

Coagula's bookworm file

Following is a selection from Daniel Rothbart's *Jewish Metaphysics as Generative Principle in American Art*, reprinted here by permission of Ulisse & Calipso Edizione Mediterranee, Napoli, Italia. Mr. Rothbart's recent bronze sculptures are currently on display at Lee Arthur Studio, 7 Bond Street 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10012.

The Barnett Newman excerpt is from one of many chapters concentrating on individual artists. Others include Morris Louis, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Sol LeWitt and Al Held. I read this book cover to cover and, speaking as a Gentile, found it engrossing, well-researched and quite provocative. Any fan of postwar art should certainly check it out.

—Mat Gleason

Introduction

Daniel Rothbart's essay describes another area which must be considered, be it as historical presence, be it as cultural environment, as having contributed to the formation of American art: the area of Jewish metaphysics.

Given that such a number of important artists had Jewish backgrounds, these metaphysics contributed to a great part of American visual history and the development of artistic movements, particularly during the decade following the Second World War. Rothbart's contribution is in demonstrating how philosophical and religious principles different from those previously discussed, and diverse cultural traditions are at the base of American culture, which continues to be surprisingly rich in linguistic possibilities, and inno-

vative, transgressive discourses.

Jewish culture is characterized by a longstanding non-conformist tendency, critical outlook, and intellectual freedom to conflictual situations, always being ready to articulate its position in discussions and confrontations.

The course taken by Jews in the last two centuries is synonymous with that of high modern culture in Europe. Moses Mendelssohn, the leading exponent of Jewish Enlightenment, reconciled Judaism with modernity, demonstrating its potential to harmonize with "Reason," and laying the groundwork, be it involuntarily, for Reform Judaism. This movement, which was born in Germany but quickly spread to the United States, reformed the complex system of rules and norms which had to some degree complicated Judaism's relationship with society. In the 19th century, a good portion of the bourgeoisie distanced itself from Orthodox Judaism, and Jewish intellectuals became active participants in contemporary culture. Nonconformity, free thinking, and a critical disposition coupled with imagination and curiosity are the qualities which enabled them to make such important contributions to scientific, philosophical, literary, and artistic culture in Europe and the United States. Daniel Rothbart, in this highly interesting essay, traces the interaction between traditional Jewish thought and avant-garde culture.

Undoubtedly the second commandment of the Decalogue, prohibiting idolatry, and the absence of a "return to order," linked to a non-cyclical conception

of history, have contributed to the formation of the American world view, with its faith in progress and the latter's epistemology. These influences, which are the American cultural inheritance, have helped render the United States the most highly evolved nation not only in the field of technology, but in the arts and culture in general.

—Enrico Pedrini

Forward

Concerning its specifically "American" character, parallels have been drawn between the gestural rendering of light and space of the abstract expressionists and painting of the Hudson River School. Pollock's working method, dripping paint over unstretched canvas, is not unlike the technique employed by Navajo sand-painters. The heroic scale of abstract expressionist paintings may also represent the zeitgeist of an affluent and powerful post-war America, with its nuclear monopoly. But little has been written as to why so many exponents, particularly of the non-gestural branch of Abstract Expressionism, critics, and collectors were Jews.

Artists like Barnett Newman, Morris Louis, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Helen Frankenthaler, and critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg came from families of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Most of them had leftist sympathies and believed in a progressive avant-garde discourse. Most of them had also received some religious training, and although this training was later disavowed, I would argue that the sympathy they had for the new abstract art was at some level conditioned by the second commandment of the Decalogue which prohibits the making of idolatrous images (Ex. 20:4-5).

For the artists, Judaism provided source material and inspiration for imagery, as evidenced by the use of titles and declared interest. It is important to keep in mind that the Jewish images and ideas which found

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their way into abstract and Conceptual Art appertain to the mystical current of Judaism referred to as cabbala. The extraordinary richness of cabbalistic imagery and its distancing of figurative subject matter, as I will try to demonstrate, exerted a notable influence on the development of Jewish practitioners of modern and contemporary art.

Barnett Newman

Barnett Newman was born in New York in 1905, the son of two emigrants from the town of Lomza, in Poland. He was named Baruch, meaning blessing in Hebrew, of which Barnett was simply an Americanization. Much has been written about the relationship between Newman's mature work and Jewish esoterism. The vertical lines, or "zips" as he referred to them, are in fact akin to the primordial act of separation described in the Genesis.

The kav, or shaft of Divine light defining *Adam Kadmon*, which in the cabbala is one of the first acts of creation, is quintessentially embodied in Newman's work. At the time of the artist's death in 1970, books on Jewish mysticism by Gershom Scholem were found in his library, and many of his titles either evoke images from or overtly refer to the cabbala.

Onement I is a small painting from 1948, "onement" referring to the condition of unity or singularity, with its playful redundancy of the number one. There is one zip in the painting as there is one God of the Jews, but the image is most deeply concerned with the theme of creation. Its earthy hue can indeed be likened to clay, *adamah* in Hebrew, from which the name Adam was derived. The red vertical mark also has a vaginal quality, speaking of sexual procreation which appertains to *Yesod*, the foundation element of the Tree of the *Sephirot* in the cabbala. "Onement" can also be interpreted as referring to atonement.

The most sacred holiday in the Jewish calendar is

Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, which corresponds to the day the Israelites received the tablets of the law. It is atonement for having worshipped a graven image! *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead, is traditionally recited at Yom Kippur, 1948 having marked the first anniversary of Newman's father's death. Abraham refers to his own father, and Newman's first black on black painting. It refers to Abraham the first patriarch as well, who set out into the world with a firmly defined sense of purpose and identity.

Hidden symmetry is another aspect of Newman's work which has affinities with Jewish mysticism.

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Before placing a zip, he would often establish its position through mathematical calculations. Friends would marvel at the way he filled his drawings with equations. Zips, by their placement or width, had the effect of dividing the rectangular canvas into proportional segments, and often the dimensions of his work are linked to a concept. Eighteen is an auspicious

number in Judaism, being the sum arrived at through an addition of the numerical equivalents of *hai, life*. His wife, Annalee, described his pleasure at learning that his paintings for a 1950 exhibition implied *heth yud*, the number eighteen.

In 1963 Newman designed a synagogue for the exhibition Recent American Synagogue Architecture at the Jewish Museum in New York. The form of his later sculpture *Zim Zum I* was arrived at through the design of its zig-zagging northern windows. Inside there is a central mound, which Newman defines in his catalog essay *makom*, or "place" in Hebrew. Unlike Christian mysticism, where the mystic experience aspires to communion with God, in the Jewish tradition mystics foresee, after passing through the four Divine worlds, standing before the Creator in a "place."

Conclusion

Parallels and affinities between Judaism, Jewish metaphysics, and artistic production, are clearly manifest in Modernism. In the case of recent immigrants, like the abstract expressionists, a strong case can be made as to their familiarity with and interest in this material. The Jewish artistic tradition has never been a figurative tradition, and artists like Modigliani, Chagall, Soutine, Shahn or Pearlstein, have contributed more through an individual rather than a collective vision.

In the wake of Modernism, the influences of Jewish thought on art began to assume new and different forms. Dennis Oppenheim's earthworks constitute among other things, a concern for the soil, which is linked to the goals of Zionism. It is impossible for a Jewish artist to divorce himself from the course of history, and artistic investigation which otherwise might preclude the importance of socio-cultural analysis, acquires additional significance and implications when Jewish artists are involved.