KATRIN KOGMAN-APPEL

IMAGES AND OBJECTS IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH SOCIETIES:
MULTIDISCIPLINARY METHODS AND APPROACHES

INTRODUCTION

Hitherto, images and their contents – the messages they (are supposed to) bear – were first and foremost the subject of art-historical investigation, and since the latter part of the nineteenth century scholars have developed and tested a particularly broad spectrum of methods. First, there was old art history, then there was new art history, and now, in what one might label the "post-postmodern" period, the range of approaches continues to widen. But images, or more broadly objects that carry some sort of visual element along with textual information, are also primary sources of (cultural) history. When scholars other than art historians show interest in the visual, one commonly speaks of a "visual turn" in history. As early as in the nineteenth century, students of Jewish culture were occasionally concerned with works of art. The most famous among this group was David Kaufmann in Budapest, whose interest was engendered by the impressive collection of manuscripts he had accumulated throughout his career, many of them illuminated.1 His work, which was primarily descriptive, correlated and presented all of the material then known for the first time.2 Others such as Eleazar L. Sukenik and Erwin R. Goodenough went as far as to pursue interpretative approaches without in fact being fully familiar with art-historical or iconographic methods.3

However, when (cultural) historians consider visual materials as primary sources, the results are (supposed to be) different. Sara Lipton describes that approach – the utilization of works of art as primary sources to tackle historical questions – as the “visual turn” in history.4 Or should it actually be the other way around? Can historical contexts help us (art historians?) to better understand a work of art and its meanings? In other words, can historical information create a context for a more thorough reading of works of art? If we think of history not in political terms but as social and especially as cultural history, does this distinction at all matter? Does a look at the social ambience of a certain group provide a key to understanding the art its members produced, commissioned, and used? Does it offer a key to its reception history? Or is a work of art a tool for better coming to terms with the social and cultural history of this group? Should this not all be considered part of a broader cultural history? We can approach what is usually said about the “material turn” in a similar fashion. No doubt, the visual and the material turns have also impacted the study of Jewish cultures in recent decades. Without necessarily always fully declaredly committing to the theoretical perspectives of these turns, many scholars in (Jewish) cultural history have broadened their scope beyond text. Of course, there had already been earlier efforts in both directions. Some art-historical projects have considered historical contexts carefully, and a few historians have used visual material for more than mere illustrative or descriptive purposes. But much is left to be done.

In this vein, the thematic issue presented here includes five contributions by art historians and scholars of Jewish studies who examine objects and images from various angles and, thus, respond in one way or another to the visual and the material turns in cultural history. A sixth contribution is expected to join

1 Today, these manuscripts are kept in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest.
4 Sara Lipton, "Images and Objects as Sources for Medieval History," in Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Historical Sources to Discover Medieval Europe (London: Routledge, 2012), 225–242.
the issue by the end of the year. The present volume revisits and studies the Jewish hat, an object that had become a symbol representative of Jewish–Christian relations; the phenomenon of Jewish coins and the practice of Jewish minting; and the role of the Seat of Elijah in Jewish community life. Figurative Masorah is looked at by a philologist; Jewish images of sirens are interpreted from an art-historical gender perspective; and the practice of cutting and trimming images in a Hebrew illuminated prayer book is jointly analyzed and interpreted by an art historian and an expert on medieval Jewish liturgy. It is not by coincidence but rather a testimony to multidisciplinarity that two of the contributions are co-authored by scholars from different fields in an effort to integrate different points of view into a consistent and harmonized discussion. That venture is quite different from interdisciplinary endeavors that look at objects from distinct and separate perspectives and come up with independent results.

Let us take a brief look at the methodological variety to be found in these essays. Hanna Liss looks at microscopic depictions of seven-branched candelabra from late-thirteenth-century northern France. A philologist with an expertise in medieval exegesis, Liss reads the Masorah apparent in these *masorah figurata* illustrations, analyzes the forms of these candelabra, and links them to the scribe’s approach to the study of the Bible. This approach, which Liss understands as part of an educational concept, can only be understood when the image is considered in conjunction with the masoretic text with which it is formed and the adjacent biblical text. Thus, the scribe was able to integrate important exegetical attitudes to the biblical as well as the masoretic text detected in Liss’s analysis, which entails a fourfold relationship among biblical text, masoretic text, imagery, and exegesis.

Images of sirens in two liturgical Pentateuchs from northern Europe dated to approximately the same period are the subjects of Eva Frojmovic’s contribution. By means of visual analysis, she pinpoints how their siren imagery differs from the usual siren imagery found in such texts and then turns to feminist studies of medieval bestiaries, on the one hand, and to questions of vocality, on the other, to explicate why this is so. The range of possibilities by which one can come to terms with visual hybrids in art-historical scholarship is complex. A siren in a liturgical Pentateuch, a text that was commonly studied and recited by males, is imaged here as a female creature who renders gender boundaries ambiguous. Frojmovic draws on both gender theory and monster theory to shed more light on these tiny images.

Making sense of mutilated medieval books leads us in several directions. Can such a book be “reimagined” as Diane Wolfthal and Elisabeth Hollender attempt to do? The former represents the art-historical perspective and looks at the fragments of the images, and the latter’s focus is medieval Jewish liturgy and the reconstruction of the missing texts. The subject of their investigation is a medieval mahzor from Ashkenaz, a collection of liturgical hymns to be recited during holiday services. As with many other Ashkenazi mahzorim, the book in question was once richly illuminated but its miniatures were cut out by later users. Although the motivations for causing such damage are unclear, it is obvious that these mutilations also left painful gaps in the text. While the remaining texts and some remnants of the images do, indeed, enable the authors to reimagine the manuscript, one might still ask what purpose a mutilated book could serve and why such a manuscript was preserved for hundreds of years. Be that as it may, Wolfthal and Hollender make a very successful attempt to combine the study of text and visual elements to tackle these issues.

Depictions of Israelites and Jews wearing what is usually referred to in the scholarship as “Jewish hats” has puzzled many a past scholar. Such portrayals abound in Christian art, but the headgear was also adopted and adapted in Jewish art. Exploring the history of this item as an iconographic element to be looked at by an art historian and as a piece of costume known from its historical context clearly calls for a multidisciplinary perspective. Art historian Hannah T. Schachter and historian Andreas Lehnertz first ask: “If, when, and by whom was it worn?” In an approach that integrates textual and visual sources, they consider issues long left aside. Whereas scholars were often preoccupied with the question of whether the Jewish hat was meant as a pejorative symbol and, if so, why it was adopted into Jewish imagery, these authors look at it in terms of identities and social distinctions within Jewish society.

The next essay, authored by historian Chana Shacham-Rosby, takes us into the sphere of ritual life. Looking at the ceremonial chair for the person who holds an infant about to be circumcised, she links Ashkenazi approaches to the ritual described in texts with the object involved and its functions. There are many textual sources by which one can explore the ritual of circumcision, and that methodology was employed in numerous earlier studies. But looking at an object
such as the circumcision chair beyond its museological significance and contextualizing it as a “material expression of the cultural tradition” and as an object that embodies the performative aspects of the ritual broadens the horizon in a crucial fashion.

Within a few months’ time, an additional essay is expected, in which historian Eva Haverkamp will address the phenomenon of Jewish minting in the Middle Ages. Beyond the material aspects of how, where, and by whom coins used by Jews were made, the questions are manifold: What was the role of religion in the design of coins minted by Jews? What do they tell us about Jewish–Christian relations apart from those in the economic arena?

For some time, the visual and the material turns dealt with hierarchies – hierarchies of the textual versus the visual and vice versa. Lipton argues that an understanding of the visual language of a period can, indeed, change the historical perception of that era.6 Needless to say, the awareness of Jewish art has altered traditional assumptions regarding Jewish culture, first and foremost with regard to the question of whether or not Jewish culture was anti-visual. But tackling issues of Jewish art as legitimate or not and approaching Jewish culture as visual is one thing. Approaching objects and images as sources and acknowledging that medieval Jewish art may affect the way Jewish cultural history should be written is another. One might also suggest that Jewish art history should open up to a social turn. What we need, then, is a greater degree of integration among the disciplines to give us a fuller picture of the meaning of Jewish art in medieval mentalities and what this art can teach us about those mentalities. Multidisciplinary efforts of the sort presented here are more easily able to deal efficaciously with the complex interplay among images, their makers, and their users as well as with the countless facets of the societies that engendered them.

Katrin Kogman-Appel holds a chair in Jewish Studies at the University of Münster. She has published work on medieval Jewish art and is particularly interested in Hebrew manuscript illumination and its cultural and social contexts. Recent books include *A Mahzor from Worms: Art and Religion in a Medieval Jewish Community* (2012) and *Catalan Maps and Jewish Books: The Intellectual Profile of Elisha ben Abraham Cresques (1325–1387)* (2020).

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6 Lipton, “Images and Objects,” 229.