Constructing and Deconstructing Jewish Art (Ramat Gan, 7-9 Sept 15)

Bar-Ilan University, Sep 11, 2014–Jan 31, 2015
Deadline: Nov 17, 2014

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Call for Papers

CONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING JEWISH ART

The Department of Jewish Art at Bar-Ilan University welcomes proposals for papers in one of two interrelated categories: papers that thoughtfully address, explore, and delineate the research strategies applied to both visual arts in Jewish societies and Jewish dimensions in modern and postmodern world art; and papers dealings with the conception and practice of academic teaching in these fields.

With fundamental shifts in culture, art history, and Jewish studies during the recent decades, it has become increasingly crucial for the custodians of higher education to carefully re-examine their approach to the history and interpretation of what is referred to as 'Jewish' art in both traditionalist scholarship and in the practice of art making, curatorship, and connoisseurship. Responding to developments in the humanities, communication studies, social studies and psychology, contemporary art history commonly embraces investigations of any image or object created for the sake of communicating meanings or emotions, and thus often replaces the term 'art' with a semantically broader term 'visual culture.' Contemporary scholarly research and the academic teaching of 'Jewish' art—like postmodern Jewish history and historiography —are increasingly distancing themselves from the search for any single exhaustive definition of the adjective 'Jewish' as applied to art, culture, and history. Instead, they tend to focus upon the variety and flexibility of both individual and collective Jewish self-identification throughout the ages. Scholarly discourse steadily moves away from the oft-repeated questions "Does Jewish art exist?" and "What is Jewish art?" to the inquiry "What is Jewish in 'Jewish' art?"—attempting to investigate Jewish visual cultures and their messages in their multiple contexts and interactions with the surroundings. This notwithstanding, even though the signifier 'Jewish' in the phrase 'Jewish art' is conventional and only loosely describes its object, it still relates to its signified in a fashion no less significant than the strict meaning of 'middle' does to 'ages' in the historical sciences, or the definition 'charm' does to quarks in particle physics. Thus the term 'Jewish art' can be instrumental in our discussion of visual culture, artistic expression, and appreciation of the plastic arts.

The conference seeks to explore and expand our knowledge of the field of 'Jewish art' under the following rubric:

1. The History of ‘Jewish Art’ as Art History

- Futile obsolescence or a promising innovation?

Are ‘Jewish art’ studies shifting from the ‘nationalist’ or ‘regional’ approach to art (exemplified by ‘French’ or ‘African’ art) to postmodern ‘sectorial’ studies (such as minority/majority, gender, social, and other postmodern approaches to art history)? Do and, if so, how do the contemporary studies of ‘Jewish’ visual culture deal with the concepts of human geography (place, space, wanderings, utopias, heterotopias, and more); body studies; trauma and post-trauma; the acceptance of art making as a meditative praxis, esoteric revelation, or mental health therapy?

- Local studies or universal art history?

Does the focus on a marginal group’s art enrich or hamper the scholar’s comprehension of general developments in visual arts? Is the search for ‘Jewish dimensions’ or the ‘Jewish contribution’ to world art productive or tendentious? Should similar or different research strategies be applied to the study of visual culture in Jewish Diaspora and Israeli visual culture? Are there distinct ‘schools’ in ‘Jewish art’ history? If there are, are they institutional, local, or do they cross international borders?

2. The History of ‘Jewish Art’ as a Judaic Studies Field

- How interdisciplinary are ‘Jewish art’ studies?

To what extent should researchers of ‘Jewish’ visual culture and plastic arts be experts in the Bible; Jewish thought, literature, and folklore; Jewish law and history; archaeology, and the like? What is the proper balance between the study of the history and analysis of art and the study of Jewish texts, history, and anthropology? Should the study of ‘Jewish art’ be an integral part of the study of Jewish history, literature, sociology, and religion?
How does the history of ‘Jewish art’ relate to Jewish history and historiography?
What does 'Jewish art' history have to contribute to our understanding of general history, and vice-versa? What metahistories do historians of ‘Jewish art’ propose? How do these theories correspond to the metahistories in Jewish historiography?

3. The History of ‘Jewish Art’ as an Academic Discipline

- How should the discipline be taught?

What fields of world art history must we teach the students of ‘Jewish art’ history (in addition to a core program in the theory and methodology of art history)? What is the proper balance between teaching the students about artefacts and their history and training them in analytic approaches to visual expressions? In the post-Guttenberg age of information exchange, should ‘Jewish art’ historians discard the diachronic principle (the divisions into ancient and medieval art, for example) and the concept of media (the division into painting, architecture, and applied arts, and so forth)? What are the advantages or disadvantages of a program based on critical theory and postmodern concepts?

- Indices or insights – A contradiction in terms?

To what extent should contemporary art historians and academic institutions invest their efforts in what was often a priority in ‘Jewish art’ studies during the last century: taking pictures of artefacts and collecting them; cataloguing, indexing, and creating databases of images? What, in your opinion, is the optimal balance between focusing on empirical research and case studies and focusing on conceptual generalization?

- What place should the discipline of ‘Jewish art’ history play in contemporary society?

Why do both the popular and scholarly strata continue to believe in the strictly iconophobic character of Jewish culture? How does or will the field of ‘Jewish art’ history—which may be characterized as a humanist ‘niche field’—survive the decline of the humanities, contemporary technocratic priorities in university management, and pragmatist critics of art history higher education?

We strongly encourage papers that strive for fresh insight and engage in a broader discussion of the theoretical aspects of the research and teaching of ‘Jewish art’ rather than those devoted primarily to ongoing investigations in the field.

Abstracts (of up to 250 words) for twenty-minute presentations at the conference should be submitted along with a short CV (as attached MSWord documents) by November 17, 2014 to ilia.rodov@biu.ac.il Applicants will be notified of the decision regarding their proposal by December 25, 2014.

Reference:

CFP: Constructing and Deconstructing Jewish Art (Ramat Gan, 7-9 Sept 15). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 13, 2014 (accessed Oct 31, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/8372>.