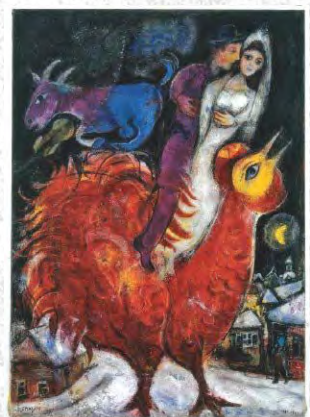


# WHAT MAKES ART JEWISH?





## MOMENT ASKS PROMINENT ARTISTS, CRITICS, COLLECTORS & SCHOLARS TO SELECT THEIR FAVORITE PIECE OF JEWISH VISUAL ART

**With** Helène Aylon, Samantha Baskind, Siona Benjamin, Judy Chicago, Hillary Chute  
Ofri Cnaani, Toby Cohen, Marc Michael Epstein, Tom Freudenheim, Claudia Gould  
Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Carol H. Krinsky, Laura Kruger, Daniel Libeskind  
Vivian Mann, Shula Reinharz, Ruth Sackner, Larry Silver, Deborah Solomon  
Ori Soltes, Mindy Weisel and Bruce Zuckerman

**Is** there Jewish art? In his seminal 1966 *Commentary* essay, the art critic Harold Rosenberg explored the many ways of answering this question. He famously began by questioning whether the question itself was anti-Semitic, saying, “There is a Gentile answer, and a Jewish answer. The Gentile answer is: Yes, there is Jewish art, and No, there is no Jewish art. The Jewish answer is: What do you mean by Jewish art?”

In the nearly 50 years that have passed since Rosenberg wrote this, Jews have become less concerned by whether this question is anti-Semitic—that is, whether it unfairly classifies the work of Jewish artists as Jewish even if Jewishness has nothing to do with it. During this time, a new confidence—at times even pride—has taken hold, although the question remains as hotly argued as ever among artists and critics. But Rosenberg’s affirmation of the Jewish need to question, as opposed to answer yes or no, and his identification of six possible answers to “What do you mean by Jewish art?” still delineate the parameters of the conversation.

Jewish art, he says, might mean art produced by Jews. It might mean art depicting Jews or containing Jewish subject matter. It might mean Jewish ceremonial objects with Jewish iconography, such as menorahs, goblets, Torah coverings, carvings or folk art evoking the daily life of Jewish communities. It might mean metaphysical art, which grapples with Jewish mysticism, probes the letters of the Hebrew alphabet or attempts to express some aspect of the Jewish conception of reality.

The fifth answer is more elusive. Jewish art might

also be defined in relation to the Second Commandment’s seeming ban against graven images. Rosenberg finds many explanations for the ban apart from the connection between figurative art and idol worship. His favorite is that in the world of miracles, “the fabrications of the human hand are a distraction.” Jewish art, he says then, “may exist in the negative sense of creating objects in the mind....”

Rosenberg’s final answer to “What do you mean by Jewish art?” revolves around identity, the core quandary of Jewish life that emerged in the 20th century’s chaotic intermingling of peoples and faiths, and which is in no way unique to Jews. On top of diaspora—with its transcendence of national and geographic identity—we now must contend with assimilation. Rosenberg leaves off here, but from our vantage point today any answer cannot exclude further branches of identity, such as feminism and gender, which have greatly enriched art. And it must include evolving themes of Judaism and Jewish culture, among them the embrace of social justice and diversity, as well as the gravitational pull of global culture. Not to mention the introduction of six generations of Israeli art, and how the Jewish state—and its politics—fit in.

Ultimately, there may be infinite answers to “What do you mean by Jewish art?” Every artist and his or her work absorbed into the great body of human creation adds more possible permutations. In this symposium, *Moment* asks well-known artists, scholars, critics and collectors to select a piece of art that they consider Jewish in the hopes of shaping a contemporary answer to this perennial question.—*Nadine Epstein*



## No.5 / No.22

**Mark Rothko**/United States/oil on canvas/1950

I have always loved Mark Rothko's painting *No. 5/No. 22* from 1950. It shows a glowy yellow rectangle hovering above a fuzzy orange one. There's a red stripe in the middle and inside of it, a long, white, scratchy line. The line makes me think of handwriting. It evokes the Jewish tradition of writing, our reputation as "the people of the book." For me the painting is like an illuminated manuscript page scaled up to heroic proportions.

Rothko is the emblematic Jewish painter. Although he was not an observant Jew, he described his paintings as a religious undertaking, and he wanted you to have a religious experience when you stood in front of them. When you look at the work of Rothko's fellow Abstract Expressionists, you can often find traces of visible reality. Willem de Kooning, for instance, incorporated female figures into his abstractions, and Jackson Pollock's paintings have been likened to nature, the horizon, a tangle of tree branches. Rothko's paintings, by contrast, do not resemble the world in which we wake up and go to work every day. Although we speak of his "clouds of color," they refer to spaces that exist apart from the known world. They provide you with a refuge from the daily grind.

Is this Jewish? I would say yes. Rothko gives you Judaism liberated from the daily trappings of observance. He gives you instant access to Jewish spirituality—without having you go to synagogue, or open a prayer book or light candles.

*Deborah Solomon is the art critic for WNYC Public Radio and the author, most recently, of American Mirror: The Life and Art of Norman Rockwell.*



## If Only They Had Asked Us

**Andi Arnovitz**

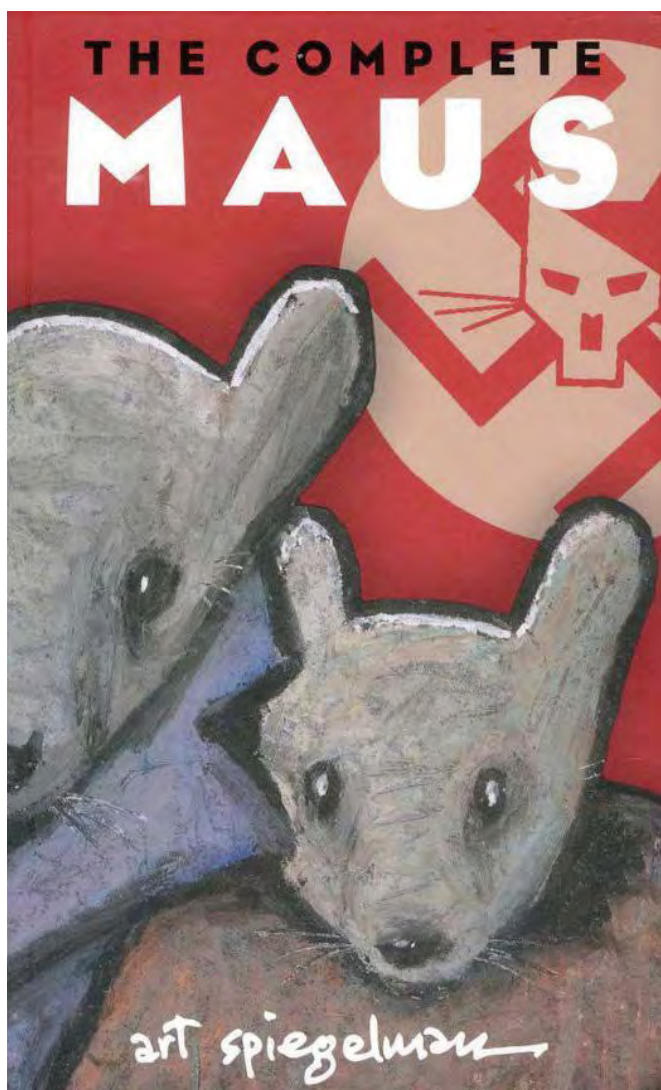
Israel/digital scans of Gemara pages onto Japanese paper, thread/2010–2011

What interests me is Jewish feminist art. With feminist art, the lack of women's visibility in Jewish history has to be discovered in some way, or mourned, or at least acknowledged. The feminist art that I look toward acknowledges that women existed somehow. And that's very Jewish to me. And so I have chosen an Israeli artist named Andi Arnovitz. She made a vest, or robe, out of very colorful tubular shapes. It's meant to appear as a robe of judgment or a mantle of leadership. There are 4,600 scrolls of tiny, colorful pages of the Gemara [the rabbinical analysis of and commentary on the Mishnah] in it. She titled it *If Only They Had Asked Us*, which refers to the lack of women's voices in halacha [Jewish law] and how much more colorful and less black-and-white Jewish law and the world of Jewish thought and discourse would be if women had a say. She is imagining colorful Gemara. It's light but it's lovely, and it's very visual.

*Helène Aylon is a visual, conceptual, installation performance artist and author of Whatever Is Contained Must Be Released: My Jewish Orthodox Girlhood, My Life As A Feminist Artist.*

“The definition of ‘Jewish art’ is wonderfully problem-ridden. Is one referring to the art—and in that case, what about it: its style, symbols, subject, purpose?—or the artist? Does the artist need to be consciously seeking to produce ‘Jewish art,’ or can it be unconscious? Does the art of someone who converts into or out of Judaism suddenly become or cease to be ‘Jewish?’ What is Judaism, anyway? A religion, a culture, a body of customs and traditions, a race, a nation, a civilization? And what is art?”

—ORI SOLTES—



**Maus**

**Art Spiegelman**

United States/graphic novel/1991

Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* shows a son soliciting the testimony of his Holocaust survivor father. The book is both about the father’s testimony of having survived Auschwitz and Dachau and other camps, and also about the son’s struggle to visualize that experience. *Maus* builds the idea of Judaism as a process of questioning into its comic form and its structure, which is two men talking to each other in this constant, difficult, unfurling process. It is a fascinating work of Jewish art because it seems to match the idea of Jewish content and form. It’s not just one or the other; it’s about how they come together. It’s a work about Jewishness, and also about Judaism. Spiegelman has said that the version of Judaism that is interesting to him is Judaism as a process of constant questioning. In this view, Jewish art would offer layers of questions and self-questioning, that kind of endless curiosity about the work that’s encoded in the work itself.

Another reason *Maus* is interesting is that it’s so savvy about aniconism [the religious opposition to the use of visual images to depict living creatures or religious figures]. It acknowledges the general prohibition on images coming from the Second Commandment, but it also works against it. Spiegelman has talked about how the book uses animals to stand in for different races and ethnicities of people. In that sense, *Maus* is as much informed by works like the Birds’ Head Haggadah as it is by 20th-century Jewish works such as Harvey Kurtzman’s *MAD* magazine.

*Hillary Chute, a comics art scholar, is associate editor of MetaMaus and a professor in the Department of English at University of Chicago.*

“What defines a work of art or architecture as Jewish for me is exactly the same thing that defines and characterizes Jewish thought. It can’t be put in a box. It is deliberately constructed not to be systematic, not to be formalized into a system. It defies any unilateral reading. And by virtue of this, it is open—it is free.”

—DANIEL LIBESKIND—





## Dancing Lesson

**Raphael Soyer**/United States/oil on canvas/1926

My favorite work of Jewish art has to be Raphael Soyer's *Dancing Lesson*. It feels like sacrilege to choose another work, considering this is the painting that originally piqued my interest in Jewish art. *Dancing Lesson* depicts three figures packed on a couch, watching the two figures in front dancing. The figures within the crowded canvas are members of Raphael Soyer's family. His sister, Rebecca, is teaching his twin brother, Moses, how to dance. Raphael's youngest brother, Israel, plays the harmonica on the sofa. His father and grandmother survey the scene from the couch, and his mother sits on an armchair, holding a copy of the Yiddish daily newspaper, *Der Tog*.

Above them hangs a portrait of family ancestors in traditional attire, in contrast to the more "American" clothes worn by the others. It's a homely scene portraying three generations. The older generation, watching the younger figures dance, are somewhat nonplussed by the burgeoning Americanness of the scene unfolding in front of them. I think the painting opens up a conversation about assimilation and immigration and the Jewish-American experience.

*Samantha Baskind is an art history professor at Cleveland State University. Her books include Raphael Soyer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art and the Encyclopedia of Jewish American Artists.*



## Alios Itzhak

**Kehinde Wiley**

United States/oil and enamel on canvas/2011

African-American painter Kehinde Wiley's recent project, *The World Stage: Israel* is comprised of portraits of young Israeli men of diverse backgrounds: Ethiopian-Israeli Jews, native-born Israeli Jews, and Arab-Israelis. For these works, he embedded each contemporary portrait in a background inspired by traditional Jewish ceremonial paper cuts. For the 2011 painting *Alios Itzhak*, Wiley adapted a cut-out 19th-century Ukrainian mizrach [ornamental wall plaque used to indicate the direction of prayer in Jewish homes] from the Jewish Museum in New York's collection as the background for the figure. The Wiley painting is in the Jewish Museum's collection not only because its background is based on a Jewish ceremonial paper cut, but because the person depicted is Israeli, thus illuminating an aspect of local youth culture in a country with unique political, historical and cultural importance. At the Jewish Museum we collect and exhibit a diverse range of works by artists from many backgrounds—some are Jewish and others, like Wiley, are not.

*Claudia Gould has been the Jewish Museum's Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director since 2011.*

“When it comes to what makes art Jewish, you will know it when you see it.  
There’s no method, there’s no formula. Everybody will come to it in their own way.”

—SIONA BENJAMIN—



## Untitled, Void Series

**Anish Kapoor**/England/fiberglass and pigment/1990

Anish Kapoor has always been one of my favorite artists. His mother is a Baghdadi Jew from India. He was born and brought up in Mumbai, lived in Israel and now lives in England. When I first saw his *Void Series*, I was struck by, in a way, how Jewish it is. Of course, it’s Indian, because of the whole concept of Brahman—the void or the infinite divine principle. But the void in Indian and Jewish culture is so similar, even though it comes from two different religions. In Judaism, it’s *Ein Sof*—the ultimate void from which all creation springs, the negation that brings all forms into the world.

While we think of Hindus as having lots of gods and goddesses, they actually don’t. All these gods and goddesses are the manifestations of one Brahman. For people studying Kabbalah, it is the same. In the void is everything and nothing.

These kinds of concepts make you realize how united and connected we all are. In *Void Series*, this is conveyed effectively and simply. If you look at it from the front, it looks like one big black circle. But as you come close it seems like you’re looking at the inside of the universe. And suddenly you understand the meaning of Brahman and the meaning of *Ein Sof*. And you understand how to say the same thing in different languages, in different mediums. In the end, I don’t think Kapoor is a Jewish artist. Of course he’s Jewish and he’s Indian and he’s British. But he’s also none of the above.

*Siona Benjamin is a Mumbai-born American artist whose paintings are inspired by being a Jew raised in Hindu and Muslim India.*

“A work of art is Jewish when it is created by anyone—Jewish or non-Jewish—for Jewish audiences, and incorporates imagery or functionality that connects it with the Jewish life. Is a nude by Modigliani, for instance, a ‘Jewish’ nude? I’m not sure. Chagall creates Jewish art when he’s painting rabbis and goats floating through the air, but he’s not making Jewish art when he’s painting flowers.

His *White Crucifixion*, however, may be his most Jewish painting of all.”

—MARC MICHAEL EPSTEIN—



“Art history is divided into national schools and by geography—the Italian Renaissance and the Dutch Baroque, for example. Jews, as we know, are a diasporic people and have different Jewish experiences—geographical, national, religious and cultural, not to mention significant differences between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews. The State of Israel complicates things further. Is art produced in the State of Israel Jewish art or Israeli art or both?”

—SAMANTHA BASKIND—

## Purim, Kraków Wedding

**Mayer Kirshenblatt**/Canada/acrylic on canvas/c.1994

I have chosen a work by my father, Mayer Kirshenblatt. It is called *Purim, Kraków Wedding*. Considering that I could have chosen a great painting by a famous artist, why have I chosen a painting by a self-taught, unknown artist? First of all, I have a great appreciation for the freshness of those who are self-taught. But this painting has added value because it captures a world that is no more and is remembered by someone who actually lived there and experienced it. The painting's value lies also in what it shows—a lost tradition of performing Purim plays, essentially folk dramas. There were Purim plays on various themes, but this particular play, *A Kraków Wedding*, was a great favorite in his hometown of Opatów. The actors are wearing costumes that approximate the regional dress of the

Kraków area. The male actors play women's parts. The painting features not only the Purim players, but also *klezmerim*, instrumental musicians. The players and musicians would go from house to house and be rewarded for their performances with a few pennies and maybe some food and drink. As a result, they'd go primarily to the homes of well-to-do people, so this is the home of a well-to-do Jewish family. It's a painting with many stories.

*Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is the curator of the main exhibition of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, and co-author, along with her father, of They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust.*





## Interior of Gates of the Grove Synagogue

**Norman Jaffe**/United States/wood and Jerusalem stone structure/1987

Synagogues, as works of design, serve as art. The ark and bimah are the elements that all synagogues must have. Other than that, they may have nothing in common. Some, with exotic decoration, are meant to suggest the origins of Judaism in the Middle East. Others, showing local traditions in design, suggest the long residence of Jews in Western Europe and the United States. A few use Gothic artistic motifs to show Judaism is equal to Christian religions. Others, with a modern design, suggest that an ancient religion can be continually refreshed.

My favorite American synagogue is the Gates of the Grove Synagogue in East Hampton, Long Island, New York. [It is part of the Jewish Center of the Hamptons.] The architect was

Norman Jaffe, well known for building imposing private homes in that area. The modest exterior, covered in wood shingles, is typical of the locality, where many houses used to be similarly covered. But it's the interior that is most important. It is made of beautiful materials, including wood and Jerusalem stone, which frame a sanctuary that is distinguished by light coming from the east and from stepped skylights in the roof that create a tent-like feel. The skylights descend to the ark, and frame a background of nature seen through the east window.

*Carol H. Krinsky is professor of art history at New York University. Her books include Synagogues of Europe.*

"Being Jewish is being marked. It's not as easy to tell as skin color, but it's still something that the world often perceives—even if the artist doesn't. Camille Pissarro was a Sephardi Jew from Saint Thomas and a socialist who wanted nothing to do with religion. But the anti-Semites among his fellow Impressionists often called him 'that old Jew.'"

—LARRY SILVER—





## Golden Haggadah

Unknown

Spain/illuminated manuscript/c.1320

Many of the magnificently illuminated manuscripts in the Middle Ages were made for wealthy Jews by non-Jews. My favorite example is the Golden Haggadah, which was made in Spain—probably in Barcelona—around 1320. It's a small book, about eight by eight inches. The text is preceded by eight double-page spreads depicting events from Genesis and Exodus, beginning with Adam naming the animals and ending with Miriam and the Israelite women singing and dancing on the shores of the Red Sea. These are followed by three pictures of Passover preparations in medieval Spain and an illustration of the restored Passover sacrifice of the future. These are little squares that are about three inches tall, but they're exquisitely painted, often with a brush that contains only a couple of squirrel hairs.

What's really cool about these manuscripts is that, if you know how to look at them correctly, they are subversive. The people who commissioned them were working for the Christian kings and queens of Spain—and they were doing quite well. But even for such elite Jews, life was insecure. So when they imagined Pharaoh and the Egyptians, they imagined them in the guise of the contemporary monarchs for whom they worked—the ones, of course, who would eventually expel them.

*Marc Michael Epstein teaches religion at Vassar College, and is the author of The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative, and Religious Imagination.*



## Aleph-Bet (Hosha'ana)

Victoria Hanna/Israel/video/2015

I'm picking Victoria Hanna's new video, which has gone totally viral. Victoria is a sound artist who grew up in a very haredi home in Jerusalem and has been active for more than 15 years on the margins of the Jewish-meets-avant-garde modern Israeli art scene. She's part of a set of contemporary art makers—writers, sound makers and visual makers—who engage with classic texts, some of them canonic, some of them more marginal or controversial.

The video takes place in a girls' classroom. The girls are dressed in very Orthodox-looking school uniforms. Victoria used to stutter, so when she started to explore her voice, part of what she was exploring was being unable to use it "properly." There is a visual element of stuttering in the video; she appears as herself more than once, and then all the girls in the class become different. The main element is the repetition of the *aleph bet* [Hebrew alphabet], which is the most basic element of Jewish language and culture. She is repeating it in a way that's becoming a form of creation. Repetition is a very meditative and basic place, but it's a source of creation.

*Ofri Cnaani is an artist whose focus is on live performances and installations. She teaches at the School of Visual Arts and International Center of Photography in New York.*





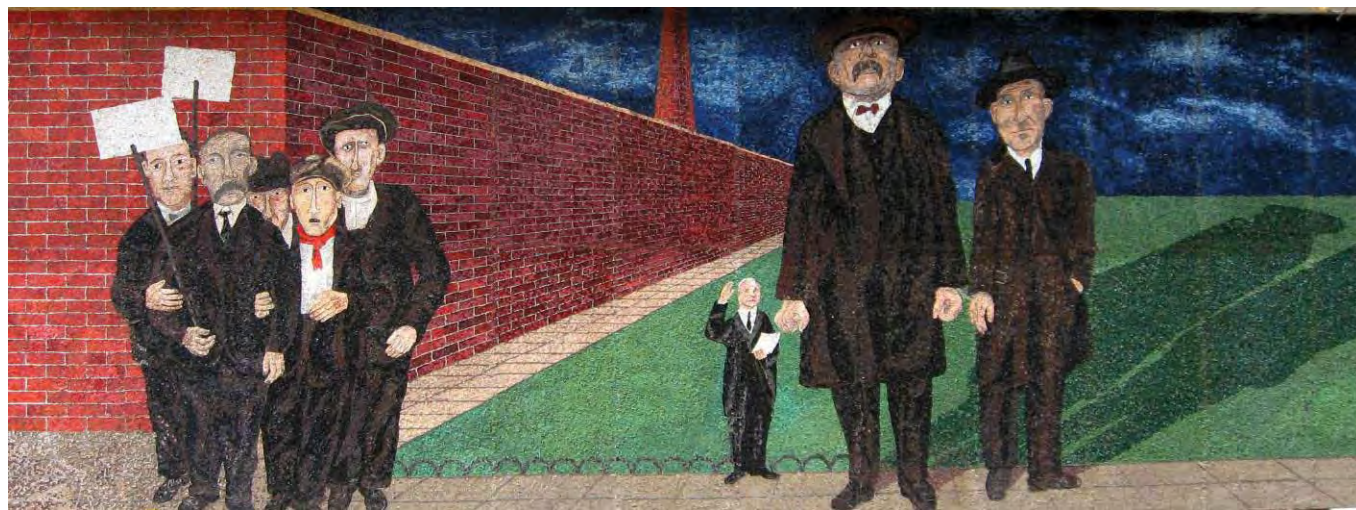
## Mizrach

**David Moss**/ Israel/giclee print/ 2007

To me Jewish art is kabbalistic, it's visual poetry, and the work of David Moss in Jerusalem, Joëlle Dautricourt in France and Peter Daniel in Austria exemplifies that. The Hebrew alphabet—whether printed or calligraphic—is open to many interpretations. Moss's *Mizrach* is an example of this. He is exploring the depths of the Hebrew word that means “east” in English, which is more often etched on a wall plaque affixed to the Eastern wall of a synagogue as a guide to remind worshippers to face toward Jerusalem. In this elaborate, decorative print, Moss has created an image where the four Hebrew letters of

*mizrach*—*mem*, *zion*, *reish* and *bet*—are presented as white spaces and the background is a darker abstraction. He calls that abstraction “pueblo” and you can see the American Indian influence. *Mizrach* is a masterful combination of positive/negative imagery in which the Hebrew letters serve as a concrete poem—they must be seen to be read. It is an elegant combination of Jewish worship and graphic design.

*Ruth Sackner is a collector and co-founder of the Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry.*



## The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti

**Ben Shahn**/United States/glass and marble chips on brick/1931–32

As a fully indoctrinated Reform Jew of the 1950s and 1960s, when social justice was considered the preeminent Jewish value, I found [the Lithuanian-born] Ben Shahn the ultimate Jewish artist. Not unlike other neglected artists of his generation, Shahn found nothing irreconcilable in the idea that art could express social values. To assure that we understood his images [a series of 23] of Sacco and Vanzetti as part of a religious art tradition, he even used the title *Passion*. Shahn saw himself as part of a tradition in which

artists reflected the important happenings, not just the fashionable styles, of their times. Shahn isn't on art radar screens anymore. Nor are some of his other socially engaged, authentically “Jewish” artist confrères such as Jack Levine, Hyman Bloom and Leon Golub.

*Tom Freudenheim writes about art, architecture, museums and culture for The Wall Street Journal and has been director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Worcester Art Museum and other museums.*



"I believe that Jewish art needs to be an exploration of the Jewish experience, though sometimes that Jewish experience must be teased out of an image."

—SAMANTHA BASKIND—



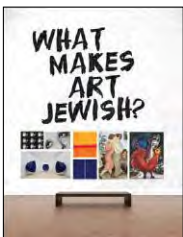
## Immigrants arriving at Haifa by boat

Robert Capa/ Israel/Photograph/1950

I choose this iconic image by the great Robert Capa. It shows Jewish refugees arriving in the port of Haifa in 1950. Some people might regard it as a news photo and not art, but it is a photo of Jews by a Jewish photographer arriving in the Jewish homeland. The looks on the faces of the people in the image show their emotions:

excitement and anxiety. Every viewer will take something different from it, and that's why for me this epitomizes art in every sense.

*Toby Cohen is a British-born Israeli photojournalist and photographer whose work is exhibited in museums and galleries worldwide.*



**Download** Moment's free e-book, *What Makes Art Jewish?* at [momentmag.com](http://momentmag.com) and read additional interviews with Judy Chicago, Vivian Mann, Larry Silver and Mindy Weisel.



## The Dinner Party

**Judy Chicago**/United States/installation art/1979

Judy Chicago's work represents the Jewish part of the feminist social revolution, and *The Dinner Party* is a major contribution to that revolution. She is a Jewish artist because she is a Jewish woman. She has said that this is a big part of her, in large part because growing up, and as an adult, she has had a deep concern with social justice. She has the kind of personality that I would consider to be a typical one for late 20th-century Jewish women in the United States—that is, possessing a voracious appetite for learning. This insatiable desire to learn is something that many Jews—of course non-Jews as well—possess. She was also interested in exploring women's and Jewish women's art that had been dismissed as just “craft” or simply puttering,

such as lace-making, glass-painting, or crocheting—things that many women do that are not considered fine art. This desire to rescue and honor unknown art and unknown people is very Jewish. She worked with an enormous number of people in making *The Dinner Party*. There was a lot of arguing and dissension and that kind of dynamic is often associated with Judaism or Jewish artistic production over the centuries. It's a very Jewish sensibility and an exploration of who we are.

*Shula Reinharz is professor of sociology at Brandeis University and the founder and director of The Women's Study Research Center; the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and The Kriznick Gallery for Feminist Art.*



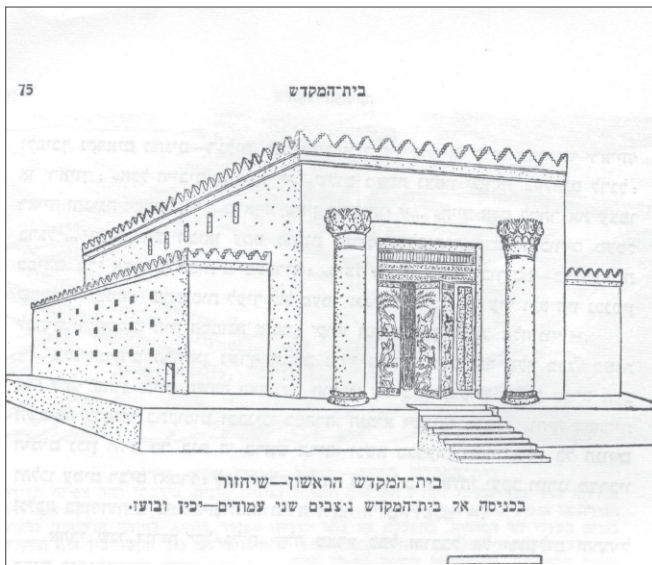
## Omer Counter

**Tobi Kahn**/ United States/ Acrylic on wood/2002

Sculpture has adorned Jewish architecture—synagogues, schools, seminaries, cultural forums, courthouses, hospitals, courtyards and parks—for centuries. In our present time, interpretations of ritual and ceremonial objects have inspired artists to magnify contemporary versions of these forms into free-standing sculptures. Tobi Kahn (born in 1952 in New York), an outstanding and mystical painter of abstract canvases, is equally renowned for his objects, on both a large and smaller scale. His tzedakah boxes (charity containers) resonate with majesty, sculptural presence and a sense of accessibility. At four feet by five feet each, they engage the viewer with a sense of powerful mystery. His re-visioning of a dimensional Omer counter [the Omer is the counting of the 49 days between Passover and Shavuot], approximately four feet square, creates a magnificent tactile free-form sculpture. He initially carves his sculptures out of wood and then lacquers them with a patina of rich color. Some, however, are transformed by being cast in bronze. Candleholders, challah boards, spice boxes all manage to transcend their basic use and exist as dimensional crafted objects that encourage the viewer to revere and touch them.

*Laura Kruger is the curator of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum.*





## Solomon's Temple

Unknown/Jerusalem/wood and stone/c. 950 BCE

The definition of Jewish art is wonderfully problem-ridden. The earliest object that could find a place within a discussion of Jewish art is Solomon's Temple. We have a description of it and its construction in I Kings 6-7, as well as a few artifacts that have shown up in the archaeological record in the last decade that seem to date from that era (c. 950 BCE). There are three key issues that the Temple evokes. First, it was designed and built by Tyrians, the premier craftspeople of that era—its style was typical of Tyrian “longhouse” temples, including the pair of columns that stood before it—but it was financed by an Israelite king to offer a tangible connection between the Israelite God and the people Israel. So it was and was not Israelite. Second, it was, in any case, Israelite, not Jewish. But—third—over the centuries, Jewish ceremonial objects have been embellished again and again with images (most particularly the images of paired columns) that allude to the Temple, so that it plays an important visual and symbolic role in Judaica—most of which, in the Christian world, of course, were made by Christians until the late 19th century. I believe that we've come full circle back to the problem of definition.

*Ori Soltes teaches philosophy, theology and art history at Georgetown University and is the former director and chief curator of the B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum.*



## Amulets

Unknown/Israel/silver/6th century BCE

For me, ancient inscriptions, especially well-executed ones, are works of art, even though ostensibly all they are is letters strung together. If I had to choose from the early inscriptions, I'd vote for the two amulets found at Ketef Hinnom, outside the walls of Jerusalem, from about the sixth century BCE. They were found by archaeologist Gabriel Barkay in a necropolis—a grave center—so we know exactly where they came from within inches. They are tiny ribbons of pure silver with letters snaking through them that are rolled up tight. The inscriptions on them cite a prayer that we have come to know as the priestly benediction; it's also cited in the Book of Numbers. This makes these amulets the earliest known artifacts to cite a text from the Bible. The amulets were prized possessions that were worn round someone's neck and used for protection, and were buried along with the person. The tiny inscriptions are a message from the past.

*Bruce Zuckerman is a professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of Southern California who helped photograph the Ketef Hinnom amulets. His books include Job the Silent.*



## Murals from the Dura-Europos Synagogue

Unknown/Syria/frescoed wall murals/244 CE

In terms of art, I would say that my favorite work of Jewish art would be the murals from the third-century CE Dura-Europos Synagogue on the Euphrates River in Syria—one of the world's oldest synagogues. The murals contain figurative scenes from the Bible, including the stories of Isaac, of Ezekiel, of the Tabernacle. They are representational, but at the same time amazingly modern and spiritual, even mystical. There is an eternal meaning in these images. I find them immensely inspiring, even though I've seen them only in reproduction. [The paintings are on display in the National Museum of Damascus.]

As far as architecture is concerned, I would say that Erich Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower in Potsdam, Germany, is a particular favorite. It was built in 1919-21 to house a solar observatory and conduct experiments in relativity. In this building, Mendelsohn freed architecture from Cartesian rigid geometry. He had the sensibility, with his flowing lines and

different idea of space, to break out—to subvert the system.

Marc Chagall's paintings, with their incredible representation of Jewish space—not like any other space, not Cubist, not identifiable—have the same kind of feeling as those ancient murals. And the works of El Lissitzky—his *Had Gadya* paintings, from 1919, in particular, rendered in a fluid style reminiscent of that of Chagall—also possess elements of storytelling and spirituality.

These works share a strong sense of the eternal and a mystical quality—a way of exposing and dealing with the wonder of reality without controlling it.

*Daniel Libeskind, a Polish-American architect, was the master site planner for the reconstruction of the World Trade Center. His numerous international design projects include the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the Danish Jewish Museum in Copenhagen.* ♾