



# PEUT-ON PARLER D'ART JUIF ?

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Vous avez entre les mains un numéro de *Tenou'a* qui, comme toujours, vous présente de l'art juif. De l'art juif??? Mais cela existe-t-il seulement? Art créé par des Juifs? Art représentant des thèmes juifs? Artisanat d'art lié au rituel juif? Tour d'horizon de la question avec Brigitte Sion qui enseigne ce sujet dans les universités européennes et américaines.

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xiste-t-il un art juif? Et si oui, comment le définir? La question occupe les esprits modernes depuis deux siècles, et de manière plus aiguë avec l'apparition des premiers musées juifs à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle en Europe. Le sujet divise, fait sourire ou, au contraire, donne lieu à des débats philosophiques et esthétiques. C'est ainsi que Franz Landsberger, auteur d'une *Introduction à l'art juif* (en allemand), commence son essai avec la question suivante: « Un art juif? Cela existe-t-il? » L'historien anglais Cecil Roth lui emboîte le pas: « Le concept d'art juif peut sembler être une contradiction dans les termes ». Et le critique d'art et théoricien américain Harold Rosenberg d'ouvrir, lui aussi, son essai « Existe-t-il un art juif? » paru dans la revue *Commentary* en juillet 1966, avec ces mots: « D'abord ils construisent un musée juif et ensuite ils demandent: "Existe-t-il un art juif?" Ah, les Juifs! » (lire page 9).

La question resterait un pur exercice intellectuel si, précisément, des créations artistiques à thème juif et des artistes intéressés par ces thématiques n'encourageaient pas une réflexion concrète. Ainsi, de nombreux musées juifs doivent leur existence à une collection d'objets rituels juifs, appelés *Judaica*, souvent de très belle facture: que l'on songe à des rideaux devant l'arche des rouleaux de la Torah ou des robes de Torah, magnifiques ouvrages de broderie; chandeliers, coupes, plateaux, appareils des *sifré Torah* et autres objets en argent finement

# Can One Speak of Jewish Art?

**Brigitte Sion, university professor**

You have in your hands an issue of *Tenou'a* which, as always, brings to you Jewish art. Jewish art??? But does that even exist? Art created by Jews? Art representing Jewish themes? The crafting of art linked to Jewish ritual? An exploration of the question with Brigitte Sion who teaches this subject in European and American universities.

Does a Jewish art exist? And if so, how to define it? The question has been occupying modern minds for two centuries, and more keenly with the arrival of the first Jewish museums in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. The subject sows divisions, amuses or, to the contrary, gives place to philosophical and esthetic debates. It is thus that Franz Landsberger, author of an *Introduction to Jewish Art* (in German), begins his essay with the following question: "A Jewish art? Does that exist?" The English historian, Cecil Roth, follows his lead: "The concept of Jewish art can seem to be a contradiction in terms". And the American art critic and theorist, Harold Rosenberg, as well, opens his essay "Does Jewish Art Exist?" published in the review *Commentary* in July 1966 with these words: "First, they build a Jewish museum and then they ask: 'Does Jewish art exist?' Ah, the Jews!" (Read page 9.)

The question would remain a purely intellectual exercise if, precisely, artistic creations with a Jewish theme and artists interested by these themes did not encourage concrete reflection [on the matter]. Thus, numerous Jewish museums owe their existence to a collection of objects of Jewish ritual, called Judaica, often of very beautiful workmanship: imagine curtains before the ark of rolls of the Torah or robes of the Torah, magnificent works of embroidery; chandeliers, coupes, platters, the apparatus for [making] the *Sefer Torah* and other objects in finely chiseled silver embellished with remarkable detail; manuscripts recopied by hand on parchment of unequalled softness; books with still dazzling medieval illuminations; traditional costumes for men and women, not necessarily luxurious, but typical of a community or of a given moment of its history. The list is still longer if one includes everyday or festive objects, noble or simple materials and contemporary art.

For some, Jewish art is above all a ritual art, linked to the cycle of holy days and of life: coupes for Kiddush, a plate for Seder, the eternal lamp. For others, Judaica form a separate category – that of ritual objects – and Jewish art is more a matter of the representation of Jewish subjects: a biblical scene, a view of the Temple of Jerusalem, an assembly of rabbis deep in study, an image of the wandering Jew or of the "ethnic" Jew in Yemen or in the Ukraine. A clear classification. But what to make of a Bernard Picart (1673-1733), a talented French engraver who publishes in 1723 at Jean-Frédéric Bernard – a Protestant editor – two volumes on *Jewish*

*and Christian Ceremonies*, followed by volumes on Hindu, Greek, Protestant, Anglican, Quaker, Muslim, etc. customs. How to classify a non-Jewish artist who treats the themes of Jewish rituals? And what to do with the opposite, equally present? For example, Maurycy Gottlieb (1856-1879), a Polish Jew and realist painter who painted *Jews Praying at the Synagogue the Day of Yom Kippur* in 1878 and *Christ preaching at Capharnaüm* the following year. A Marc Chagall who creates stained-glass windows for the church of the Fraumünster in Zurich or those of the church of Tudeley, in Great Britain, between paintings depicting a rabbi carrying a Torah and the illustration of a *Haggadah* for Passover.

Nothing is simple and everything gets complicated. The Israeli art historian Ezra Mendelsohn (1940-2015) attempted to put some order in the debate by proposing the most exclusive definition. In an essay consecrated to Maurycy Gottlieb, he writes this: this “problematic [...] includes works of artists who are of Jewish origin and whose Jewishness is of evident importance to them and whose paintings treat specifically Jewish subjects, throw a light on the different aspects of Jewish history and of contemporary Jewish life and can be considered as advancing a certain ‘Jewish cause’, that is to say a particular point of view concerning the past, the present and the future of Jews.” And Mendelsohn illustrates his definition with painters, those who meet the definition – Moritz Oppenheim, Ephraim Moses Lilien, the artists of the Bezalel School in Jerusalem, R.B. Kitaj among the contemporaries – and those who do not produce Jewish art – Modigliani, to whom one could add Pissarro. The School of Paris was it a Jewish School? Certain of its members only and on individual grounds?

During the twentieth century, Jewish art has also defined itself in terms of identity, in relation to antisemitism, or with Zionism, or with the Diaspora. The art historian Dominique Jarassé shows this very well in an excellent book recently reedited in a pocket version (Éditions Esthétiques du Divers) and titled *Does Jewish Art Exist?* This book also fills a gap, the disinterest of university research on the question of Jewish art, less a matter of definition than of sensibility and themes.

Rather than go on about the Jewish nature of the work of Mark Rothko (Jewish painter, 1903-1970) or about the asserted cabalistic inspiration of the work of Anselm Kiefer (non-Jewish German painter born in 1945), one should perhaps envisage Jewish art in a less normative and exclusive manner, that is to say, as fluctuating, contingent, contextual and relational. It is the view given to Jewish art by numerous directors and curators of Jewish museums today, who are interested in the exhibition of popular culture and the grand masters, of artists inspired by Jewish themes without having their religion or personal practice count, of ultra-contemporary ritual objects side by side with their alter egos marked with the patina of time. For the greatest benefit of the visitors.