**Review Essay**

**BEETWEEN ASSIMILATION AND SEGREGATION: JEWISH CULTURE IN MODERN EUROPE**

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* Of the many recently published books on Jewish culture, the three under discussion here represent a variety of possible approaches to the history of Judaism, depending on the intended group of readers. Richard I. Cohen’s *Jewish Icons* discusses Jewish art in Europe from the fifteenth to the beginning of the twentieth centuries. This book calls for a readership with some previous knowledge of both the history of the arts and of Jewish culture. Ritchie Robertson’s *The ‘Jewish Question’* introduces non-Germans to well and lesser-known German literary figures from 1749 to 1939 and to the answers they had to the so-called ‘Jewish Question’ (i.e., whether Jewish people should integrate into or separate from German culture). Finally, Emily Bilski’s *Berlin Metropolis*, which Edward Timms has aptly called a “coffee-table book for connoisseurs,”¹ is geared to the average American museum-goer, who associates pre-World War I Berlin mainly with Wilhelmine militarism, but also with gaiety and with decadence in the arts.
What the three books have in common, however, is that they interpret the history of Judaism as an oscillation between assimilation and segregation. Cohen’s *Jewish Icons* discusses this oscillation through more than five centuries; the other two books highlight certain phases in history, in which either assimilation or segregation was prevalent. Thus, it seems reasonable to begin this review with Cohen, in order to give the reader an idea of the scope of all three studies. Basically, what Cohen does, is to delineate very carefully the slow integration of the visual dimension into Jewish culture from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. In doing so, he shows himself to be a disciple of the so-called “contextual art history” method, wherein a work of art is placed within its social and ideological context and is then examined through its artistic style. Furthermore, Cohen constantly relates Jewish art and art objects to cultural processes in various European (i.e., gentile) societies, thus demonstrating acculturation or deliberate isolation. For an introduction, he presents a history of Jewish art studies, fighting against the still prevailing prejudice “... that Jews and art are two opposing entities...” (4). The reader might be surprised to learn that the wish to promote Jewish art on a grand scale originated only at the end of the nineteenth century. Jewish art as such is defined as “... that ‘which reflects the Jewish experience’” (7), such as ritual objects, illuminated manuscripts, political broadsides, medals, drawings, paintings, sculpture, amulets, and architecture. For Cohen, the study of these objects is no end in itself, but offers insights into society’s habits and reveals social processes.

The book proceeds chronologically, building chapters around major themes in European Jewish history. Cohen bases his discussion on artefacts depicted in the accompanying illustrations. In all of his chapters, to a varying degree, he shows how Jews encountered modernity (which for Cohen begins in the seventeenth century, in contrast to Bilski’s focus on late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernism) while struggling with their traditional background.

The main part of Cohen’s study opens with the description of a transition which ‘initiated’ Jewish art: that from symbolism to realism in the visual arts during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In his view, the new iconographic style – followed by both Jews and Christians – transmitted the social message of integration. Cohen singles out Italy, the Netherlands, and France in order to argue that the Jewish books and paintings produced there were pleading for the acceptance of Jewish culture by Christians. Yet in making this point, this chapter reveals one of the book’s very few weaknesses, since to illustrate his point as well