



MEDIEVAL TO MODERN PERSPECTIVES IN JEWISH ART

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HOLO: Welcome to the College Commons Bully Pulpit Podcast, Torah with a Point of View. Produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, your host, and Dean of the Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles. You've tuned into a Bully Pulpit special series for Symposium 1, which the Hebrew Union College convened in New York City in November of 2016. Symposium 1 was organized around the theme of crafting Jewish life in a complex religious landscape. We at the Bully Pulpit had the privilege of interviewing some of the outstanding thinkers who participated in Symposium 1, and we think you'll enjoy the conversation.

Today we will be talking to Dr. Vivian Mann, Professor Emerita of Jewish Art and Visual Culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, also, Director of the Master's program in Jewish Art and Visual Culture at JTS. Additionally, for many years Dr. Mann was the Morris and Eva Feld Chair of Judaica at the Jewish Museum. Dr. Mann, it's really a pleasure to have you. Thank you for joining us.

MANN: Thank you.

HOLO: I'd like to begin by asking you about something we hear all the time, a kind of truism that there's no such thing as a Jewish style of art. What do you make of that? Is it true? Is it an exaggeration? What's the reason for it if it is true?

MANN: It's absolutely true. And that is due to the openness of halakha, Jewish law in relationship to ceremonial objects. The only three ceremonial objects that are completely specified as to form are our texts, the Torah, for example. But in regard to everything else, there's only minimal requirements, which leaves the object open to influence from the outside. So for a Hanukkah lamp, the eight lights should be in one row. But what the back of it looks like is totally open.

HOLO: Or its color or anything.

MANN: It could be any, you know, leafy forms. And birds if it's an Islamic country because those were the motifs that were used in metal work. Or it could be, you know, tulips in Holland. It didn't matter because the only thing that was of concern was the eight lights be in one row.

HOLO: So you combine the halakhic minimalism with respect to any prescriptions for physical art.

MANN: Right.

HOLO: Together with the fact that Jews were dispersed and that the overarching social conditions of the Jews as living in a multiplicity of cultures other than their own as historically understood. And it was a recipe for varieties of influence.

MANN: I don't like the word influence.

HOLO: Okay, good.

MANN: Because that implies that the Jews as minorities in all of these countries took from the majority. Whereas the truth of the matter was they were participants in the artistic culture of these countries. For example, in the Middle Ages most Jews lived in the Islamic world, not in Europe. It was a small minority in Europe. Now in the Islamic countries Jews were the metalworkers. So whatever was produced there was largely the work of Jews, whatever purpose it had. So to say that they were influenced by the larger culture just doesn't make any sense.

HOLO: It focuses only on the demographics, the numbers, that the Jews were a small minority. And it just assumes that because they were a minority they didn't, themselves, influence as much.

MANN: Which is not –

HOLO: Right, which you're arguing...

MANN: The (inaudible), for example, in the Middle Ages or then the modern period.

HOLO: Point taken. And let's use that as a launching off point then to talk about the Middle Ages and the locus of shared culture in almost everybody's imagination is Spain. Most people who think about convivencia, it's more than cohabitation. It's shared society amongst Christians, Jews and Muslims. Convivencia is this borderland of Spain where the great Christian powers met the great Muslim powers, and where there was a large Jewish minority. So let's talk about Spain, 14th Century Spain in particular, but perhaps not exclusively, and some of the modes and events and artifacts of artistic interests that help us flesh out the relationship between Jews -in the case of the examples you provide in your scholarly work it's mostly Jews and Christians – so let's talk about those. Specifically let's begin with the alter pieces. What do we find?

MANN: We find that the Church in various places hired Jewish painters to paint alter pieces. And what's interesting about reading the contracts...

HOLO: The conditions, the contract conditions.

MANN: Contract commissions. They say I will want a painting of the Virgin that looks like the Virgin – the painting of the Virgin in the church of so and so. There's no description what this painting should look like, only that it refers to another painting in another church. And that means that the artist was supposed to – or they presumed that he knew this other art.

HOLO: Had access to this other art one way or another.

MANN: And he knew Christian iconography. He knew what was supposed to be in a painting of the Virgin, which is a very interesting fact.

HOLO: Right. It betrays a real genuine fluency, a cultural fluency because Christian iconography, even for those of us who don't know how to penetrate it technically, we all know that Christian iconography is an idiom of its own. It's a language and you have to be inducted into it. And so that means that the Jews were at least conversant with that idiom, that expression of Christian iconography.

MANN: And it's interesting in contrast to what went on in Germanic countries at the same time.

HOLO: So what's the difference?

MANN: Where the fact that a Jew went into a church was so extraordinary that you get some written mention of it, usually.

HOLO: I see.

MANN: An encounter with images in the Christian church was worthy of notice. Whereas in Spain, it's assumed.

HOLO: So it maybe slightly mythologized this notion of convivencia. But you're actually telling us that there's a lot of truth to it. That there are not merely artistic but documentary sources of evidence that really lead us to understand that there was cultural interaction of substance.

MANN: Yes.

HOLO: The Jews were clearly players in the painter class.

MANN: Not just painters. Also silversmiths.

HOLO: Silversmiths.

MANN: They were major silversmiths. And again, this has to do with possibly a relationship with the Islamic culture of Spain. Islam holds that working in metal is a dirty occupation. Best left to the others. So that is one of the reasons the Jews were so prominent.

HOLO: In Spain as well.

MANN: All over the Islamic world.

HOLO: We find the contractual evidence for Jewish participation in explicitly and uniquely Christian art. Do we find something artistic that we can see? Is there something – is it seamless?

Are there indications or suspicions of Jewish influence?

MANN: Oh I found a couple very interesting things. One was – but it's episodic, you know. It's not consistent. First of all, it's important to mention that as was true in other areas of economic endeavor, Jews converted to succeed or to attain a higher level of recognition in the society. So it's sometimes looking at conversos and presuming...

HOLO: Can you tell the difference?

MANN: Not particularly. I mean there are well written Hebrew inscriptions in some paintings. But those might have been done by apprentices in the workshop because we're not talking about an artist (inaudible) in Greenwich Village. It's very important to understand that in the past artists worked in groups. So therefore, you have to distinguish what the primary artist did and what may have been done by an assistant.

HOLO: Which is often difficult to suss out.

MANN: Yes. Let's go back to...

HOLO: So we're talking about who's doing this and you brought up in the issue that they may be conversos.

MANN: It was a painting that I – a retablo or an alter piece that I found...

HOLO: Can you explain to us what a retablo is please?

MANN: A retablo is an alter piece. In Spain at this time they were painted on wood. And they often consisted of multiple parts so they can be as high as the ceiling of the church and as – and very wide. Consisting of different scenes. So I found this scene in which the high priest is going into the Kodesh HaKadashim, he's going into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. And around his leg is a gold chain. And this alter piece dates one century after the reigning of the Zohar where this is first mentioned, the gold chain wrapped around.

HOLO: Because it's not in Torah.

MANN: It's not in – it has nothing to do with Torah. It's layer. And the Zohar is thought to have been written in...

HOLO: 1391.

MANN: In the valley.

HOLO: 1291.

MANN: A century before this painting, which is something like 1423, in the same area. So that is an interesting example of the influence of Jewish lore on a Catholic painting.

HOLO: Interesting. Interesting.

MANN: And there are also many paintings that show Jews in synagogues because the Christians had a concept that if the Jews of the time represented the Jews of antiquity, of Jesus's time, then their spaces represented the spaces in Jesus's life. So the synagogue represented the temple. The Jewish quarter represented the Holy Land and so forth. And so you get wonderful genre pictures, depictions of actual Jewish life in these alter pieces.

HOLO: Conversely, also in the 14th Century we have illuminated haggadots. And you have studied, in particular, this flowering of miniatures. Tell us about why the presence of miniatures, miniature vignettes I guess we would call them.

MANN: No, they're paintings within a manuscript.

HOLO: Within a manuscript. What is it about miniature paintings in manuscripts that also speaks to the interactions between Christians and Jews?

MANN: This whole type of art suddenly appears around 1300 and it goes to 1350. The first half of the 14th Century. And it suddenly appears in a kind of full fledged manner where there are many miniatures and they're in the same place.

HOLO: That suddenness itself is notable.

MANN: Right. So what are the origins of this? And the origins may have been books of hours which were books that were made for a particular person that were personalized and had miniatures that represented the prayers that that patron would recite at a certain hour of the day. So it may have been some influence. And there's really not a definitive answer to the origins of this. Only that it appears full blown. The other example of interaction which you're eluding to is the iconography that the subject matter of these miniatures is rooted in early Spanish art. Most writers have, you know, taken an arm and a leg from this place and that place in Italy. To me it makes no sense. But there's a whole tradition of representing Genesis, for example, in Spanish art, Christian art that is brought over into these miniatures.

HOLO: Supporting your argument is the fact that we wouldn't necessarily expect a Genesis scene in a haggadot.

MANN: No. The subject matter is another whole subject.

HOLO: Right, but the fact that we have a Genesis scene, as I recall I think you cited a Genesis scene in a haggadot, which is startling. Not merely the fact that we have a type of art that comes full blown, seemingly out of nowhere. But also that this should be a red flag to us that there's a Genesis scene in a haggadot. And now you're telling us that is a tradition of Genesis scenes in Spanish art.

MANN: Correct.

HOLO: So I'm affirming your point with that.

(Break)

HOLO: The ways we think about interaction in the Middle Ages, I said myth before because I think there's always risk of translating that into the modern world in ways that are not necessarily useful. Or if they're useful they may not be accurate. It's a complicated proposition. And maybe we can discuss that. But for now I'd like to move to your current discussions about how Jewish art engages with contemporary art today. What is contemporary about contemporary Jewish art? What are the trends? What are the things that we note in contemporary Jewish arts?

MANN: I think the key difference between the modern and contemporary periods and the past is there are many more Jewish artists. And this has to do with emancipation and going into many fields. So there are many people participating. And they don't go in one direction. They go in many different stylistic directions as there is a chronological progression, and even a matter of choice on the part of the artist. Matthew Baiggel, who was the historian of American art, you know, believes that what ties it all together as a Jewish art is a kind of messianic expectation. That there will be *tikun olam* and that there will be a betterment of the world, or a hope for that, even though these works are made in many different styles. There is an encounter with certain themes, particularly after the Holocaust. Which in fact the art of many artists who then began to concentrate on Jewish themes.

HOLO: Among the aspect of contemporary Jewish art that you pinpoint for us is a notion that I'd never stopped to think about but I found very compelling, which is the notion of coproduction. That there are examples of contemporary Jewish art that truly invite the non-artists, the person who's using it so to speak, to actually form the piece itself. Describe an example or two of that for us, and then let's talk about it.

MANN: I think the chief example are a series of Hanukah lamps in which there are many more places for the wicks than the eight that are necessary. And so the person who was lighting the candles had the choice of where to place the wicks, and how to arrange them in relation to one another. Which is a revolution in terms of what we think about as a Hanukah menorah where all the lights are given and you have to place the candles in one or the other socket. So that is a chief example of what I'm talking about.

HOLO: A slightly subtler example with respect to the owner's coproduction of the art that I really found quite beautiful was the kinetic Miriam's Cup, which is designed to have an unstable base so that the minimal movement will create ripples and waves in the water. That's a particularly beautiful coproduction because it's very kinetic and dynamic and ephemeral, but participatory nonetheless.

MANN: Yes. And it also changes something static into something movement.

HOLO: Yes.

MANN: So it connotes water in that way.

HOLO: Yes.

MANN: And it also evokes creation in the fact that when you read the first sentences of Genesis it's God moving the water and then there's light. So the moving of water is a generative cause for creation.

HOLO: Generative on many levels because, a, Miriam's Cup is an innovative thing, in that regard.

MANN: Absolutely.

HOLO: Sort of ideologically and culturally. And the generative because the movement of the water then folds back onto the experience of the person around the table and moving the table, or kicking the table by accident, for all that matter, and you become part of the movement yourself. It's very interactive. But I want to distinguish, and ask you to distinguish, between interactivity and coproduction.

We've been speaking about how participating in the art you actually co-create the art with the artist, which is different than interactivity because as you and I were discussing earlier, all art is interactive. If art is in the forest and no one's looking at it, no one's thinking about it, no one's engaging with it, it's not art. It's not happening effectively. But sometimes the interactivity can be very, very cerebral and invisible. You know, you see a beautiful – you see a Rothko and it's two stained halves of a canvas. Yeah, you're interacting with it because you're thinking about it and you're wondering, but you're not doing anything with it.

Whereas, you walk on or around a mosaic that is didactic, these intricate, beautiful mosaics that are telling biblical stories, retelling, refashioning biblical stories in a liturgical context. So clearly that interactivity is much more on the surface. Talk to us about interactivity in Jewish art across the ages, and if there's a contemporary aspect of it which is unique.

MANN: I think interactivity is, as you are defining it, is a general characteristic of art. Period.

HOLO: There's no qualitative difference between...?

MANN: In other words, with past art until the modern period the artist said – the artist finishes the painting. Now I as a viewer, if I am not just clicking on my Instagram to record it and say I've seen it and then move onto the next painting, but if I'm really looking at it then I can derive deeper meanings than if I just pass by. That's being interactive with a work of art. You bring yourself to it but you're reacting to something that's finished that the artist has closed. With the modern period you get this unfinished quality where the viewer becomes a participant in forming the work. And I think that's the difference.

HOLO: So would you say Jewish and non-Jewish aside art, part of the trajectory of the story of art is everyone's full recognition and appreciation and celebration of the mutuality of art itself?

MANN: I don't think it happens with all art. I don't think it happens with a Rothko which is finished. But you take a Calder mobile art, I mean it moves as you move around it and as the breeze comes in the window. And that's an example more of creating with the work. Whereas interactivity would be responding to a Rothko. So I don't think there's a difference in period. I think it's a difference in the art itself.

HOLO: No art form is more characterized by this quality in general than architecture, in so far as we literally live in architecture and we're constantly messing with it all the time. I mean we're repainting walls. We're repairing. We're remodeling. Bulldozing. Rebuilding. What have you. So let's talk about synagogue architecture and what we learn about being Jewish, the communitarianism of Judaism, the flavor of that communitarianism under a shared roof, literally, of the synagogue.

MANN: Well, there's been a historical progression in the sense that before the beginning of the 19th Century say, most people were in traditional synagogue which had two parts. There was the Ashkenazi tradition of seats facing the Ark, but with the bimah – with the reader's desk in the middle. Which promoted a certain interaction with people going up to the reader's desk and coming down on the other side. And so there was this sort of cooperation between worshipers that existed.

HOLO: And the transit of the sefer Torah from the Ark to the reader's desk.

MANN: To the reader's desk. All of this – all of this promoted interaction with the divine Torah, and with each other. In a Sephardi synagogue the seats face one another. So there is an added dimension of interaction. And that all changed with the onset of liberal Judaism which sought to emulate the manners of the non-Jews in the church and we as dignified as the church. So instead of having people moving around all the time, you had people sitting and facing front in an auditorium-like style.

HOLO: This is the specific early 19th Century developments out of which both Conservative and Reform Judaism emerged.

MANN: And Reform Judaism emerged.

HOLO: Right. This is the very beginnings of the 19th Century.

MANN: So you get an auditorium style. And the bimah is moved to the front.

HOLO: Giving tchotchkes to the kids as they're running around.

MANN: It's a very formal relationship. And men and women are sitting together as opposed to in the middle or the Middle Ages when women section develops in synagogues with women end up in the balcony for the most part. I could give you exceptions but...

HOLO: So then we enter into the modern European mold where the Jews are reshaping. What

are some of the consequences of that?

MANN: The consequences were that it was less interaction between worshippers because everybody was sitting in an auditorium style. So the analogy would be sitting in the theater today where you really don't, unless you decide to talk to your neighbor, you don't interact with the people in the row in front of you or behind you. And the lesser interaction between worshippers was a consequence of wanting this decorum that existed in church services.

HOLO: And you're arguing that the decorum comes at the expense of a certain degree of communal, even sometimes superficially disorderly, but communal interactions and opportunity. Now, let's then take it to the next step which is very much contemporary. And I have an impression and I want to ask if you share this impression. It's not scientific but it is my impression that as large Reform and Conservative synagogues are beginning to engage more and more with smaller groupings of worshipers, so the grand, grand auditorium, suburban, multiple hundred family synagogue now voluntarily breaks itself into smaller spaces for smaller minyanim or prayer groups. And it is my impression that many of these minyanim are preferring non-fixed seating, movable chairs and that they are choosing to order their seating either in a much deeper curve which is approaching a semi-circle, or downright quasi-circles, or facing each other. Which to me bespeaks a yearning for some of that interactivity of which you spoke. Do you think I'm reading our coreligionists' tendencies accurately? And if so, do you think that's the motivation?

MANN: Absolutely. I want to say from the beginning, particularly in this country, I mean because I can't project myself back into 19th Century Germany, where probably there was more attendance, shall we say, through the year. In the United States, you end up with a situation where famous architects design synagogues for three days a year when the congregation was at its maximum. And then on Sabbaths you have a very small congregation. So, for example, you have one extreme in Temple Emmanuel in New York where they insist still, because they're very classic Reform, on holding those small services in the huge auditorium-like setting that can seat over 2,000 people when they only have 40 people on Friday night.

So there has always been the problem in the architecture in designing a space that could expand. And sometimes the decisions are awkward architecturally. I mean they're just ugly. And sometimes they're more clever. But there is a move now, I think, definitely in the direction that you're talking about. And one example is Portchester where there is a synagogue designed by Phillip Johnson where the front facing pews were replaced in the front with an area where pews face each other. And then there's another portion of them that face the Ark. So that leads to more interactivity.

HOLO: And it gives people choice if they're not comfortable staring at their neighbor across the way.

MANN: They can sit in the other seats and interact with the clergy more directly. So it creates an intimacy. I mean Portchester is an example of what I would call the awkward solution to the three day a year problem because all they did was create a curtain wall that separated one part of the seating from the other part of the seating.

HOLO: A common solution.

MANN: But it's not elegant, shall we say.

HOLO: But it's important. It illustrates that our communities are thinking quite actively about how to reignite this feeling of community in the ways that our bodies interact with the space and each other, and eye contact, and the whole thing. All of which is to say that the architecture, the art, this human act with which we surround ourselves is really a vital part of our experience as Jews as well. And I...

MANN: I often took students and had them sit in different parts of the – you know, I took them on a tour of historical synagogues in New York, of which there are many. And I'd have them sit in different places to understand the worshiper's different experience in the synagogue based on where they were sitting.

HOLO: Well, we've covered a few centuries, maybe millennia, and talking about really a fascinating topic. And I want to thank you for your expertise and really your engaging conversation. It's been a pleasure to talk to you. I enjoyed it.

MANN: Thank you.

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