

Introduction

There is no test that so surely reveals the one-sidedness of a philosophy as its treatment of art and aesthetic experience.

(John Dewey, *Art as Experience*)

THE ARTLESS JEW studies an idea. It investigates the social origins, intellectual moorings, and cultural implications of Jewish aniconism. Aniconism refers to the ambiguous “historiographic myth that certain cultures, usually monotheistic or primitively pure cultures, have no images at all, or no figurative imagery, or no images of the deity.”¹ Jewish aniconism implies that Jews are a People of the Book rather than a People of the Image. Proponents of Jewish aniconism deny the existence of authentic Jewish traditions in painting, sculpture, and architecture. They concede that Jews imitate, in production and reception, the foreign art of their host or neighboring cultures. They claim that Jewish attitudes toward visibility and the visual arts range from indifference to suspicion and hostility.

The grand themes of Jewish aniconism are sounded by innumerable cultural historians who insist that “the Second Commandment and many other restrictions in the Bible undoubtedly had a negative impact on the artistic development of the Jewish people, and subsequently of Christianity and Islam.”² Similar strains reverberate whenever Jewish artists complain that “monotheism was dearly bought—and because of that Judaism had to give up observation of nature with our *eyes*, and not just with our soul. On religious grounds, Judaism struggled with ancient idolatry, whose remnants are displayed today in all museums of the world, so that [Judaism] remained with no share in the treasures of graphic art.”³ Jewish aniconism echoes whenever scholars declare that “the visual arts never played a central role in the religiously dominated premodern Jewish culture.”⁴ Almost ubiquitous, the denial is at work when biographers assume that Eastern European Jews seeking to become artists were compelled to “defy the traditional taboo against iconic images.”⁵ The themes of Jewish aniconism are embellished whenever philosophers and critics propose that “cultures vary greatly in their exploitation of the various senses and in the way in which they relate their conceptual apparatus to the various senses. . . . The Hebrews tended to think of understanding as a kind of hearing, whereas the Greeks thought of it more as a kind of seeing.”⁶

Belonging to conventional wisdom, the credibility of Jewish aniconism is reinforced whenever experts in diverse fields declare that “there is an inherent lack of visual talent amongst Jews.”⁷

To ascertain the scientific validity of these assertions, to prove Jewish aniconism factually true or false, one would have to consult a battery of empirically minded specialists: cognitive psychologists working in laboratories equipped to measure visual acuity; clinical psychologists and cultural anthropologists willing to tackle the mysteries of artistic creation; historians of philosophy; and historians of art probing the network of symbiotic relationships that link artists, patrons, and collectors with theories of art and artifacts.

Regardless of the empirical findings, several intriguing questions would remain unanswered. Ideas and theories, like all human artifacts, connote their makers. Because human activity is overdetermined, ideas and theories are overdetermined. They “have more reasons for existing than they need.”⁸ Regarding the denial of Jewish art, what might some of those reasons be? Political campaigns, wishful thinking, and controversies in the history of science warn us of immense gaps between the validity of a proposition and its public acceptance. Is the gap between truth and popularity a clue to understanding the attractions of Jewish aniconism?

What was the environment that allowed Jewish aniconism to germinate, reproduce, edge out its competitors, and become conventional wisdom? What groups of people found it compelling or incredible? What were their educational backgrounds, political loyalties, national identities, and religious affiliations? Denying or affirming Jewish art, did they mean to praise or condemn Judaism? What motivates contemporary discussions of Jewish aesthetics? What motivated premodern discussions? How do the premodern and modern discussions compare? Have Jewish and Gentile perceptions of Jewish visuality and Jewish art been immune to historical change? Have they missed their appointment with the opticians of culture? Have they escaped refraction by the iconoclastic Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century; the scientific revolutions of the seventeenth century; the American, French, and Russian Revolutions of 1776, 1789, and 1917; the recent emancipation and westernization of the Jews; the rise of political and racial anti-Semitism; the birth of Jewish nationalism; and the bewildering array of modernist, avant-garde, and postmodern developments in all the arts and aesthetic theory? These are the questions to which *The Artless Jew* provides partial answers.

The Artless Jew is chronologically partial. It focuses on medieval and modern developments. Reference is made to the earlier traditions of Israelite culture and Late Antique rabbinic Judaism only insofar as they were received and interpreted by later authorities. *The Artless Jew* is also partial in combining my professional training and love for medieval Jewish

thought with my amateur's delight in the musical and visual arts. Writing it broke the senseless and stultified habit criticized by Richard I. Cohen of overlooking "the visual dimension of Jewish life . . . in the study of the Jewish past."⁹ *The Artless Jew* satisfied my desire for the pleasures of "critical theory" and confirmed my faith in the advantages of taking a social approach to the history of ideas.¹⁰ It heightened my respect for synchronic and diachronic differences in "ways of seeing."¹¹ It put and kept me in collegial conversation with new friends and creative scholars from outside my field. It taught me, once again, the humane and liberating lesson that "all ideas have more reasons for existing than they need."

I undertook this project when my initial confidence in the truth of Jewish aniconism was shaken by unfulfilled expectations. I knew that "the Jewish people did not begin to philosophize because of an irresistible urge to do so. They received philosophy from outside sources, and the history of Jewish philosophy is the history of the successive absorptions of foreign ideas which were then transformed and adopted to specific Jewish points of view."¹² I also knew that "there has not been a major philosophical thinker from Plato and Aristotle, to Heidegger and Wittgenstein, who has not had something to say about [the] subject" of art.¹³ I therefore assumed that medieval and modern Jewish philosophers were compelled to discuss art. I expected their discussions to be uniformly dismissive, critically negative, derogatory. They would all insist that the "scopic regime" of Jewish culture has always been aniconic.¹⁴ They would unanimously ratify Judaism's preference for the literary and musical arts. They would imply or declare that the trajectory of Jewish thought zigs toward the auditory, the verbal, and the temporal because it zags away from the visual, the pictorial, and the spatial.¹⁵ After all, the Book of which the Jews are the People is a book without pictures.

I maintained these expectations even though I had discarded one of the major premises of Jewish aniconism in the preliminary stage of my research for *The Artless Jew*. I had come to reject the dyadic antithesis between "mentalities," between Hebrew "understanding as a kind of hearing" and Greek "understanding as a kind of seeing."¹⁶ These distinctions are the pernicious product of an outmoded ethnocentric worldview whose political and religious loyalties simplify and absolutize, aggrandize or denigrate, cultural peculiarities.¹⁷ I was certain that hearing and vision are evenly distributed, mutually intertwined, and equally valued in all societies.¹⁸ I therefore concluded that under the playful shade of aristophanic clouds, the owls of ancient Greek philosophy and the eagles of Israelite prophecy might be made to flock together. Greek philosophers and Israelite prophets preferred to speak or write their minds rather than paint or sculpt their ideas. They nevertheless found visual images irresistible and visual metaphors indispensable. According to Plato's *Republic*, Socrates

allowed himself to be enticed into a marathon conversation by the exciting prospect of watching an unusual relay race in which horse riders would pass lighted torches to another.¹⁹ Socrates subsequently argued that painters, like poets, misrepresent the truth and therefore are either stringently regulated or altogether banned from society lest they arouse the wrong parts of the human soul and weaken its best part, intellect.²⁰ The same was true for Moses. According to Exodus, he too was enticed into a marathon conversation by a visual spectacle: He saw a burning but unconsumed bush. He too concluded that society needed to regulate the artists. He subsequently forbade graven images of God for use in worship.

Inheriting the overlapping visual and regulatory traditions of Socrates and Moses, medieval Jewish mystics named their classic texts *Bahir* (*Book of Dazzlement*) and *Zohar* (*Book of Splendor*). Hasdai Crescas, a late medieval philosophizing theologian, named his text *'Or 'Adonai* (*The Light of the Lord*). Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) spoke for them all when he couched religious experience in terms of enlightenment: “Sometimes truth flashes out to us so that we think it is day. . . . We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes time and time again. . . . There are others [whose] darkness is illumined . . . by a polished body or something of that kind, stones or something else that give light in the darkness of the night.”²¹ Maimonides also spoke for them all when he likened prophecy to dream images generated by imagination and seen by the mind’s metaphorical eye. Not everyone agreed with the Maimonidean equation of ancient prophecy and mere psychological insight.²² But medieval Jewish mystics and philosophers all cultivated the theatrical powers of their inner “eye.” Because they were so engrossed in charting the psychosomatic effects of scenery flashing vividly on the interior screens of their mind, I surmised that they might have been similarly attentive to pictures painted on manuscript pages, figures engraved on coins, images woven into tapestries, and shapes emerging from geometrically patterned walls, even if it turned out that they had nothing favorable to say about them.

I quickly stumbled into a Procrustean bed. My initial expectations were misguided. The evidence told a different story, one that did not conform to the master plot of Jewish aniconism. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature was indeed replete with fully elaborated denials of Jewish art. I was startled, however, by a dissonant choir of minority voices. These nineteenth- and twentieth-century minority voices echoed the archaeologists and art historians who were affirming Jewish art. They all defied the conventional wisdom. They declared that the national or religious spirit of Judaism shows deep, native affinities with the visual arts. Several of these voices spoke with Eastern European Jewish accents. Even among the proponents of Jewish aniconism in the West, many were eager to find

exceptions proving the rule. People who admired synagogues argued that Judaism has always sponsored religious architecture and favored the decoration of ceremonial objects. People with a taste for secular abstract expressionism or surrealism argued that Judaism has always encouraged non-representational, cerebral paintings and sculptures.

The medieval evidence was even more confounding. My expectations were generally correct about trivial matters and altogether wrong about everything else. Medieval Jews indeed placed the visual arts on their compulsory philosophic agenda; they indeed railed against idolatry. But their travel itineraries, polemical literature, biblical commentaries, and law codes proved that they did not construe the Second Commandment to mean that all visual images were forbidden. Sharing the same culture with medieval Jewish artisans who were commissioned to engrave burial markers, illuminate Hebrew manuscripts, and fashion ceremonial objects, medieval Jewish intellectuals did not act as if Judaism were aniconic.²³ They did not assert that Jewish theology orbits around the auditory and the verbal, avoiding the visual, the temporal, and the spatial. They did not reduce the sensations of sight to mere metaphorical status, since it was apparent that they appreciated physical beauty and cultivated both inner and outer eyes. They propounded and challenged theories claiming that art imitates reality. Some of them realized that beauty subjectively resides in the eyes of the beholder. Often they worked as if their discipline were art history: Their tastes were catholic. They were awed by Christian, Islamic, and Jewish sites. They identified artists and patrons. They described the physical construction of Jewish and Gentile monuments and artifacts, interpreting their symbolic meanings, analyzing their aesthetic properties, speculating on the source of their power, arguing over the regulation of their use.

Alerted by the medieval evidence to the strong possibility that Jewish aniconism was stamped with a strictly modern provenance, I formed a new working hypothesis: If Judaism were in fact aniconic, the oddity of a culture without royal, religious, or secular art would certainly have attracted the notice of interested observers. Gathering evidence to test this tentative assumption, I caught sight of a premodern consensus that included everyone from the ancient Greco-Roman historians and rabbinic sages to the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers and the founders of modern art history, Giorgio Vasari and Johann Joachim Winckelmann. The consensus affirmed that Jews do not fashion artifactual representations of their God. The consensus also affirmed that Jewish culture officially sanctions and adorns itself with all sorts of visual art. Some observers, like the medieval St. Bernard of Clairvaux, complained that Judaism was synonymous with too much opulent visuality.

Chronologically framed by the premodern consensus, Jewish aniconism finally emerged as an unmistakably modern idea. Its modernity suggested more than adventitious temporal coincidence. Its historical origins implied that Jewish aniconism is a barometer indicating the pressure of modern culture and politics on Jewish life. It appeared that Jewish aniconism crystallized simultaneously with the construction of modern Jewish identities.

This historical conclusion reduces the field of “overdetermined” reasons for the genesis and popularity of Jewish aniconism. Without denying other possible factors, chapters 1 and 2 narrow the field even more. These chapters correlate affirmations and denials of Jewish art with specific features of the modern historical context. I argue that were it not for Kant and Hegel, the denial of Jewish art would not have been invented. And were it not for nineteenth-century emancipation and anti-Semitism, the affirmative premodern consensus described in chapter 3 would not have been overturned. Nor would Jewish aniconism have persisted so tenaciously throughout the twentieth century, defying the empirical evidence that indicates the existence of authentic Jewish art. Ironically, Jewish aniconism turns out to have been the partisan opinion of anti-Semites who disparaged Jewish culture and diasporan Jews in Western Europe and America who refused Zionist options. Aniconism eventually became the conventional wisdom for general scholars, art critics, and historians who were unable to overcome the dogmatic lessons of their education. Chapter 2 ends with a coda: It plays a dirge for ahistorical essentialism and positivism, a scherzo to the utter ambiguity of artifactual evidence, and a fanfare to the vagaries of contingency and ideology. I argue that the question of Jewish art is unanswerable apart from the multiple ideological frameworks that construct and stabilize our protean notions of “Judaism” and “art.”

Assigning a strictly modern provenance to Jewish aniconism bestows other historiographic benefits, as well. It suggests a fresh understanding of medieval Jewish philosophy. It makes obvious what has been obscured for too long. First, modern textbooks and learned journals in medieval cultural history either ignore or say little about Jewish aesthetics because the mainstream of modern scholarship remains committed to the orthodoxy of Jewish aniconism. The time has come to change all that. Second, medieval conceptions of Jewish art and visibility unfolded without the help of Kant, Hegel, Freud, and Marx. Instead, the medieval conceptions adhered to the precedents of rabbinic tradition and followed the contours of the fully embodied, visually infatuated aesthetics of the Middle Ages. Medieval painting, sculpture, and architecture were crafts. They had not yet been secularized and transformed into the so-called fine arts by the eighteenth-century Romantic mystique of the creative genius. They had not yet been commodified by public museums and commercial galleries.

They had not yet been denatured by ages of mechanical or digital reproduction.²⁴ Medieval images were not “art” in the modern sense of the word.²⁵ Medieval images were appreciated for their beauty, but they were expected to earn their keep, like medicines, tools, and amulets, by performing specific functions.

Chapters 4 through 7 explicate these medieval topics. Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to philosophic aesthetics. Chapter 4 redescribes the sensory underpinnings of Jewish epistemology. Chapter 5 rethinks the concept of beauty by comparing Maimonides and David Hume. Chapter 6 surveys twelfth-century trends in the iconographic interpretation and functional analysis of images. It features a thought experiment involving the notorious golden calf. Were the conventional wisdom correct, the golden calf incident described in Exodus 32 ought to have elicited stark expressions of Jewish iconoclasm. Instead, the biblical narrative evoked an unexpected array of fascinating interpretations that attacked Christian images, rationalized Jewish images, embedded art in politics, and legitimated the golden calf. Chapter 7 completes the story of the calf, probing multifaceted late medieval perceptions of the power and social control of images. Chapter 7 allows rabbinic law to have the last, perhaps decisive, word. Rabbinic law is the Scylla and Charybdis of writing Jewish intellectual history. To overemphasize the law is to distort Judaism by reducing it to a legalistic essentialism. To ignore the law is to misrepresent Jewish intellectuals who cultivated it. To neglect the law is to distort Judaism by erasing one of its axiological foundations. Topics dealing with the law therefore permeate the book. No chapter of *The Artless Jew* is devoted exclusively to the law, and no chapter unfolds without substantial references to the halakhah.

In addition to integrating the law, all the chapters situate concepts of the visual in their immediate, historical context. Each of the chapters explores the implications of geographic, chronological, and ideological diversity. I argue that medieval Jewish thinkers were neither prophets who knew the modern principles of Jewish aniconism nor precursors who recognized an eternal existence of art in the modern sense of the word.

Reversing the conventional sequence in history writing, I have placed the medieval chapters last and the modern chapters first. I decided upon this slightly eccentric arrangement for several reasons: I am convinced that premodern and modern views of Jewish art and visibility differ radically. It is therefore possible to understand the modern views well enough without owning a stitch of medieval lore. Conversely, it is impossible even to begin the study of medieval Jewish culture without knowing what the moderns have taught. Without being informed by modernity, historical scholarship would be aimless. One would not know what claims to corroborate, refine, or reject.

While writing *The Artless Jew*, I was frequently scolded by my academic superego for not being an altogether “innocent eye”:²⁶ Thou art obliged to interpret medieval texts dispassionately, “from their own point of view,” merely letting them speak in their “own terms.” Silencing that unreasonable wretch of a superego, I reminded it that times have changed. In an earlier and perhaps more innocent era, in 1916, it was still possible for Isaac Husik, a distinguished historian of medieval Jewish philosophy, modestly to declare that “there is not much room for originality in a historical and expository work of this kind, particularly as I believe in writing history objectively. I have not attempted to read into the medieval thinkers modern ideas that were foreign to them. I endeavored to interpret their ideas from their own point of view as determined by their history and environment and the literary sources, religious and philosophical, under the influence of which they came.”²⁷ By now the “noble dream” of neutral, disinterested “objectivity” in history writing has vanished.²⁸ Whether conservative or radical, modernist or postmodernist, academic historians subscribe to various forms of cognitive relativism. Gertrude Himmelfarb, a conservative modernist, wrote the brief: All academic historians now agree that “ideas and events [are] so firmly rooted in their historical context that history, rather than philosophy and nature, becomes the arbiter of truth.” Historians, she declared, now realize that “they themselves live and act and think in their own present, that some of the assumptions they bring to history derive from, and are peculiar to, their own culture, that others may reflect the particular race, gender, and class to which they belong, and that still others emanate from ideas and beliefs that are unique to themselves as individuals.”²⁹

Husik was therefore well intentioned but naive to deny his originality. Being alive in Philadelphia in 1916, attuned to the conflict between science and religion, he was uniquely positioned to discover “that the philosophical movement in mediaeval Jewry was the result of the desire and the necessity . . . of reconciling two apparently independent sources of truth. . . . religious opinions as embodied in revealed documents on the one hand, and philosophical and scientific judgements and arguments, the results of independent rational reflection on the other.” Husik’s time, place, and training allowed him to fix his attention on something really “there” in the ancient texts: the medieval struggle between “revelation and reason, religion and philosophy, faith and knowledge, authority and independent reflection.”³⁰ His time, place, training, and predispositions also obscured his view. They did not allow him to notice that medieval philosophers also sought to understand the visual arts.

Being alive in late twentieth-century America, inhabiting a social and academic space in which the topics of multiculturalism, “body studies,” and “visual regimes” are preeminent, in which world travel to museums

and monuments is easy, in which cameras, televisions, and computer screens await the slightest flick of a switch, I was enabled to imagine *The Artless Jew*. Were it not for the accumulating archival and archaeological evidence of Jewish artifacts ignored by or unknown to Husik's generation, I would not have been aware of what to look for in the medieval texts. Without the modern art historians who disabused me of my mistaken beliefs and taught me that the Byzantine iconoclasts cultivated a visual art of their own, that Islam is not averse to representational art and architecture, that visual art flourished within the Protestant Reformation, I might not have discovered that the Second Commandment theoretically licenses all visual images except one.

Husik lived too early to be shaken out of a dogmatic slumber (as I was) by Linda Nochlin's sociological answers to the question, Why have there been no great women artists? and by Michele Wallace's parallel discussion of African-American art and artists.³¹ These controversial essays prompted me to reconsider the conventional wisdom presupposing that Jewish culture produced no visual artists. Their essays also reassured me that I was on the right track in specifically correlating modern perceptions of Jewish art with anti-semitism and the struggle for Jewish identity rather than with vague appeals to an eternally fixed "Hebraic spirit" or ancient biblical prohibitions against fashioning images of God. Their essays finally made me understand that when the ambiguous term "art" is qualified by Greek, Dutch, Italian, or French, it tends to trigger one set of high-minded, canonical associations; but when coupled with Jewish or primitive or feminist or African-American, the terms "art" and "artist" trigger an altogether different stream of conscious stereotypes and unconscious associations. The range and vocabulary of these associations have less to do with timeless (Eurocentric and hegemonic) notions of beauty and more to do with the experience of diasporan minorities and subordinated peoples. Subordinated minorities tend to be excluded from or derogated by the art establishment. They seek cultural effacement ("no such thing as Jewish art") or self-affirmation ("some sort of Jewish art") while engaged in revolutionary struggles against colonialism, sexism, and racism.

Were I not living in late twentieth-century America, I would not have been able to read Nochlin and Wallace. And had I not been taught by Husik's generation that Judaism is aniconic, that Jewish thought favors the verbal over the visual, that premodern Jewish philosophy lacked a full-scale aesthetics, I would not have been astonished to discover that the texts and artifacts of medieval Jewish culture told a different story. In all likelihood, I would not have noticed the medieval story at all.

Were I an art historian, I would have written a different book. It would have contained photographic reproductions of specific images and monuments. The text would have offered critical discussion of those images and

monuments, exploring their formal characteristics, provenance, patrons, creators, markets, and iconographic implications. Instead, I am an intellectual historian and this book intentionally lacks plates and illustrations. *The Artless Jew* does not refer to specific images and monuments. It investigates ideas about art, artisans, artifacts, and visuality that are embedded in literary traditions.

Finally, were it not for the contingencies of my personal life, I would not have been visiting Padua in 1993, standing awestruck in Giotto's Arena Chapel, with my partner and significant other. Annabel guessed my envious thoughts and offered a loving, footnoted word of comfort. Ending my ignorance, she mused: "Why so sad? You have your frescoes of Dura-Europos."³² Nor would I have been in graduate school, long ago, when a mentor informed me that the first principle of historical scholarship requires that "we not smudge our fingerprints all over other people's ideas." Fortunately, there was another mentor, more closely related and far more collegial. Several years ago, in New York, he listened to my paralyzing doubts and said: "Our job is not to write the complete and final word. We just put things on the agenda. We bring things to people's attention, and hope that our work is superseded." *The Artless Jew* is meant to reinvigorate the field of medieval Jewish philosophy. It is designed to show that Jewish bodies no longer "lack eyes."³³ I hope to see my work and intentions superseded.