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No Jewish Art?

[Is there such a thing as Jewish art? This question, asked less frequently than "Is there such a thing as American art?" is answered with an emphatic "no" by the German critic and writer, L. A. Schutze of Berlin. It is Mr. Schutze's belief that the artists of the Jewish race have been so well assimilated by the art traditions of the peoples with whom they have mingled that their own art does not bear the distinctive national traits of any particular race. Mr. Schutze's opinion is printed for what it is worth by THE ART DIGEST, and without comment.]

By L. A. SCHUTZE

Adolf Basler, art dealer and critic, himself an Israelite, in a very interesting book published some time ago, entitled "Le Cafard Après la Fête," gives the following answer to the question, "Is there such a thing as Jewish art?" "No, there are Jews who have studied art in Paris, Munich, London, Amsterdam, etc., and among them there are some rare talents. But talents are rare everywhere. The only one who has created an art entirely born out of a Talmudistic spirit is Picasso, heir of Arabian decorative artists or the Jewish cabalists of Spain."

We shall try to outline the main trend of thought in Basler's book. The Jews since their emancipation, which is of quite recent date, choose the artistic career like every other "liberal" vocation, such as law and medicine. If a Jewish artist of the genius of Spinoza had arisen in the 17th century, the Synagogue of Amsterdam would probably have excommunicated him, as they did the great philosopher. All the Jews that have distinguished themselves as painters and sculptors are men of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, can it be asserted that they are distinguished by their national character? Does their art betray any peculiar Jewish accent? They merely reflect the artistic culture of the country in which they are living. They have an admirable gift of adaptation, enabling them to satisfy all sorts of taste—that of the respective period, that of the country where they live and even such taste as is dictated by fashion.

Religious tradition has not been the only hinderance to Jews desirous of devoting themselves to art. Social and political movements have also interfered. I do not know of any Jewish Raphael, Fouquet, Poussin or Michaelangelo standing out from the multitude of Jewish artists. The French Jews, for instance, being the most assimilated of those scattered all over the world, do not show any other national traits than a Roman Catholic, a Protestant or an Atheist living in Normandy, Brittany, Alsace or Province. The case of the German, English, Dutch Jews is identical.

Israels, who painted Jewish motives, betrays the Dutch character no less in these than in his pictures of fisherman. Is not Liebermann, a distinguished disciple of the great French Impressionists, held in high esteem as a German artist, and Modigliani as one of the most brilliant younger talents of Italy? Is not the Jew Josefson, whose genius ended in insanity, the greatest glory of Swedish art? His countryman and fellow-Jew, Isaac Grünewald,

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once showed me some drawings of his that proved him to be a master with a gift for the sublime.

Most of the Jewish artists have come from Russia, Poland and America. The Judaeo-Poles have produced anecdotal pictures from Jewish life. Most of them, particularly those professing another kind of art than the illustrative, are pupils of the academies of Warsaw and Cracow. Such painters as Kisling or Monszain are pupils of Pankiewicz, who was the first to introduce the cult of French Impressionism into Poland. But neither Kisling nor Monszain, nor any of the other Judaeo-Polish painters, like Zak, Kramstyk, Marcousis and Menkes, show any distinctive national traits in their works. Paris has formed them all, and they have created a species of painting peculiar to an epoch and not to any particular race.

In the same way, of the very gifted American artists, Maurice Sterne and Max Weber, the one is attributable to Cézanne and the other to Matisse. Maurice Sterne is an artist of distinction no less than the "Neo-American" Pascin. Perhaps Pascin is the most racy of these, certainly more so than Chagall, who combines in his fantastic interpretation of Russian and Judaeo-Russian life the savageness of a mujik and the eccentric spirit of a young Jew whose mind has been affected by excessive study of the Talmud. The result is a number of pictures, painted, drawn and etched, that are as impressive as they are odd.

Of the sculptors, with the exception of Lutschanski and Moise Kogan, who have a rough grasp of the craftsmanship of the good French sculptors, all those coming from Russia show the distinctive qualities of the Russian race. Zadkine, who in his work affects a somewhat barbaric character, betrays the same lack of self restraint as Lipschitz whose decorative talent delights in cubistic triflings. I also know some Jewish German, Austrian, Czechoslovakian and Hungarian artists, among them Kahler of Prague, a very promising young talent lately deceased, also Kars, Czobel, the Pole Nadelmann, all of whom were behaving rather wildly at their debut.

The Jewish artists used to paint anecdotal pictures when this genre was in vogue. Later they became realists and impressionists. After the "Fauves" and the Cubists they found what perhaps was lacking in their natural disposition: aesthetic problems based on rather algebraic methods, replacing optical beauty with an entirely abstract one. This is the aestheticism which Picasso has brought us. When he asked me one day "Do you see anything Jewish in my art?" I could not help answering "Truly, your Cubism is nothing but Talmud!"