

Landmarks in Israeli Art

Fall 2009

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Class meets on tue/thu Herring hall 124

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Office Hours: tue: 11:00-12:00 and by appointment.

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Franz Kraus, *Buy Hebrew Watermelons*. C. 1930, lithograph.

Course Description

The course deals with the main movements and styles of painting, sculpture, architecture and crafts of Israel (1906-1986). It examines the metamorphosis of traditional Jewish symbols manifested in themes and subjects Israeli artists deal with while constantly relating to the undercurrent of political events and Zionist dogmas that influence them. Zionist thinking expanded familiar Biblical legends and myths by creating modern ones for the emerging Israeli culture. A close examination of them would show the influence of Roman and Greek mythology as well as Christian symbolism used as models for their creation.

Requirements for the course

Midterm: 20%

Final Exam 40%

Reading assignments: 10%

Research paper: 30%

1) **Midterm** – The midterm will be based on class notes. It will consist of three types of questions: discussions of single works, comparisons of two works, and more general essay questions. For the slide questions, you will need to identify each work according to its theme and its periodic style as discussed in class. For single works, which will be shown for 7 minutes, you will compose an essay that discusses anything relevant that we have discussed in class. For comparisons, which will be shown for 15 minutes, you will need to explore the critical similarities and differences between the two works.

2) **Final** - The final will be similar in format to the midterm.

3) **Research paper:** Length: 6 - 8 double-spaced pages plus endnotes and images. For choice of topics, see below. Your paper should have a thesis, which is proven through evidence. Your research paper should be well written, and based on articles and books. (Information from websites is generally not permitted). You must document your research with endnotes. Do not include a bibliography or Works Cited; endnotes should have all complete bibliographical data (author, title, place of publication, date of publication, and relevant page numbers).

5) Required works for exams, required readings and other announcements will be posted on the **OWL** website for the course.

6) The Rice Honor Code applies to all your written work for the class, including the exams, short papers, and research paper.

Textbooks :

There are no text books for this course; Copies of *articles* and certain chapters from books will be passed on to you by the professor; you are required to read the following:

1. Dalia Manor, "The Dancing Jew and Other Characters: Art in the Jewish Settlement in Palestine During the 1920s", *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, Volume 1, Issue 1 May 2002 , pages 73 – 89.
2. -----, "Imagined homeland: landscape painting in Palestine in the 1920s", *Nations and Nationalism*, 2003; 9 (4), pp. 533-554.
3. Alec Mishory, *Visual Israeliness* (cat.exh.), Ranana:The Open University of Israel, 2007.

Tentative schedule

1 Introduction- I

Getting familiar with art history glossary and with a concise history of the Zionist settlement in Jewish Palestine and the founding of the State of Israel. Mapping the course's boundaries: 1906 to 1986.

The role played by Jewish Artists in *Jewish Renaissance* (late 19th and early 20th century). Works by Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, Gottlieb, Minkowski, El Lissitzky

Questions for discussion

- The second commandment prohibits the making of graven images. How does modern Jewish art relate to it?
- Why are the visual arts important to early Zionist thought?
- How did early Zionism mark the difference between Jewish settlers in Palestine and Jews in other countries of the world? Does this differentiation apply to artists as well?

2 Introduction – II

Ephraim Mose Lilien.

3 Boris Schatz and his utopian doctrines

Boris Scharz studied in Paris and has become the court artist for the King of Bulgaria. In 1906 he migrated to Palestine and founded the 'Bezalel' school of arts and crafts in Jerusalem.

Questions for discussion

- Schatz's "neo-Renaissance" style influenced by Parisian and American sculptors.
- Themes in Schatz's works and their relation to contemporary Zionist ideas.
- The relevance of Italian Renaissance art to Schatz's Zionist concepts of the life and art in the future Jewish state.

4 The “Bezalel” school in Jerusalem: instructors and artifacts

The "Bezalel" school was based primarily on socialist concepts: besides offering art classes, it comprised of several workshops that employed Jewish residents of Jerusalem, seeking work opportunities. The workshops produced several kinds of artifacts – from furniture to ritual objects. In its early years "Bezalel" fulfilled a need for art education as well as providing employment for the unemployed.

Questions for discussion

- Influence of the "Arts and Crafts" movements – European and American on the "Bezalel" style.
- Themes and subjects of the "Bezalel" artifacts and the public they were geared to.
- The "Bezalel" artifacts relation to contemporary Zionist ideas.

5 Painting, sculpture and graphic design during the 1920's I

As opposed to the arts and crafts tendencies of "Bezalel", artists adhered to 'art for art's sake', i.e., 'bourgeois' painting and sculpture. Most of them migrated to Palestine from Europe. In Jewish Palestine they were striving for a unique Hebrew style that would be suffused with modern, secular Jewish concepts. Contemporary graphic design made unique contributions to Hebrew typography.

Questions for discussion

- The influence of the Jewish "School of Paris".
- The significant role played by modern Hebrew language in the Zionist concept of a new Hebrew culture and especially in the visual arts.

6 Painting, sculpture and graphic design during the 1920's II

- Themes and subjects of Israeli art during the 1920's.

7 German-Jewish artists of the 1930's

After the Nazis ascended to power in Germany in the 1930's, many Jewish artists and architects migrated to Palestine. Most of them were trained in German art schools. German Expressionism set different goals than those conceived by French Impressionism, the style most commonly adopted by artists living in Jewish Palestine at that time. This conflict of artistic concepts brought about significant changes in the art of the period.

Questions for discussion

- Basic characteristics of German Expressionist art
- The European and American publics regarded German Expressionist art as 'Nazi art'.
- German Expressionist art was rejected by the Jewish public in Palestine.
- 'Paris versus Berlin': the Jewish art establishment prefers Paris to Berlin.
- Themes and subjects in the works of artists of German descent and their relation to contemporary Zionist ideas.

8 Pre-State Israeli architecture I: Eclecticism

The founding of Tel Aviv (1909), 'The First Hebrew City', manifests one of the first realizations of the Zionist dream: a Jewish city in the 'Ancient Homeland'. The town was conceived in European architectural terms, most of which eclectic, to serve as components for a utopian tie with Biblical themes.

Questions for discussion

- Principles of Utopian architecture.
- Schatz's utopian ideas for the future Jewish-Hebrew State as models for the new "Hebrew House".

9 Pre-State Israeli architecture I: Bauhaus and the International Style

During the 1930's, great waves of immigrants came to Tel Aviv with fresh, up-to-date European innovations. The architectural projects of this period labeled Tel Aviv as 'The Bauhaus City'; later on, most public edifices built in the city and throughout Jewish Palestine, were following the 'Bauhaus' and the 'International' styles.

Questions for discussion

- Contributions by Jewish architects of German descent.
- 'The International Style' favored by the Zionist establishment's construction enterprises of new towns and settlements in Jewish Palestine.

10 Israeli Art in 1948: 'Art for Art's sake'

The sovereign State of Israel was founded on May 14, 1948. A day after its Proclamation of Independence, a war broke out with the neighboring Arab countries. During the war, on the home front, most artists went on painting and sculpting as usual; only a few related to the war on the front. Some were able to get close to certain battle-fields, others sketched their works far away, in their studios.

11 Israeli 'War artists', independent artists, illustrators and caricaturists and the 1948 War

Israeli artists were preoccupied mainly by mythical depictions of the new Israeli soldier (both male and female); very few artistic reactions to the war exemplify any components of protest.

Questions for discussion

- What is 'War Art'?
- British and American World War II 'War artists'.
- The approach taken by Israeli newspaper-illustrators to the war differs in principle from the one taken by individual artists on the home front.

12 Israeli art during the 1950's: abstraction versus 'national' styles I

American *Abstract Expressionism* is held as the United States' cultural-political instrument in its overall struggle against Communism during the Cold War years. It was hailed as the manifestation of freedom of expression and thus as the complete negation of *Social Realism*, Soviet Russia's official style, that was supposed to express the collective spirit while shunning from any individualistic tendencies. Israeli artists could not but join the universal embrace of abstract art; the Israeli *art* establishment in the 1950's and the 1960's put abstract art on the top of its artistic hierarchy. At the same time, the Israeli *political* establishment was known for its socialist views; it has adopted many Soviet ideas, among which the concept that Israeli art should be created so that it 'serves' society and that it should reflect socialist ideals. Israeli artists who adhered to socialist concepts, whose style was not abstract, found themselves hailed by the political establishment and shunned by the art establishment.

Questions for discussion

- two concepts: 'Abstract' and 'Abstraction'.
- 'Abstract art' and Capitalism.
- What is the difference – if there is any – between American and Israeli abstract art.
- Are there 'Jewish' elements in Israeli abstract art?

13 Israeli art during the 1950's: abstraction versus 'national' styles II

Questions for discussion

- 'National' aspects in art
- American 'national art'.
- Israeli 'national art'
- The conflict between Israel's Zionist-socialist political views and 'capitalist' individual abstract art.
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14 Israeli Pop Art

American and British Pop ridiculed the powerful role played by Abstract Expressionism. Most Pop artists were concerned with social and cultural issues of modern, industrial society. Pop Art reached Israel very late; only a small number of Israeli artists have adopted its principles and as it were, almost completely ignored by the contemporary art establishment that still favored the Israeli version of abstract art. The influence of American artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns was significant; that of artists like Lichtenstein, Warhol or Wesselman had a lesser impact. The implication of Pop principles in Israeli culture was manifested by a few comments on Israeli social issues, universal ecological problems and elementary expressions of political protest.

questions for discussion

- basic characteristics of Pop Art.

- Israel's political and social issues during the late 1960's (after *The Six Day War*).
- Depictions of Arabs in contemporary Israeli art
- Why was Rauschenberg's style so highly respected by certain Israeli artists?

15 Aspects of *Minimalism* and *Op Art* in Israeli art of the 1970's

A new interpretation for 'national' art was made by Israeli artists of the 1970's; they have adopted contemporary, universal art principles (mainly dominated by American art) and implemented them in their works. Israeli *Minimalism*, *Op Art* and *Conceptualism* correlate with certain popular concepts held by members of the Jewish clerical establishment; they tend to recognize 'Jewish' aspects in abstraction. *Minimalism* is an abstract art characterized by extreme simplicity of forms and by a deliberate avoidance of expressive meaning. In Israel of the 1970's one stumbles upon a significant growth in official commissions for minimalistic public sculptural monuments, erected throughout the country.

Questions for discussion

- Basic principles of *Minimal art*.
- Basic principles of *Op-Art*.
- Political events in Israel: 1960's and early 1970's

16 Israeli Conceptual Art

The verbal component of *Conceptual art* was taken to heart by many contemporary Israeli artists; the old claim that Jewish culture is basically *verbal* rather than *visual* fitted them perfectly. They have appropriated *Conceptual art's* principles in their dealings with Jewish-Israeli themes and issues as well as with a secular approach to Jewish traditional customs and beliefs. Their works contain aspects of criticism and protest, as part of their Jewish identity introspection process.

Questions for discussion

- Basic principles of *Conceptual art*.
- The [foreign] languages used by Israeli *Conceptual* artists.
- Themes and subjects in Israeli *Conceptual art*.

17 Israeli Earth art

Israeli-Jewish artist Efrat Natan once remarked that “Unlike American Earth Art, which was perceived as a preoccupation with utopian, cosmic and metaphysical ideas in a struggle over the definition of alternative spaces for the museum, the 'earth' in Israel is a national myth, thus 'earth works' here are condemned from the outset to politicization by the very roots of Israeli essentialism.” Indeed, 'earth' in Israeli-Jewish culture is linked to Zionist concepts and ideas that attribute mythical aspects to every chunk of earth found in the country; Israeli soil is a direct continuation of the concept of 'Earth from the Holy Land' in Jewish tradition and culture.

Questions for discussion

- The Jewish custom of laying a bag containing earth from 'The Holy Land' in a freshly dug grave.
- Israeli Earth art and its relation to Zionist ideas.

18 Themes and subjects I: Remembered Fruits: Pomegranates in Israeli art

The flora of Israel has been linked to beliefs, legends and myths since Biblical times. . . Jews have been familiar with the “Seven Species” of blessed crops representing the abundance and plentitude of the land. They blessed the “Four Species” that symbolized the various groups that comprise the Jewish community. The '*Lily of the Valley*' and the '*Rose of Sharon*' added an erotic aspect to their longing for the Land of Israel. All of these created the basis for a most significant Zionist concept: making the desert bloom.

Questions for discussion

- What are the Jewish 'four species' and what is their symbolic charge?
- What are the Jewish "seven species' and what is their symbolic charge?

19 Themes and subjects II: Flowers: Anemones in Israeli art

Zionist thinking expanded the familiar Biblical legends and myths by creating modern ones in the State of Israel. The country's flora was a popular topic for investigation and research since the early period of Jewish settlement in Palestine. It was manifested in a link between the "New Jew" and his ancient-new Land. When the first Jewish settlers came to Palestine, they found there the flora that they recognized from the scriptures. The Zionist concept of the Return to the Land was reinforced by the idea that the "New Jew" comes, in fact, to a place whose flora is familiar. Later on, the Jewish settlers discovered wild flowers, fruits, trees, weeds (and thorns) that are not mentioned in the Bible; these served the new legends, beliefs and myths.

Questions for discussion

- How many flower names are mentioned in the Bible?
- Modern Hebrew innovations of botanical terms.
- How were traditional Jewish myths and legends transformed into Zionist lore?
- How were such Zionist ideas rendered visually?

20 Themes and subjects III: *The sacrifice of Isaac*, a prevalent subject in Israeli art

Sacrifice and martyrdom play a significant part in Zionist mythology. *The sacrifice of Isaac* became a common theme expressing ideas of self sacrifice and extreme religious devotion. Many Israeli sculptors and painters treated the subject; their works manifest a crossing of historical and stylistic periods.

Questions for discussion

- Read the relevant narrative in Genesis.
- Who are the main protagonists of the story?
- How is this subject depicted in Christian art?
- How is this subject treated by Jewish artists? (some precedents).
- *The Sacrifice of Isaac's* relation to Israeli martyrdom.
- Who plays whose role in Israeli depictions of the Biblical story and why?

21 1998: Israel at 50: some aspects of graphic design

- a. Israel's 50th anniversary official posters
- b. individual (private) publications
- c. stamps and banknotes

22 Themes and subjects III: Israeli-Jewish 'Blasphemy'

One of Zionism's significant dogmas stressed the seemingly difference between 'The Diaspora Jew' and 'The New (better) Jew' who resides in The Land of Israel (and later on in the State of Israel). This concept led to the deliberate 'Negation of the Diaspora' that was manifested in an overall contemptuous attitude towards Jewish culture – religious and secular. First signs of breakage with this tendency were expressed by Israeli artists not before the 1970's. as part of their introspective process of reassuring their Jewish-Israeli identity. Some of these artists gave visual expression to some Jewish 'taboos', ritual customs, Jewish burial customs and more. An interesting phenomenon that is typical of the above mentioned artists shows that the general secular public that frequents museum and gallery exhibits is almost totally ignorant of the Jewish rituals referred to by them. Orthodox Jewish-Israelis, who are familiar with every one of the above mentioned themes, naturally regard these artists' comments as blasphemy.

Questions for discussion

- Jewish burial customs
- The '*Havdalah*' ceremony
- The symbolic role of water and wine in Jewish ceremonies

Final exam**Research paper**

Your paper must concern one of the issues raised during the course. Topics will be suggested by the professor or one of your own choice in consultation with the professor: