

STEVEN FINE

Lernen To See: “Modernity,” Torah and the Study of Jewish “Art”¹

JEWISH ART IS TODAY a well-established area of Jewish culture. It is collected and displayed in museums across the globe; ancient, medieval and modern synagogue and historic artifacts are lovingly preserved and curated; excavations yearly uncover ever more examples of Jewish art and archaeology from Western Europe to the Galilee; two scholarly journals are dedicated to the study of Jewish Art; books are published and dissertations agonized over. “Jewish” artists, “religious” and “secular” (sometimes the same person!) thrive everywhere that Jews do. As late as 1900, by contrast, this was barely the case. Hebrew didn’t even have a term for “art.” Eliezer Ben Yehuda (d. 1922), for example, referred to the introduction of the noun *omanut*, “art,” to the developing modern Hebrew lexicon: “A word (*omanut*) that was recently coined (*nithadesh be-zeman ha-aharon*), and its usage has spread in newspapers and in speech.”² Speakers of modern Hebrew developed this word at a time when Cultural Zionists, followers of Ahad ha-Am, Asher Ginzberg (d. 1927) were focusing upon the development of a distinctly Jewish national art, a prerequisite, they believed, to the Jews being accepted as a modern national entity.

This project was the life’s work of Ben Yehuda’s neighbor and fellow-traveler Boris Schatz from his base at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem (figs. 1-2).³ While officially a crafts center, college and museum, the

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FIG. 1. THE BEZALEL NATIONAL ACADEMY OF ART, JERUSALEM, 1920's, POSTCARD BY YAACOV BEN DOV. SCHATZ IS TO THE LEFT.



FIG. 2. JUDAICA HALL, THE BEZALEL NATIONAL ACADEMY OF ART, JERUSALEM, 1920's, POSTCARD BY YAACOV BEN DOV.



FIG. 3. INTERIOR OF THE HURVA SYNAGOGUE, JERUSALEM, 1934-1939
(COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION).

Bezalel School, led by the charismatic Schatz, saw itself as a vanguard, creating a national art for a people that was universally perceived as lacking one. Jews were not alone in the need to create a national art. Other “new” nations, most notably recently unified Germany and the United States, were struggling with this problem of identity and art on much larger scales. So were the smaller national groups within the multicultural Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires—Czechs, Serbs, Ukrainians, and yes, Jews (many of whom were Zionists). In fact, Schatz came to his Zionist task after helping to create a national art for the new kingdom of Bulgaria as founding director of the Royal Art Academy in Sofia.

For Jews, this process was uniquely complex, as they were spread over so many languages, and now nation states. With the onset of Emancipation, Jews, as communities and increasingly as individuals, were engaged in the often bewildering task of reforming themselves in the images of the new “modern” nation-states in which they were now citizens. They did this differently in different places, fashioning Judaism on the model of Protestantism in Protestant countries like Germany, England and the United States; Catholicism in Italy; and as a national minority in the Hapsburg lands. The porous and flexible boundaries that differentiated Jewish culture from pre-modern host societies—an international virtual community sharing a deeply mimetic tradition—which includes within it *halakhah*, language, script, and sacred story—were broken down, as Jews sought to rebalance who and what it meant to be Jewish in ways that the majorities of their newly-fellow countrymen would find exemplary (or at least not offensive). “Art” became an important point of identity formation.

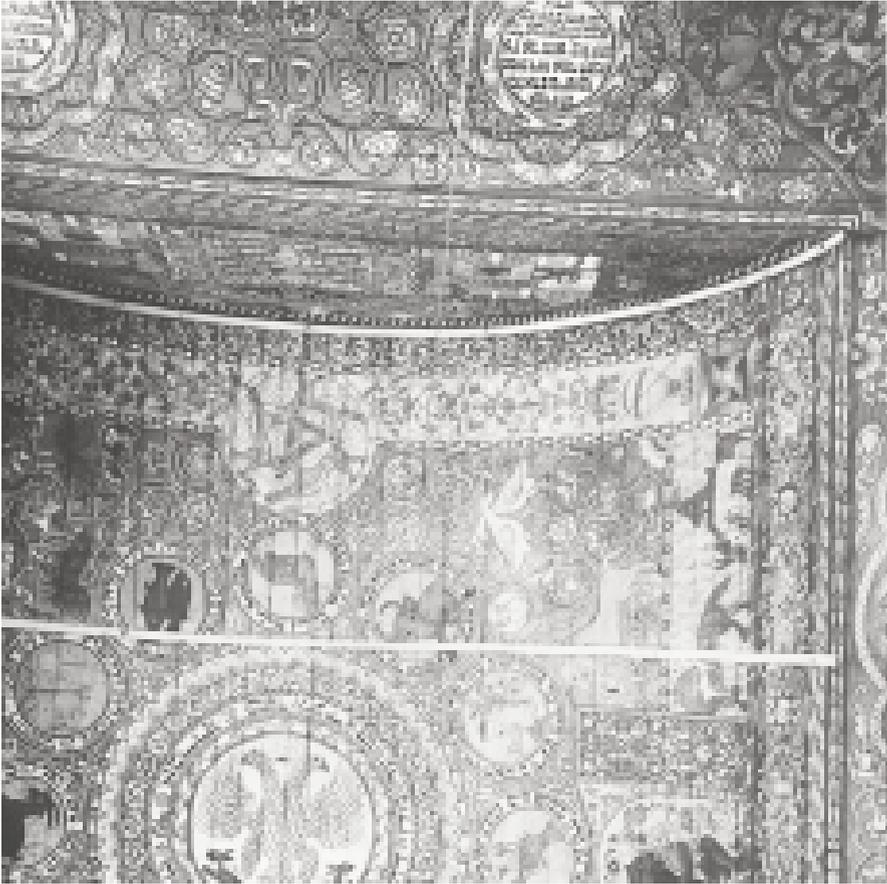
For those committed to maintenance of Jewish “peoplehood” during the latter 19th and the early 20th centuries, often Zionist and “Diaspora nationalists” of Eastern Europe, the existence—and thus the invention—of a canon of Jewish art that would reflect the “spirit” of the nation was a national priority. This is no better expressed than in a periodical that appeared in Berlin between 1922–4, which was published both in Hebrew as *Rimon*, and in Yiddish as *Milgroim*—“Pomegranate” in both languages—and was directed to both of these constituencies and edited by Mark Wischnitzer and Rachel Wischnitzer (after the War, “Mrs. Wischnitzer,” as she was called, was professor of Jewish Art at Yeshiva University). Since every true “nation” was believed to express its inner spirit through its “Art,” Jews set out to “discover” and curate a distinctly Jewish artistic canon from Hebrew illustrated manuscripts spread across the great libraries of Europe, ceremonial objects found in communal contexts, scattered synagogues (some now churches)

and cemeteries and archaeological sites across the Mediterranean basin. The first great repository of this virtual and international canon is the *Jewish Encyclopedia* of 1905–7. Jewish museums, including one at the Bezalel School, were in formation.⁴

For others, however, the non-existence of Jewish national “Art” was a virtue, and claims for its existence a challenge. These Jews—both Reformers and neo-Orthodox, with their roots in Germany—accepted Protestant notions of aniconism as their standard. They adhered to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who praised Judaism for being closer to Protestantism than to hated Catholicism for its lack of an Artistic tradition.⁵ It was far “better” to be like the “enlightened” with their focus on “the Word” than the much-disliked Catholics with their “idols.” In a decidedly polemical article entitled “Art: Attitude of Judaism Toward” in the self-same *Jewish Encyclopedia*, American reform leader Kaufmann Kohler and President of the Hebrew Union College, emphasized Judaism’s lack of a national art. In effect, he imagined “Art of the Mosaic persuasion,” for Germans/Frenchmen/Englishmen and Americans of the “Mosaic persuasion”:⁶

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 (חכמה ואינה מלאכה, 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.

The “art” of the Jews, then, was part and parcel of the world in which the Jews lived, Jews secondarily forming those visual cultures in the “spirit” of Judaism. He concedes, nonetheless, that “Still, both ecclesiastical and secular art existed to some extent among the Jews of the Middle Ages” before asserting that “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.” Much maligned in recent years for his “anti-Jewish Art” stance, Kohler is not wrong—if hard to hear. Jewish art is, as another Germanophone scholar, Stephen S. Kayser, founding director of the Jewish Museum in New York (and my teacher), wrote in the *Mordechai Kaplan Festschrift*, “art applied to Judaism”⁷ German-Israeli scholar Heinrich Strauss called it “a minority problem.”⁸ Still, Kohler’s polemical tone is a response to the “Jewish national art” approach of Jewish nationalists—by the 1950’s dominated by Israelis bent upon constructing a “national art” and overcoming this religionist voice.⁹



**FIG. 4. CEILING OF THE SYNAGOGUE OF CHODOROW, UKRAINE, NOW DESTROYED
(ALOIS BREIER COLLECTION, COURTESY OF THE TEL AVIV MUSEUM OF ART)**

Kohler's article continues with a discussion of "idolatry" as formative to Jewish attitudes toward art, stressing the ways that Jewish attitudes toward visual culture were formed by the literature on *Avodah Zarah*. This immediate turn to idolatry is typical of historical scholarship on "Jewish Art" ever since. Accordingly, Jewish attitudes toward visual culture, it is tacitly assumed, are framed and given meaning through recourse to what it is not. A negative boundary here becomes the categorical determinant of this material, this focus within the literature of the rabbis the operative way to define it. Thus, the notion that Judaism is a "religion of the book" and not a "religion of the image" became a modern truism and one that was respectable to



FIGS. 5-6. TORAH ARK AND CEILING (DETAIL, BELOW) OF THE BIALYSTOKER SYNAGOGUE, MANHATTAN. (PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVEN FINE)



a Protestantizing Western rabbinate. This false and deeply modern dichotomy places the riches of Jewish textual culture in competition with a recently constructed Jewish national artistic tradition, clearly an unfair set-up that served polemical purpose and contemporary identity politics.

With this as background, I turn to Vivian Mann's *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, first published in 2000,¹⁰ and now available in paperback. Mann has assiduously made available to the English reader a broad collection of Jewish reflection, mostly writings by rabbis in the form of *teshuvot*, and quickly become the standard body of this material for scholars of a wide variety of fields. The literature ranges from the Talmud to medieval and modern rabbis, to a few pieces referring specifically to the formation of the "Jewish art" canon beginning during the latter 19th century. The translations are excellent, even as, for obvious reasons, our author often leaves out the kinds of

technical discussions that are the “meat” for Jewish studies scholars, but the gristle for those working in other fields interested in Jewish subjects. In a sense, it is the textual companion to the canon of Jewish art built up over the last century. The overwhelming sense that I gain from Mann’s very representative collection is that *Hazal*, the *Rishonim* and the *Aharonim* had at best a jaundiced eye toward “Jewish art,” discussing it only when some “problem” arose. Some were more *laissez faire* in their regulation, some more stringent, but *Avodah Zarah*—however broadly construed, was the main way that “art” was discussed in rabbinic sources for nearly two millennia.

The problem is that much of the literature assembled by Mann (as it was for Kohler) is at best situational. In a typical situation, a rabbi was asked his opinion on some point of visual culture, and he answered using the very narrow group of texts at his disposal, often in very repetitive fashion. The ordinary case, where a beautiful building was built, manuscript illustrated or a *parokhet* embroidered that no one deemed “problematic” (to use contemporary yeshiva jargon) is virtually unrepresented in the Rabbinic corpus, particularly after antiquity. What is forgotten, for example, are rabbinic panegyrics on the throne of Solomon, descriptions of the holy vessels and benefactions to the Temple, and *piyyutim* on the garments of the high priests—to name just a few places where rabbinic visual imagination is particularly rife.¹¹ What halakhic literature as a genre cannot include is the vast majority of cases where rabbis chose not to write down their thoughts, were not asked, were not consulted or even involved. Only when a particular rabbi, or some faction, or an individual objected to what was, in most cases, a mimetic tradition of decoration, did questions of synagogue decoration become relevant. For this reason, I began my discussion of rabbinic attitudes to “art” in my *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge, 2005, rev. 2010) with example after example of rabbis enjoying, indeed reveling, in the colors and forms of Jewish visual culture before I ever approached questions of *Avodah Zarah*.¹² Allowing our literary canon to guide the discussion, we have been asking the question of Jewish visibility backwards, starting with the *assur*, the “problematic,” and ignoring the “of course!”—the normal, “unproblematic,” and thus undiscussed.

E. L. Sukenik, the father of the modern study of “Jewish archaeology,” responsible in large part for the development of the Jewish art canon for antiquity, sums up well the dynamic in a footnote to his *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* (Oxford, 1932):¹³

An incident from modern times is typical of the whole history of such controversies. The interior of the largest and best-known synagogue in Jerusalem (fig. 3) is graced by a very obvious illustration of the



FIG. 7. SYNAGOGUE OF UMM AL-QANNATIR, GOLAN HEIGHTS. (PHOTOGRAPH BY JESS OLSON)

Rabbinic adage, “Be fierce as the leopard, swift as the eagle, fleet as the deer, and brave as the lion to perform the will of thy Father in Heaven,” *Mishnah Aboth* 5:20. At the time when it was painted the Chief Rabbi voiced protest, but it is still there, and the most pious Jews still worship at this place.

Such paintings were so common in Eastern Europe as to be stereotypical and “normal.” Few remain today, wiped out by the ravages of World War II (fig. 4), the abandonment of urban synagogues in 1950’s America and the modernist impulse that swept synagogue architecture in Central Europe after World War I and then in America after World War II (figs. 5-6). When the Hurva was recently rebuilt, the animals were left out, though “unproblematic” depictions of the Holy Cities of Israel that appeared in the original synagogue decoration were repainted. This short memory was shortened even more when twentieth century thinkers asserted that this modernist architecture and art is the MOST Jewish of all. Without the development of the visual canon—organized, published and exhibited by Jewish nationalists—we might well have forgotten that other approaches have existed throughout Jewish history. Left to their own internal literary logic—often reinforced by modernizing attachment to the apologetic “truism” that Judaism is a textual and not a visual religion that suited the Emancipation project so well, one might imagine that good “frum” Jews throughout the ages allowed only aniconic synagogue decoration. Anything else must be non- or even anti-rabbinic!

It is my contention that knowledge of the Jewish mimetic tradition of visual representation—the canon of Jewish art—allows us to contextualize and indeed, sideline, the border patrolling function of halakhic discussions, setting this rich literary material within a context that better reflects the original intentions of its framers. The implications of this assertion for contemporary “students of the Sages” are larger than they may seem. If it is the case that without knowledge of the variety of the canon of Jewish art, it is impossible to truly understand the implications of the *halakhah* regarding “art,” how many other areas of Jewish law and lore require full historical contextualization in order to be fully appreciated? The rabbinic imperative to *פוק חזי מאי עמא דבר*, “Go out and see what the people are doing” (*b. Berakhot* 45b; *Eruvin* 14b), thus takes on a historical imperative to “go out and see what the people *did*.” For modern Orthodox scholars and rabbis, this is an imperative, as we strive to fully understand the ways that this literature—and its “Modern” interpretation, impacts and is impacted by our own world. While I am no believer in the integration of the results of researchers like me into the halakhic process—in a sense treating an avowedly secular

discipline as if it is sanctified and sanctifying (it is not—at least not in a pre-modern sense),¹⁶ I do believe that the full contextualization of Jewish sources in terms of the world in which they were created is essential to understanding the settings in which our sources and their authors “lived”—in antiquity, the middle ages, and especially in the modern period.

In this short excursus, I have presented just some of the complex issues related to the place of “Art” in Jewish life, and the ways that these issues touch on the root of Jewish identity in the wake of the reformation of Jewish identity that “modernity” caused. For *talmidei hakhamim*, “students of the sages,” the four walls of the traditional *beit midrash* are no longer sufficient for this kind of analysis. For the kind of *lernen* that I am describing the *beit*



FIG. 8. RESEARCH BY THE ARCH OF TITUS DIGITAL RESTORATION PROJECT IN ROME, JUNE, 2012 (COURTESY OF THE ARCH OF TITUS DIGITAL RESTORATION PROJECT).

midrash is a lonely archaeological site in the Golan Heights, a *mikveh* in medieval Germany, the Archaeology and Judaica wings of the Israel Museum (the successor of the Bezalel National Museum) or even atop rickety scaffolding at the Arch of Titus (figs. 7-8). Torah resides in all of these places for those who “see.”

NOTES

1. This article is for Norman Adler, a Jew who can truly “see.”
2. E. Ben Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1980), 1: 286, in Hebrew.
3. For an excellent introduction to the Bezalel School in English, see Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 127–56, and the bibliography there.
4. Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology*, revised edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 20.
5. Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 14, 30.
6. Kaufmann Kohler, “Art: Attitude of Judaism Toward,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1905), 2:141-3. See similarly: Louis Ginzberg, *The Responsa of Professor Louis Ginzberg*, ed. D. Golinkin (New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1996), 157-63, discussed by Fine, *Art and Judaism*, xv-xvi.
7. S. S. Kayser, “Defining Jewish Art,” *Mordecai M. Kaplan Jubilee Volume* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1953), 457-467.
8. E.g., H. Strauss, “Jewish Art as a Minority Problem,” *Journal of Jewish Sociology* 2 (1960), 147-171.
9. The fact that Strauss never found employment as an art historian in Israel is indicative. In later times, the silent response by much of the Israeli “Jewish Art” community of Bezalel Narkiss (himself named while his father served as director of Schatz’s “Bezalel National Museum,” and later my teacher) to the work of German-American scholar and reform rabbi Joseph Gutmann, reflects the continuing power of this argument. On Narkiss, <http://cja.huji.ac.il/Narkiss/MY%20PATH%20THROUGH%20ART.html> On Gutmann, <http://www.ajs-net.org/ajsp04fa.pdf>.
10. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. For Hebrew readers, see: David Kotlar, *Art and Religion* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: David Kotlar, 1971).
11. See also Bland, *Artless Jew*, 109-140.
12. Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 97-121; Michael D. Swartz, *The Signifying Creator: Nontextual Sources of Meaning in Ancient Judaism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
13. E. L. Sukenik *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* (Oxford, 1932).
14. Here I am intentionally staking out a position that contrasts with halakhic method within Conservative contexts. See Joel Roth, *The Halakhic Process: A Systemic Analysis* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1986).