Darshan Yeshiva

# Survey of Jewish Visual Art

The second commandment declares: "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image or any likeness of anything that is in the heavens above or in the earth below" (Exodus 20:4).

For years, there has been a misconception that because of this commandment that Jewish visual art was not allowed. This is not true. It means that God's image was not to be created.

All through Jewish history, artists have been expressing religious devotion and later cultural expression through visual arts.

**Jewish Folk Art**

For the greater part of Jewish history, most Judaica artists were untrained, and their art was not their life's work, but was simply one form of devotion to God.

Known today as "Jewish folk art," the tradition of Jewish visual expression includes paper-cutting, creation of the *mizrach* and *shivitti* (two forms of decorative signs), and the art of micography (using words to create images).

Paper-cutting was an inexpensive art--no fancy materials were needed, just a scrap of paper, a pencil, a knife. It can be traced back to the 14th-century and was primarily done by males who had free hands, even while their minds were engaged in study.

The artist would take a line of text (from Psalms for example) and try to bring the text to life through imagery in the paper-cutting.

**Ritual Art**

Jewish Ritual art is the creative expression in artistic renditions of the ritual objects used in Jewish religious life.

An important concept in Jewish life is hiddur mitzvah, the beautification or enhancement of religious practice.

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Ritual art includes painting, drawing, ceramics and sculpture. Ritual objects may include items used in life cycle ceremonies (ketubot, wimple) to those used in the synagogue, home and yearly holiday cycle including Shabbat candlesticks, Torah covers, chanukiyot, Seder plates and more.

**Jewish Painters**

The Enlightenment in Europe allowed Jews to leave their ghettos and attend universities. This change allowed Jewish painters to attend art school and receive formal training.

Daniel Moritz Oppenheim (1799-1882) has been referred to by some as the "first Jewish painter." A German Jew, Oppenheim's critically-acclaimed work drew on his Jewish experience.

Many of the Jewish painters who followed Oppenheim focused less on Jewish life and content. For example, Camille Pissaro, the well-known Impressionist, was born in the West Indies to a Creole mother and French Jewish father.

While most Jewish 19th and 20th century painters who succeeded Oppenheim did not paint specifically Jewish-themed work, one exception stands out: Marc Chagall.

Chagall's work incorporates the styles and techniques of the Parisian art scene where he studied and lived, while expressing and identifying his Jewish background and frame of reference, including symbols from his childhood in Russia and Biblical illusions.

**Contemporary Jewish Art**

Art is flourishing in the Jewish world—from feminist artists, like Judy Chicago and Helene Aylon, a rich art scene in Israel and re-energizing of Jewish ritual and folk art.

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