

Judaica Twist

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Since the late 1960's, and especially in the 1980's, Judaica objects have held a significant place in the work of Jewish artists in Israel and abroad: Judaica – not *yiddishkeit*. In centers of contemporary art, these objects furnished the source of a radical, critical motif which was woven into the artistic discourse. “The changing direction of Judaica,” as the trend was defined by the researcher Yael Gilat, refers not only to the use of motifs and Judaic elements, but also to their reappearance in the general context in which they were placed – a context in which the poetics of visual representation merge with the politics of cultural and gender identification. This interpretation of these objects challenges concepts related to high culture by presenting popular culture as art; ritual objects are considered as part of popular (folkloristic) culture, and rather than focusing on their sacred and majestic attributes, they are awarded critical attention

In practice, the interlacing of motifs taken from Judaica with contemporary art works results in the formation of new objects which correspond to traditional ones, but shed their original role as ritual symbols, thus elevating them to the realm of art. This practice is debated within the art world today, attracting an increasing number of voices and even encouraging creativity outside the canon of high culture.

Thus, in addition to enriching the discourse by focusing on certain aspects of popular culture and placing them at the forefront of debate, those objects which are not easily defined by their essence are awarded recognition, even as they

cross over from one genre to another and require a new and expanded classification.

The trend of combining elements and motifs of Judaica with modern art forms corresponds to the changes that have transpired in the field of Judaica itself. In fact, beginning in the early 1930s, Jewish product design reflected modernistic trends notable for the use of clean, simple and functional forms. However, in the 1980s, theories of post-modernism crept into the field. The trend, as described by Haya Friedberg, for example, was characterized by a preference for romantic and ideological values. The artists themselves who were engaged in creating Judaica sought to emphasize the significance inherent in the object itself, rather than its functional design.

If the above is true, Judaic objects are also in a state of flux: no longer are they merely utilitarian but rather project elements which describe a way of life and which also provide symbols of identity. Of course, this trend has distanced the product from the Jewish aesthetic tradition of the past. Moreover, within this framework, the distinction between a ritual item and an art object has often disappeared entirely. Many artists admit to combining cultural-religious practices with art, and their work strives to blend these two distinct disciplines.

However, the conventional dichotomy between a utilitarian object and a collector's item which may be exhibited is not always perceptible. Often the contemporary form is presented as a post-modern, practical version of the traditional object or, alternatively, as a new ritual item, reflecting the evolving times and culture.

Exchanging the leather, which was traditionally used for phylacteries for a soft and delicate satin material, for example, thereby suggesting a modern feminist approach, exposes the underlying masculine bias embedded in certain traditional

objects. Thus, the new object becomes more of a conceptual piece of art. However, there is nothing to prevent it from being used as a ritual item in the modernized world of non-Orthodox Judaism.

The phenomenon described above is not radically new but rather a continuation of existing conventions; for instance, Judaica artifacts throughout the years have incorporated product design in ritual objects and culturally significant vessels.

The aim of **Judaica Twist** is therefore not entirely innovative. One can discern in Israeli art attempts to adopt iconic objects laden with nostalgia, or those which challenge certain taboos and symbolic or aesthetic postulates which were inherent in Jewish culture in the past.

Further more, The Halachic debate itself is a kind of exploration of the changing realities of life – its purpose and needs - and suggests a variety of Halachic solutions, from the Sabbath timer to the obligations and commandments of *eiruv*, *shmitah* and *heiter meckirah*. The product design itself challenges the aesthetics and poetics of the constantly changing body of Halachah. Those artists who engage in these themes are seemingly flirting with the boundaries of the law – although in a strict sense their creativity, which might at first seem like an anti-Halachic statement, often reveals a reverence for Halachic concepts and values. These artistic endeavors also convey profound perceptions about the essence of Judaic law.

The works presented in the exhibition **Judaica Twist** touch upon a wide variety of questions, subjects and meanings: designs that employ non-conventional materials; the sanctity of ritual objects and the process of industrial production; the relationship between the original, the copy and the fake; the relationship between the surface, the interior and the final product; questions related to dismantling and re-assembling the object; issues of rigidity and static form

versus modular, shifting and dynamic models; the fusion between text and material and the escape from archetypical forms; the relationship between interior-exterior and among the dissimilar objects exhibited in the same space; and questions focused on the products as stepping stones to ultimate objectives or goals within themselves. In addition, the exhibition presents work which examines stereotypes and the question of "green design," as well as the question of reviving traditional methods of production which are gradually disappearing from the world.

However, one of the most obvious tendencies in the move towards the use of Judaica which is highlighted in the exhibition is the significant way in which it draws modern Jewish art closer to the familiar themes expressed in modern Jewish literature and theater. Research has shown that contemporary Jewish literature and theater are often typified by a critical and self-deprecating tone expressed through the use of comedy and humor.

On the other hand, modern Jewish art has been different for the most part, and as a whole may be characterized by a deadly seriousness and heavy spirit. In contrast to this severity, a number of the objects in **Judaica Twist** exhibit the humorous aspects previously mentioned. The works unite extremes which would generally not be considered part of a harmonious whole. On the one hand, the objects are characterized by a mischievous, naughty, outlook of amusement while, on the other hand, the implication is that of a lively dialogue with a traditional world at profound levels of meaning – a dialogue which does not hesitate to question, criticize and disturb. In this way, the works examine issues of identity, gender and worship from an original perspective.

However, one should not confuse this tendency with developments in the Israeli art world in general. **Judaica Twist** is primarily a stage for lively rebellion which in many respects is similar to the widespread treatment of Judaic themes within

Israeli art. However, in spite of the similarities, canonical Judaic art in Israel is largely one of defiance; it raises the question of the validity of tradition, while **Judaica Twist** goes beyond this, shifting the debate to questions concerning the rightful shaping of tradition.

The difference between undermining settled traditions and shaping new ones, arose as far back as the Middle Ages. Discussing the dispute between the rabbis and the Karaites, R. Abraham Ben David Halevy (RABAD) claimed that in Judaism, there was no argument as to the validity of the commandments, but rather in the way in which they were fulfilled: “[...] our late rabbis never differed, regarding the validity of a commandment – but only the way in which it should be practiced. When they learned of its essence from their teachers, they did not ask about its history [...] they did not differ as to whether one lights a candle on the Sabbath or not; what they did differ about was how one should light the candle and how one should not light it. They did not differ on whether one was obligated to read the *Shema* during the evening and the morning prayers or not; what they did differ about was when exactly in the evening and when in the morning one was obligated to read the *Shema* – and such it was with all cases.”

However, this is not an entirely accurate picture; Jewish culture, although regarded as fixed, is not actually set in stone. Nevertheless, an important distinction exists between shattering established traditions - opposition and resistance typical of the treatment of Judaic material by local artists – and the continued harmonious approach in which the formation of tradition plays a central part.

The latter tendency is based on examining objects from the past and identifying a new perspective. It often belongs to a neo-traditional discourse, and is always part of a post-secular debate – one which succeeds in capturing the complex

cross-breeding between religion and secularism, rather than exchanging one for the other.

Thus, **Judaica Twist** can be seen as creating a world of images which examines Judaism with a critical eye, but also with a deep affinity for the religion and its traditions. "A love which does not get out of hand."