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Looking Jewish: The State of Research on Modern Jewish Art

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Looking Jewish: The State of Research on Modern Jewish Art

Larry Silver and Samantha Baskind

Being a Jew is like walking in the wind or swimming: you are touched at all points and conscious everywhere.

Lionel Trilling, notebook entry, 1928

I know of no writer in English who has added a micromillimeter to his status by "realizing his Jewishness," although I know of some who have curtailed their promise by trying to heighten their Jewish consciousness.

Lionel Trilling, *Contemporary Jewish Record*,
1944

Definitions and Historiography

Scholarship on modern Jewish art has developed critical mass only in the past two decades, after an uneven pioneer phase most often confined to museum exhibition catalogues and closely researched articles in the once indispensable *Journal of Jewish Art* (1974-88).¹ From Israel (yet written in English), *Jewish Art's* successor, *Ars Judaica* (2005-), is **[End Page 631-]** now complemented by the first American-edited journal dedicated to Jewish art, *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* (2007-). Several anthologies have recently emerged, such as Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd's *Complex Identities* (2001) and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp's *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times* (2008).² Much serious work still appears either as museum publications or articles, mostly in journals of Jewish art or Jewish studies.³ Yet Jewish art history continues to suffer from a lack of respectability outside Israel; indeed, the prevailing perception within the discipline of art history does not yet recognize Jewish art as a subfield, such as African American art, let alone Christian or Islamic art. Art history more typically is delineated by nationality, another of the definitions of Jewish difference, and a starting point for some current self-conscious Jewish art scholarship. This essay will discuss such recent contributions to the field of Jewish art, alongside three older landmark books—enduring

models for interdisciplinary, historically grounded scholarship in modern Jewish art—by Richard Cohen, Ziva Amishai-Maisels, and Avram Kampf.⁴

General historiographical problems concerning the assessment of Jewish art formed the subject of a 1999 anthology, edited by Catherine Soussloff.⁵ The first segment considers biases of the field of art history against the very notion of Jewish art, in part due to the widespread misimpression that the Second Commandment prohibited Jews from making pictorial imagery. Lisa Saltzman, who also later devoted important books to **[End Page 632]** the subject, tackles the issue of art after the Shoah, particularly for a gentile German like Anselm Kiefer.⁶ Soussloff's book also engages with how a historian or critic's identity shapes his (in all cases) approach to Jewish art.⁷ Specifically, Margaret Olin examines nineteenth-century art history surveys and their exclusions of Jewish monuments from a dominant progressive narrative, conceived in national and racial terms. Remaining essays on early Jewish art historians and critics, from Aby Warburg to Clement Greenberg, evaluate emerging twentieth-century Jewish visions of the discipline of art history, whether Renaissance or modern.⁸

The old canard about Jewish image-phobia remains widespread. Two recent books, however, have gone far to redress the commonplace that Second Commandment prohibitions inhibited, even prevented, Jewish visual culture. Kalman Bland, also a contributor to Soussloff's volume, deconstructs the misperception. His 2000 book chronicles a history of ideas starting with German nineteenth-century stereotypes. Even Kant and Hegel regarded Jews as a verbal people who preferred abstraction and monotheism to the materiality and potential idolatry of art objects—hearing and the word dominated over sight and the image.⁹ But not only racist outsiders, including Richard Wagner, tarred Jews with this limitation. Prominent insiders, such as Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig, conceded this (potentially self-fulfilling) historical truth as well. While the very existence of any tradition of Jewish art remained steeped in modern debates over the meanings of both art and Jewish identity, Bland also shows that a "premodern consensus" actually

affirmed Jewish art amid lively discussion (as well as debate) by medieval and early modern rabbis. It is idolatry, not visual art, that was forbidden in Jewish tradition. **[End Page 633]**

Margaret Olin probes wider issues ("discourses") about Jewish art in her provocatively titled volume of...

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1. Pioneering books: Cecil Roth, ed., *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History* (New York, 1961); Gabrielle Sed-Rajna et al., *Jewish Art* (New York, 1997). More recently Edward Van Vooen, *My Grandparents, My Parents and I: Jewish Art and Culture* (Munich, 2006), a slimmer volume with good plates, especially from the modern era. An essay that offers bibliography for teaching Jewish art as well as an earlier state of the field: Richard I. Cohen, "Jewish Art in the Modern Era," in *The Modern Jewish Experience: A Reader's Guide*, ed. J. Wertheimer (New York, 1993), 228–41.

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