MOYSHE-LEIB HALPERN: PAINTER AND POET*

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While Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886–1932) is best known as the most innovative and ironic of the modernist Yiddish poets, he was also a brilliant visual artist. According to his son Isaac (Ying), Moyshe-Leyb Halpern drew and painted from his childhood apprenticeship to a sign-painter in the Galician shtetl of Zlotchev through his teenaged years in Vienna, where he was apprenticed to a commercial artist.¹ What survives of Halpern’s art is a diverse collection of realistic graphite portraits, oil paintings, and a group of objects painted in an ironic, faux-folk, modernist mode.

The most familiar works are Halpern’s self-portraits, some of which have been reproduced in posthumous editions of his poetry,² as well as sensitive portrayals of his wife Royzele and their young son. While these drawings display Halpern’s skill and training as a representational draftsman, his rarely-seen modernist paintings and constructions have a whimsical irony, irreverent wit, and oddly moving beauty.

Halpern transformed the most ordinary and modest household items into art. Two everyday wooden chopping bowls, or hak-shisls, provided Halpern with circular, concave surfaces to depict mythological scenes. On one, he painted a stylized golden lion roaring.

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² Reproductions of Halpern’s self-portraits can be found as frontispieces in M.-L. Halpern, Di goldene pave (Cleveland 1924); idem, Di goldene pave: lider (New York 1954); and idem, In New York: A Selection, translated and edited by K. Hellerstein (Philadelphia 1982). Other of Halpern’s self-portraits, as well as portraits of his wife and son were first published in Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (New York 1934) vol. 1, facing pages 97, 138, 161; vol. 2: frontispiece, facing pages 115, 177.

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