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THE Arts in JEWISH EDUCATION

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Perspective on Jewish Education

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Teaching Jewish Identity and History Through “Art”

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Matthew Williams examines a classic piece of American art, using it as a lens through which to explore the dual questions of the nature of the relationship between Art and Judaism and how art can animate students in Jewish day schools.

The Oxbow, the 1830s landscape painting by Thomas Cole, has by many been cited as perhaps the most “American” of American pictures (Cole, 1836). The iconic pastoral landscape, dotted with smoke from wood-burning stoves in the distance, is divided into two major scenes. On the right of the canvas is a clear, gorgeous sky, bright green hills, and a small oxbow (a man-made bend in a river). On the left, however, is a lush forest, full of wild brush and broken trees, with a black storm cloud overhead darkening the scene. In the middle, hidden by the brush at first glance, is the painter, staring back at us over his shoulder, his half-finished canvas in front of him.

Many art historians see this painting as illustrating a tension buried deep within the American core (Bjelajac, 2006). On the one hand, you have the beautiful, idyllic wilderness of nature; and on the other, you have the triumph of technology, bending nature for the aims of man. Others see this as Cole’s meditation on the foreboding future of the industrial age, a mere point in the distance in the 1830s. The storm clouds signify that nature that, try as we might, will never be tamed. Still others point to the quintessential American hubris of painting ourselves into our own visions. After all, the landscape, one could argue, serves as not only Cole’s self-

portrait, but it also creates the equation: landscape equals self-portrait of America, an idea later played with by the likes of Frederic Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt.

Yet, when the painting is flipped upside down, rotated 180 degrees, my students gasp (some not as audibly as others, of course). For where the *Nun* and *Het* were are now the letters *Shin*, *Daled*, and *Yud*, the letters spelling God’s name *Shadai*.

Few look to the strange letters carved into the hilltop in the distance, the one that creates the perspective edge of the painting’s background. My students though, after I draw their attention to it by tapping the zoom feature on the smart-board, recognize them immediately. *Noah*, or rather the precise Hebrew block letters of *Nun* and *Het* adorn the hilltop. To some extent this doesn’t have to necessarily alter the interpretations listed above. If anything, it might only add the nice Biblical resonance of the flood to Cole’s visions of the future and America’s tenuous relationship with nature.

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gasp (some not as audibly as others, of course). For where the *Nun* and *Het* were are now the letters *Shin*, *Daled*, and *Yud*, the letters spelling God’s name *Shadai*. While this also could very well add another

layer to previous interpretations, I explain to my students, something else is at work now. We have to ask a very important question. How does this White, Protestant painter, noted for his contributions to American Romanticism and Naturalism, who lived in the, then, remote Hudson River Valley of New England, know how to make gorgeous Hebrew letters and what they mean?

In general, any student of American history quickly determines that the Hebrew Bible greatly factored into the American colonists’, and then United States citizens’, world views. From the legal system, labeled by that oft quoted phrase “Judeo-Christian,” to the founders’

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famous writings that plundered the Old Testament for choice lines, America was, in many ways, shaped by the Hebrew tradition. As Cole might suggest, the Hebraic tradition is quite literally part of the American landscape.

American Jewish history though, for many years, centered simply on “famous American Jews.” Those Bar/Bat Mitzvah books we all got – “famous Jewish athletes,” or “famous Jewish women who helped change America” – are, upon examination, pretty typical of the social history of Jews in America. In many textbooks as well, American Jewish history, with the noted exception of George Washington’s letter to the Rhode Island Congregation, starts some time in the later nineteenth, early twentieth century, when the mass of Ashkenazi immigrants poured through Ellis Island into the Lower East Side, forever altering the American fabric. And, even then, it’s focused not on the Judaism and its manifestations but rather on the Jewish people.

Now many can argue, as do some of my students, that Cole’s painting is not in “Jewish history.” That Jewish history is solely about innovations by Jews and not a sort of general, effervescent “Hebrew” tradition. A limited definition or not, this line of thinking leads directly into complex discussions about the nature of Jewish history, the conceptual instabilities of genre, and even, that pointed question – who is a Jew?

Thomas Cole’s painting is a single example of a much larger phenomenon, one that begs these questions. Art has the power to interrogate categories of thought, Jewish or otherwise. Further, as a manifestation of culture, art refracts the ideas, values, and motivations that shape it, color it, place it on a wall, and auction it off for several million dollars. Art is also accessible. It does not need the figurative dust brushed off of it like great works of literature. It hangs on the wall, beckoning, open, fully exposed.

This article drives at two main issues, within the context staged by the above example. First, what is the exact nature of the fraught relationship between Art and Judaism? Does Cole’s painting expose a rift in both the way Jews construct their history and the way larger culture distinguishes between the Hebraic tradition and the Jewish one? Second, how can art, like Cole’s painting did for my class, animate students in Jewish day schools? How can it awake them to the aesthetic experience of Judaism and Jewish history? And, how can it make accessible the complexities that abound therein?

Jews and Art

Within the Jewish context, “Art” (with a capital A) has recently played a more symbolic role, emblematic of Judaism’s relationship



Cole, T. (1836). View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm - The Oxbow [Painting]. *American Paintings and Sculpture*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

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with both western thought and secular society. “Art,” as Steven Fine puts it, is an “imperfect cipher,” an amorphous term taken to mean both well-crafted visual/material culture and the abstract concept of “high art” (Fine, 2005). As people, naturally, Jews

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have participated in “Art” since the beginning of recorded history. However, the relationship between Art and Jews has been fraught and complex, colored by the perspective that Jews are “The Nation without Art” (Olin, 2001).

Beginning with Immanuel Kant, who lauded Jews for their lack of art, writing that

perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or on earth, or under earth, etc. This commandment alone can explain the enthusiasm that the Jewish people in its civilized era felt for its religion when it compared itself with other peoples.

This sentiment developed later with Hegel who denounced this same attribute, writing “everything genuine in spirit and nature alike is inherently concrete and, despite its universality, has nevertheless subjectivity and particularity in itself. Therefore the Jews [...] have not been able by art to represent their God, who does not even amount to such an abstraction of the Understanding, in the positive way that the Christians have” (Bland, 2001).

Religious undertones aside, many modern, secular scholars of art history have shown little regard for the notion of Jewish art. Secularity itself, envisioning a culture evolving out of the darkness of religion, was cause for many denunciations of Jewish art. Margaret Olin (2001), in her studies of *Wissenschaft*, nods to many of these instances and their manifestations in contemporary academia.

Many Jews even accepted the notion that Jews do not do art. Meyer Schapiro, the famous Jewish art historian from Columbia University, believed that with few exceptions the field of Jewish art was an almost non-existent backwater. Cecil Roth thought that “the conception of Jewish art may appear to some as a contradiction in terms.” Fine points to popular pieces of literature like *Jews do Art too!* to signal this acquiescence.

Questions that arise from these lines of thought – do Jews have their own aesthetic, how is Jewish art really Jewish – aside from being unproductive, miss the boat. They do not recognize both the fluid nature of the terminology at hand (what is “Jewish” anyway?) and what interpreting art can actually do. Fine aptly characterized the “relationship between Judaism and art [as] a test case [...] a litmus test for interpreting the place of the Jew in modern society” (Fine, 2001, p. 6).

Art can illuminate how a Jew, or even just a small piece of the Hebraic tradition (five letters), stands in relation to larger, foundational issues at the core of human culture. Why would Noah or God matter to Thomas Cole at that particular moment? Who taught Thomas Cole Hebrew? Does that say anything about the relationship of Jews and non-Jews during the early 19th century? If there were none, how did the Hebraic tradition (and the Hebrew language!) operate within the larger Christian culture? If there were inter-faith relationships, were such relationships typical? Did their interactions entail more than just the single dimension of Hebrew typography? Who has asked these questions before?

Jewish day schools and art education

All too often the word itself, art, in the surrounding context of the Jewish day school signifies finger painted *hallah* covers and paper decorations to hang in the *sukkah*. Art as a studio experience, as a pragmatic venture, is seen, not only in Jewish day schools but throughout the western world, as a luxury of the educational curriculum. It sits on the same rung as physical education in some sense. Both are subservient to Math and Science; both are apparently done through feeling, with the body more than with the mind. Further, art is a creative endeavor, an image that, as Ken Robinson (2001) points out, conjures to the mind pictures of bearded people in cool glasses and hipster jeans who can show up late to work because they’re off being creative or whatever. This does not dovetail with the priorities of an educational system intent on producing doctors, lawyers, and engineers.

Art, though, as you’ve read so far, does not have to enter the curriculum through this particular form of encounter. Art can be a vehicle through which you can understand complex cultural milieu, whether in a history class or a geometry one. In addition to the interpretation of Thomas Cole’s painting, this following scenario, from my 12th grade Jewish history course, and its embedded analysis demonstrate this.

This political cartoon from post-World War I Germany appeared in a wide variety of publications throughout the German-speaking world in the years following Germany’s defeat and resulting bankruptcy. My students were immediately drawn to the central action – the act of betrayal, of “stabbing in the back.” That much is straightforward. The students quickly gleaned that Germans pictured Jews as backstabbers.



1919 antisemitic cartoon in: March 26, 1919 Vienna Arbeiterzeitung

They then noticed the figures' positioning relative to each other (reading the placements of characters as a mode of interpretation was something that I had introduced a few weeks before this). In order for the back stab to occur the Jew must be behind German lines (represented here by both the German soldier and the barbed wire fence in front of him). They must be, quite literally, in Germany. A student asked, "do the Germans think that, at this point, Jews weren't really Germans? We've been struggling with this all semester, in a way. Jews tried to be German, but were they defined as a race apart or a separate nation at this moment in time?" I nodded encouragingly. "Or a gender?" piped up one of my students, pointing toward the confusingly ambiguous gendered features, the *peyot* (curled sideburn locks associated with Hassidic men) and the voluptuous cleavage, of the Jew in the cartoon.

I stepped in, for the first time since loading the picture up on the smart-board, "so are you saying the German culture is capable of constructing gender?" My question signaled to my students that they can use this cartoon to explore a deeper issue. "Well, how gender is depicted is different than how gender is constructed, is it?" one of my students asked. "How something is represented does matter," another one of my students insisted, "just think about the skirted generic girl figure above the bathroom, girls do wear pants

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too, sometimes, you know." "Not here," another one of my students whispered. And, though snide it may be, this comment connects the political cartoon and its odd constructions of gender and situates it within my students' own understanding of how Judaism flows throughout their Modern Orthodox Jewish day school.

This conversation led directly into the midterm exam. I asked two questions and provided nine documents (they each could bring a tenth) to answer them. How did Nazis represent Jews? What methods of interpretation did you use? In a general sense, by examining these intricate manifestations of culture, students engage with history in a dynamic way. They investigate it, they analyze it, and they prosecute it. "They are turned from jury members, passively accepting information, into attorneys attempting to make sense of it" (Wineburg, 2001). The messy, but important stuff of historical thinking is accessed through the class's engagement with visual culture.

Jewish history in particular cannot simply be a list of names, places, and events. It is lived by students in Jewish day schools and elsewhere on a daily basis; they know that it is so much more. Jewish history can be an aesthetic experience, full of captivating images and complex notions of life so that it better reflects the lived world of our students. Engagement with the contours of Jewish history and identity through art can do that.



The Washington Haggadah - fifteenth-century Hebrew manuscript.
Image: US Library of Congress

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