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VIVIAN MANN AS CURATOR AND SCHOLAR OF JEWISH ART*

From its inception, modern Jewish scholarship granted the literary text pride of place while frowning upon or marginalizing visual aspects of the Jewish past. The last half century, however, has seen a significant reorientation of this traditional aniconic image of Judaism, in no small measure due to the remarkable growth of Jewish museums and the wide-ranging exhibitions and catalogs they have produced.¹ In tandem with the development of Jewish museums, scholarship on Jewish art has expanded considerably and has now penetrated into all areas and periods of Jewish studies. For over thirty years, Vivian Mann has played a central role in this transformation from her positions as the curator of Judaica at The Jewish Museum of New York and as an adjunct professor of Jewish art and visual culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Mann came to The Jewish Museum in the late seventies, having completed a dissertation on Romanesque ivories at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts in 1977.² Very much a neophyte in the field of Judaica, Mann had neither prior experience in a Jewish museum nor academic training in Jewish studies, though she had always had an interest in Jewish art. Having been reared, however, in an Orthodox home where she became acquainted with Jewish texts, Mann maintained an intimate connection with Jewish ritual and a deep commitment to Judaism. In the sense that she developed a professional interest in Jewish art somewhat

late, Mann resembled such German-Jewish scholars of the early twentieth century as Rudolf Hallo, Stephen S. Kayser, Franz Landsberger, and Rachel Wischnitzer, whose training was in non-Jewish areas of study but whose claim to fame would be in the embryonic field of Judaica.

Mann entered the field of Jewish art as scholarship and Jewish museums were beginning to emerge into a new period, and as Jewish studies were finding a place within the American academy. A significant moment was the founding of the *Journal of Jewish Art* in 1974 under the editorship of Bezalel Narkiss, who aspired to bring together the community of scholars in the field and offer them a scholarly forum. While the *Journal of Jewish Art* aided the academic study of Judaica, at that time the important collections in New York, Prague, Jerusalem, Cincinnati and Los Angeles remained relatively unstudied and unknown beyond a close-knit community of Jewish studies scholars. Curators of Judaica, educated in Jewish sources and skilled in decorative arts, were few and far between and the quality of the existing catalogs of Judaica was far inferior to those produced in many other fields of the arts. The important collections in the Hebrew Union College, eventually split between Cincinnati and Los Angeles, had served as the basis of several seminal studies by Franz Landsberger, but these touched upon a very small number of objects in the collection.³ Similarly, a number of articles on the extensive Judaica collection of the

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¹ On the aniconic view of Judaism, see Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

² Vivian B. Mann, "Romanesque Ivory Tablemen" (Ph. D. Dissertation, New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, 1977); her dissertation served as the basis for several articles, including: "Samson vs. Hercules: A Carved Cycle of the Twelfth Century," in *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Penelope C. Mayo (ACTA: Proceedings of the SUNY Regional Conferences in Medieval

Studies, 7; Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1983), 1–38 (this article was reprinted under a slightly different title in her volume of essays, *Art and Ceremony in Jewish Life: Essays in the History of Jewish Art* [London: The Pindar Press, 2005], 153–73); "Der Dreieichenhainer Brettspielstein und eng verwandte Arbeiten," *Stadt und Kreis Offenbach A. M. Studien und Forschungen* (Neue Folge) 12 (1989): 44–9.

³ Most of these studies have been reprinted, see, e.g., Joseph Gutmann (ed.), *Beauty in Holiness: Studies in Jewish Customs and Ceremonial Art* (New York: Ktav, 1970); Idem, *No Graven Images: Studies in Art and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Ktav, 1971).

State Jewish Museum in Prague were showcased in *Judaica Bohemiae*, but these only enabled one to sense the richness of this collection. The catalog of the Heinrich Feuchtwanger collection, acquired by the Israel Museum in 1969, prepared by the museum's curator of Judaica Isaiah Shachar, signaled an important development in the field, but no sequel appeared in the following years.⁴ Finally, The Jewish Museum in New York published an attractive catalog with an exhibition catalog based on the museum's collection of Jewish textiles prepared by folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in 1977, the same year that Mann joined the museum's staff.⁵ These, then, were the major Judaica models that presented themselves to Mann, leaving her with the responsibility to raise the awareness and understanding of her institution's collection.⁶

Prior to Mann's arrival, The Jewish Museum had a sporadic exhibition and publication record on Judaica. Under the leadership of curator Stephen S. Kayser (between 1947–1962), the museum had held a wide variety of exhibitions on Jewish art and had become a central repository of Jewish ceremonial art. Kayser was guided in his conception of exhibiting Judaica to show “arts as they are applied to Judaism” and he emphasized the functional importance of the art object. It was under his tenure that the museum published *Jewish Ceremonial Art*, its first scholarly catalog since its inception in 1904, to accompany an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art celebrating the tercentenary of the American Jewish community.⁷ The catalog offered the public a sense of the museum's collection. It “became a standard text on Jewish art and remained the most

important reference on The Jewish Museum collection for over twenty-five years.”⁸ Kayser left The Jewish Museum in 1962 and was replaced by Alan Solomon, who became its first director. Solomon sought to position the museum within the New York art scene, leading to a sharp conflict with its parent institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). During the following decade, Judaica continued to be exhibited, but it was pushed into the background as it was not regarded as part of the avant-garde image of modernity the museum highlighted in these years. The museum focused its energies on exhibiting contemporary art by leading New York artists (e.g. Robert Rauschenberg and Larry Rivers) with contemporary concerns.⁹

By the time Vivian Mann arrived at The Jewish Museum, the institution had established several departments and emphases and the cultural divide between JTS and the modernist turn of the museum had temporarily subsided. Mann's domain was Judaica and for three decades she spearheaded a program that has both asserted the centrality of Judaica to the museum's mission and expanded the contours of her department. Her spirited leadership began shortly after her arrival, when she assumed the helm of the exhibition *Danzig 1939: Treasures of a Destroyed Community* (1980). Mann's predecessor, the assistant curator Cissy Grossman, had begun work on this exhibition with the help of several members of the Judaica department, but it was Mann, in collaboration with Emily Bilski and the advice of art historian Joseph Gutmann, who was responsible for the catalog and the exhibition (Fig. 1). Although almost all the objects included in the exhibition were

⁴ Isaiah Shachar, *The Feuchtwanger Collection: Jewish Tradition and Art* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1971; exhibition catalog; Hebrew); a revised edition in English appeared posthumously under the title: *Jewish Tradition in Art: The Feuchtwanger Collection of Judaica* (trans. R. Grafman; Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1981). In 1973 the ethnography department of the Israel Museum produced its second exhibition (the first in 1967, dealt with the Jews of Bukhara) on Jewish ethnic groups, Jewish life in Morocco. This was a major exhibition and the catalog dealt with many ethnographic objects and ceremonial art; see Aviva Muller-Lancet and Dominique Champault (eds.), *La vie juive au Maroc* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1973; exhibition catalog; Hebrew).

⁵ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Cissy Grossman, *Fabric of Jewish Life: Textiles from The Jewish Museum Collection*, vol. 1 (New York, 1977; exhibition catalog).

⁶ For a more complete list of previous catalogs, see the bibliography in Rafi Grafman, *Crowning Glory: Silver Torah Ornaments of The Jewish Museum, New York*, ed. Vivian B. Mann (New York:

The Jewish Museum in association with David Godine, Boston, 1996), 393–98.

⁷ Stephen S. Kayser (ed.), *Jewish Ceremonial Art: A Guide to the Appreciation of the Art Objects Used in Synagogues and Home, Principally from the Collections of the Jewish Museum of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955; exhibition catalog); a revised second edition, prepared with the assistance of Guido Schoenberger, appeared in 1959.

⁸ Grace Cohen Grossman, “Dr. Stephen S. Kayser: A Personal Testimony,” in *A Crown for a King: Studies in Jewish Art, History, and Archaeology in Memory of Stephen S. Kayser*, eds. Shalom Sabar, Steven Fine, and William M. Kramer (Berkeley: Judah L. Magnes Museum; Jerusalem: Gefen, 2000), 11.

⁹ For the background to this development, see Julie Miller and Richard I. Cohen, “A Collision of Cultures: The Jewish Museum and JTS, 1904–1971,” in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), 2: 309–61 and the relevant bibliography there.