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Janis Bergman-Carton

exhibition review of

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"The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth-Century Europe"

The Jewish Museum, New York

18 November 2001–17 March 2002

Susan Tumarkian Goodman, ed.

The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth-Century Europe

With essays by Richard I. Cohen, Susan Tumarkian Goodman, Paula E. Hyman, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Larry Silver, and Gabriel P. Weisberg

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A long-standing academic concentration within university departments of history, literature, and religion, the interdisciplinary field of Jewish Studies has now found a vital place within art-historical discourse as well. Ritual Judaica, contemporary Jewish cultural creativity, the relation of Jewishness to modern identity politics, and most recently, Jewish subjectivity in art history, have been the subjects of increasing numbers of international symposia, exhibitions, and books in the past decade. One institution that has contributed substantially to our knowledge of Jewish art production and patronage is The Jewish Museum in New York City.

In a recent exhibition, "The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth-Century Europe," the Museum examined the assimilation of Jews into professional art production during the "long nineteenth century," that is, the period bracketed by the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century and the First World War. While there have been small, usually monographic, exhibitions devoted to many of the artists that curator Susan Tumarkian Goodman included in her selection, this show marks the first, broad, historiographical effort to place a relatively large number of nineteenth-century paintings in relation to the geographically, chronologically, and culturally diverse experience of Jewish "emancipation" and acculturation. Twenty-one artists of Jewish origin from England, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria-Hungary, and the Russian Empire were represented. The genres included portraiture, depictions of Jewish secular and religious life, narrative painting devoid of explicit religious reference, and painting styles ranged from realism to symbolism and expressionism.

In her introductory catalogue essay, Goodman posits the now familiar assertion that works such as these call "for a rethinking of the canon of nineteenth-century European painting." But the canon of nineteenth-century art that Goodman hopes will be refashioned — a canon whose theoretical origins also lie in cultural and intellectual notions of the late eighteenth century—was constructed around romantic myths of individualism and a rather privileged brand of "outsidership" that are not actually reflected in the exhibition. Nor are the secondary goals she established for the show clearly met—to demonstrate "the role of Judaism in the lives of artists gathered here" and to acknowledge "the essential fact that art does not exist in a vacuum but instead develops in a complex social, historical, psychological, and political matrix"—goals whose rhetoric underscores the somewhat

unsatisfying collection of a disparate body of work that demands more selective contextualizations.

Fortunately, the catalogue essays by Paula Hyman, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and Larry Silver offer useful and provocative frameworks for this material. Like Gabriel P. Weisberg's contribution, "Jewish Naturalist Painters: Understanding and Competing in the Mainstream" and Richard I. Cohen's "Exhibiting Nineteenth-Century Artists of Jewish Origin in the Twentieth Century," these essays address different dimensions of the central questions raised by the exhibition. What models of art practice evolved among artists of Jewish origin in Europe as restrictions were relaxed on the occupations and institutions to which they had access? And, How did the competing impulses of assimilation and Jewish identity politics register in the aesthetics, reception, and historiography of this work?

Within a framework that emphasizes the relationship between "emancipation" and the development of the modern nation state, Paula Hyman's "Acculturation of the Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe" considers the distinct experiences of Eastern and Western European Jews. It particularizes the chronologies of the various Jewish communities and degrees of their acculturation ranging from the earliest and most straightforward right of citizenship granted by the French following the 1789 Revolution to the more complicated and phased adjustments of establishing Jewish legal status in England and the Russian Empire, for example. Hyman's distinctions between the experiences of Jews in individual countries—in terms of patterns of urbanization, professional and economic opportunity, and conflicting expectations (both within and outside the Jewish community) regarding the erasure or retention of Jewish identity that followed emancipation—provide the foundation for all subsequent considerations of the subject matter, style, and critical reception of this diverse group of Jewish artists.

Nicholas Mirzoeff's "Inside/Out: Jewishness Imagines Emancipation" offers more of a theoretical meditation, a sociological lens through which we might view the multiformity of the paintings in the exhibition. He begins with the very paradox of the Jewish emancipation – with freedoms that granted degrees of access to arenas of political and cultural representation yet were contingent upon self-denial, upon the concealment of outward signs of Jewish identity. This legislated "doubleness," which created a tension between the private interiorized identity that is the precondition of art-making and the public performance of acculturation, initially generated intriguing artistic strategies. Later in the century, however, these strategies were branded "suspect," says Mirzoeff, by practitioners of the various pseudosciences who focused on issues of race. Although Mirzoeff's "inside/out" paradigm applies most convincingly to the experience of Western European Jews, it also opens up a rich area for investigation that moves beyond iconography and biography.

As in Hyman's essay, Larry Silver's "Between Tradition and Acculturation" traces this art work to the Haskalah, the late eighteenth-century cultural movement of Jewish emancipation, which made it possible for nineteenth-century artists of Jewish origin to produce art at all. And, like Mirzoeff, Silver is drawn to the idiosyncratic strategies that these artists employed in their struggle with, or embrace of, the doubleness of Jewish identity. Building on an earlier essay on Maurycy Gottlieb for Catherine Soussloff's 1999 anthology *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, the author presents case studies that encompass not

only regional and period variations but the formative issue of audience and reception as well. He begins with Moritz Oppenheim, an artist best known today for his oils and graphic work depicting Jewish family life. Silver remarks on how Oppenheim consistently coupled German and Jewish elements into a pictorially unified model of tolerance and integration. Maurycy Gottlieb provides his second example of a young Jewish artist seeking visual strategies through which to convey the Haskalah doctrine of reconciliation in a kind of "Jewish history painting," a hybrid genre that distinguishes this artist's work and broadens its appeal beyond an exclusively Jewish audience. The remaining artists Silver examines operate in less traditional genres. They range from assimilated and cosmopolitan figures like Camille Pissarro and Max Liebermann, who made careers in the context of the independent and secessionist movements, to Samuel Hirszenberg, whose haunting imagery of the diaspora speaks to the far more precarious position of Eastern European Jews.

These catalogue essays strengthen an exhibition that was more hesitant and exploratory in nature than synthetic and textured. The Jewish Museum's investigation of the intersections between art-making and Jewish culture has been realized more successfully in other historical projects, such as in the site-based exhibition of "Berlin Metropolis: Jews and the New Culture, 1890–1918," for example. The difficult marriage of Jewish identity politics and modern visual culture is perhaps most easily achieved when it is embroidered within a more expansive narrative of art production, one that underscores its inseparability not only from Jewish acculturation patterns and experience, but also from the formative institutional and social realities of the art community in which it was produced.

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