS THERE A JEWISH ART?

Harold Rosenberg

Is THERE a Jewish art? First they build a Jewish Museum,* then they ask, Is there a Jewish art? Jews! As to the question itself, there is a Gentile answer and a Jewish answer. The Gentile answer is: Yes, there is a Jewish art, and No, there is no Jewish art. The Jewish answer is: What do you mean by Jewish art?

Needless to say, the Gentile answer, either way, is anti-Semitic. Consider first that there is a Jewish art. A German art historian named Haftmann has written a two-volume history of 20th-century painting in which he divides art into a Mediterranean mode and a Northern or Germanic mode. French, Italian, and Spanish art—including Cubism, Fauvism, Futurism, post-Impressionism—is Mediterranean in feeling and is characterized by rationality, harmony, sensibility. In contrast, Germanic art, with its Expressionism, Bauhaus, Blue Rider group, is profoundly subjective, metaphysical, speculative. Where do the Jews come in?

In a small section by themselves. It turns out that Chagall, who came from Russia; Modigliani, who came from Italy; Soutine, who came from Poland, do not belong either with the Mediterraneans or the Nordics (though the Russian, Kandinsky, is treated as strictly Germanic). They are grouped together as Jewish artists. They lived in the same neighborhood in pre-war Paris, and Haftmann conceives that little street as a kind of ghetto where Chagall, Modigliani, and Soutine produced a Jewish art.

Now in fact there is very little resemblance between the art of Chagall, the art of Soutine, and the art of Modigliani. But Haftmann finds a principle of identity, and answers: Yes, there is a Jewish art. By the same principle,

Haftmann could have included Lipschitz, Epstein, and Max Weber. He could have come to America and gathered up Gottlieb and Rothko, Newman, Guston, Saul Steinberg, and dozens more and placed them in his small off-track confine called Jewish art, without in any way being able to explain what it was in their art that made it Jewish.

Here, then, is an example of a Gentile saying that there is a Jewish art, and for saying so, deserving to be regarded with suspicion—one reviewer flatly accused Haftmann of anti-Semitism.

Now take the other view: No, there is no Jewish art. What does that mean? Shortly after the war, a book appeared by Jean-Paul Sartre entitled *Anti-Semite and Jew*. In it Sartre argued bitterly against the anti-Semites, and indeed he has always been a friend of the Jews. But in attacking the notion that the Jews were not really a destructive force in history, Sartre maintained that, actually, the Jews had no history and existed only because anti-Semitism prevented them from disappearing. They were not themselves a nation with a feeling for a common soil, and they did not participate in the national feeling of the Germans, Frenchmen, or Russians among whom they sojourned. They were a people of big cities, also of logic and argument—in a word, intellectuals. They were involved with abstract ideas (coming from a man like Sartre, this is not necessarily insulting), and while they were capable of building mathematical and metaphysical theories, they lacked the dimension of sensibility and that continuity with things necessary for the creation of art.

I repeat, Sartre abhors anti-Semitism. But accept his premise of the Jewish mind with its incapacity for art and you have the raw material out of which anti-Semitism can be formed. From the image of the man limited to abstract ideas, it is but a step to that of the man dedicated to cash, since the chief abstraction in the mod-

ern world is, of course, money. The explanation of why the Jews don't have art and the conception that they are devoted to money fit together and provide a description of the kind of people they are.

IN SHORT, whether one says that the Jews have art or that the Jews have no art, one tends to wind up with notions not very flattering to Jews.

As to the facts of the matter, they are not much help. In the last fifty years, Jews have become quite prominent in painting and sculpture, and if Jews produce art, it would seem that there must be Jewish art. On the other hand, it is generally agreed that there is no such thing as a Jewish style in art. The upshot is that while Jews produce art, they don't produce Jewish art.

Assigning national identities is a very tricky affair, and final conclusions as to them ought to be delayed as long as possible. For example, most of us believe that there is such a thing as a Jew (and Sartre should be praised for taking a positive stand on this). Yet many people have tried to get rid of the anti-Semitic caricature by arguing that only individuals exist; that there are no qualities that can properly be attributed to Germans or Americans or Frenchmen. Thus, if one says that there was something about the Nazis that wasn't entirely produced by ideology, that there was something German in Nazism, one will be accused by liberals of race prejudice, chauvinism, bigotry. "What?" they demand, "are you going to hold a whole people responsible?" Similarly, many people deny the reality of Jewishness. They say, for instance, that there is no such thing as looking like a Jew; we know perfectly well, they say, that there are people who look like Jews who are not Jews. But if there are non-Jews who look like Jews, there must be such a thing as looking like a Jew. And if there is such a thing as looking like a Jew, does it not follow that the art Jews produce must also have a look of its

*This piece was adapted from a talk Mr. Rosenberg gave some months ago at the Jewish Museum in New York—ED.

own—that this art must look like Jewish art? In that case, there is a Jewish style—for in art the look is the thing.

The same problem exists with regard to American art. I have been attacked in Europe (in England, really) for saying that there is an American art. American art, according to some critics, is simply a development of European art. American painting in the past twenty years has been Surrealist, Expressionist, Pop—it has no specifically American quality. And indeed, a young professor at the University of Pennsylvania who tried to isolate what is visually American in American painting failed dismally.

Yet in a mysterious way we know that there is such a thing as American art, though it is difficult to say precisely when it became more than a mere offshoot, and what characteristics make it American. Jewish art is in an even more ambiguous situation.

I have thought of at least six possible meanings that the term might have. First and most obviously, Jewish art might mean art produced by Jews. This is the practical definition usually applied by Jewish historical societies. The sixth annual American Jewish History Week taking place this year has been planned around the theme, "The Jew in American Art." No doubt, biographies of American artists will be examined to determine which among them were Jews, and then their accomplishments will be discussed, as well as whether or not they went to the synagogue and the possible connection, if any, between their work and Judaism. In this manner, an account of the Jew in American art becomes an account of Jewish art. It is a way of establishing Jewish cultural identity in the United States without being compelled to lay claim to any particular characteristics. One looks through American history and points to the Jew in American literature, the Jew as an officer in the armed forces, the Jew as a scientist. All national minorities use this type of research as the basis for prestige campaigns designed to establish the fact that they are an asset to America and have a right

to be respected. Having artists and generals proves that they are almost as good as people who have done nothing special, but do have the proper background. In sum, they present their achievements as credentials entitling them to the status of ordinary Anglo-Saxons.

The idea of Jewish achievement in American—or French or British—art might be one definition of Jewish art and perhaps not altogether an empty one. Imagine that some Jewish gentleman whose ancestors arrived in America at the time of Peter Stuyvesant moved to the South, bought slaves, became a member of North Carolina society, and then decided to paint. (Very likely, such a gentleman would have gone to the synagogue.) Would there not have been some Jewish ingredient in the portrait this Southern Jew might have painted of his neighbor? Very likely, though no one would have been able to say exactly what it was; perhaps it would not have been an aesthetic quality in any sense. Yet we might assume that if this hypothetical artist had been endowed with a fair amount of talent, something of his personality would have entered into his art and to that degree it would have been Jewish art. The "Jew in American Art" thus actually turns out to be creating Jewish art, or at least Jewish-American art. This might have some significance. I, however, cannot say what its meaning is.

WE NOW come to a more serious conception of Jewish art, which is art depicting Jews or containing Jewish subject matter. In this century, a substantial body of such work has been produced. Beginning in the 1920's, an extraordinary development in art took place on the Lower East Side of New York. Under the influence of the American Ash Can School, this art (which might be called East Side realism) dedicated itself to studying the artist's environment—the prevailing idea was for the artist to paint what he saw and what he was deeply familiar with—and the environment happened to contain a multitude of Jews. Quantities of paintings and sculptures were done by Jews of old men with

beards, grandmothers sitting in front of tenements on Essex Street, people going to synagogue, street ceremonies of dedicating a Torah—subjects that tended to branch out and include other Jewish themes in the artist's memory or imagination (Wailing Walls, etc.).

If one were to judge by subject matter, this is as legitimately Jewish art as the painting of Christian subjects is Christian art. But though art may be characterized in terms of subject matter, subject matter does not characterize it as art. Crucifixions and Annunciations have been painted on every level of skill and in every Western style from Andrea del Sarto to the Polish primitive on Second Avenue. To grasp the feeling of a work, one must look beyond its subject to the style in which it is painted. Style, not subject matter or theme, will determine whether or not paintings should be considered "Jewish" or placed in some other category.

For example, I recall a very sensitive picture painted, I believe, by one of the Soyers in the 30's of the artist's parents seated at the table after a Friday night supper. The candles are beginning to melt, and the middle-aged couple are also melting into half sleep. They look as if they had eaten a good deal—a golden glow as of chicken soup permeates the picture. With the droopy, worn quality of the parents in the midst of the Sabbath haze, the scene is thoroughly authentic, and it is beautifully painted. Yet, essentially, this was a French and not a Jewish painting. As a translation of a Jewish situation into French art, it had a sensitivity all its own. But its style had no relation to the Jews or to the Lower East Side.

This brings me to a less disputable area of Jewish art, that with which the Jewish Museum is involved—I mean the art of Jewish ceremonial objects: silver menorahs and drinking goblets, embroidered Torah coverings, wood carvings. Over the centuries, Jewish craftsmen produced these treasures, which have served Jewish ritual purposes and displayed the symbols of Judaism. In the old days, the symbolism was most strictly regulated. Today, many of the old crafts are being

revived with sophisticated modernist variations.

In short, a Jewish handicraft exists and a handicraft tradition. This is what scholars usually accept as Jewish art. Without troubling themselves as to whether Chagall bears any relation to Modigliani through the fact of their both being Jews, the scholars give their attention to the stream of carvings, silver castings, and embroideries with a Jewish iconography and biblical references. I doubt, however, that this priestly work is art in the sense in which the word is used in the 20th century. My own interest in it is extremely limited. And this seems to be generally the case. Otherwise, why would the Jewish Museum feel compelled to supplement its exhibition of Jewish crafts with showings of contemporary paintings and sculptures, to make imposing events of retrospectives of Rauschenberg, Johns, and Rivers?

There is, in addition, an underground of Jewish handicraft which is largely lost, a kind of ceremonial and semi-ceremonial folk art of an ephemeral nature, emanating from the daily life of the Jewish communities. (M. Sartre was unaware of Jewish folk artists living on the land and in the village like any Norman peasant.) I know about this art only because my grandfather was a *shochet* and a *mohel* who was extremely skillful with tools. He used to cast for us Chanukah *dreidlach* made of lead in his own design; and out of some kind of leaden-colored pastry he modeled miniature tables, chairs, and beds which you could eat when you got through playing with them. Nobody ever thought of my grandfather as an artist; his art was cutting the throats of steers and executing his sculpture on the male babies of Brooklyn. To match him, my grandmother on the other side of the family used to bake *chaleh* in the shape of birds with folded tails and whole peppers for eyes. She also had terrific prestige for the thinness of her noodles and the lightning speed with which she chopped the rolled-up dough.

I haven't seen any home-made *dreidlach*, bird breads, and noodles like blond hairs for a long time,

but I assume that Jewish men and women are still doing these things, which might be considered art—that is, if you wish to consider chopping noodles a Jewish art form.

Ceremonial and folk art lead to another possible category of Jewish art, one that we might call metaphysical Judaica. Perhaps this is the Jewish art of the future. Perhaps a genuine Jewish style will come out of Jewish philosophy. Ben Shahn has experimented with the Hebrew alphabet and has done reading in Jewish mysticism. Yaacov Agam, a well-known Israeli painter who lives in Paris, expresses a passionate interest in the subject of Jewish art. Agam's position, as I understand it from a letter and some published statements he recently sent me, is that up to now there has not been a Jewish art, but that the time has come to create one. He desires, he says, "to give plastic and artistic expression to the ancient Hebrew concept of reality, which differs in its essence from that of all other civilizations."

I shall not attempt to summarize here the reasoning which carries Agam from the uniqueness of the Hebrew conception of reality, through the Commandment against graven images, to the description of his own non-figurative paintings (he was included in the "Responsive Eye" exhibition of the Museum of Modern Art last year) as "more reality than abstraction." In practice, Agam is a painter of optical effects whose abstractions are closer to the paintings of Vasarely than to the Tables of the Law. Jewish metaphysics may be a way of lending an aura of difference to Agam's work, but there is nothing in it to convince me that it stands at the dawn of a unique Hebrew conception of reality in art.

SPEAKING OF the Second Commandment, whenever anything is said about Jewish art, someone is bound to bring up the ban against graven images in the Old Testament. There are, of course, many explanations of this anti-image complex: apart from the connection between figurative art and idol worship, the Jews were literally crushed by art while they

were in Egypt and the notion of sculpture must have induced tribal nightmares.

I have, however, my own fanciful "modernist" theory of why the Old Testament excluded carvings and paintings. It is that in a world of miracles, the fabrications of the human hand are a distraction. In the landscape of the Old Testament, anything (a garment, a slingshot, the jawbone of an ass) or anybody (a shepherd boy, a concubine) may start to glisten with meaning and become memorable. (One finds a trace of something similar in Whitman: instead of constructing images, he catalogues objects of the American scene, the idea being that art is anything that appears in the aura of the wonderful.) Thus, the Old Testament is filled with a peculiar kind of "art," which we have begun to appreciate in this century: Joseph's coat, Balaam's ass, the burning bush, Aaron's rod. If there were a Jewish museum with those items in it, would anyone miss madonnas? I am not suggesting that the ancient Hebrews were the inventors of Surrealism. But the idea that if you inhabit a sacred world you *find* art rather than *make* it, is clearly present in the Old Testament. When the mind of the people is loaded with magical objects and events, which unfortunately cannot be assembled physically, what is there for artists to do but make cups for ceremonial drinking and ornaments for the Torah?

Jewish art, then, may exist in the negative sense of creating objects in the mind and banning physical works of art. In this sense, the Second Commandment was the manifesto of Jewish art. In our day, an anti-art tradition has been developing, within which it could be asserted that Jewish art has always existed in not existing. At least I prefer that idea to Agam's.

Returning to the real world, I believe we are obliged to conclude that there is no Jewish art in the sense of a Jewish style in painting and sculpture. Whether there ever will be such a style is a matter of speculation—a speculation that ought to take into account the progressive fading of national styles in modern art generally.

Still, Jewish creation in art has been very vital in this century, and the important thing is that while Jewish artists have not been creating as Jews, they have not been working as non-Jews either. Their art has been the closest expression of themselves as they are, including the fact that they are Jews, each in his individual degree.

The most serious theme in Jewish life is the problem of identity. The Jew, of course, has no monopoly on this problem. But the Jewish artist has felt it in an especially deep and immediate way. It has been a tremendously passionate concern of his thought. It's not a Jewish problem; it is a situation of the 20th century, a century of displaced persons, of people moving from one class into another, from one national context into another.

In the chaos of the 20th century, the metaphysical theme of identity has entered into art, and most strongly since the war. It is from this point that the activity of Jewish artists has risen to a new level. Instead of continuing in the masquerade of conforming to the model of the American painter by acquiring the mannerisms of European art, American Jewish artists, together with artists of other immigrant backgrounds — Dutchmen, Armenians, Italians, Greeks — began to assert their individual relation to art in an independent and personal way. Artists like Rothko, Newman, Gottlieb, Nevelson, Guston, Lassaw, Rivers, Steinberg, and many others helped to inaugurate a genuine American art by creating as individuals.

This work inspired by the will to identity has constituted a new art by Jews which, though not a Jewish art, is a profound Jewish expression, at the same time that it is loaded with meaning for all people of this era. To be engaged with the aesthetics of self has liberated the Jew as artist by eliminating his need to ask himself whether a Jewish art exists or can exist.

HAROLD ROSENBERG, *the distinguished art critic, is the author of The Tradition of the New, The Anxious Object, and other works.*