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THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF JEWISH ART

We are on the verge of a re-assessment of the artistic values created by Jewish artists. Thanks to the researches made by archaeologists and art historians, and to the work produced by Jewish artists in the first half of the 20th century, there is no longer any validity in the peculiar assumption - which was supported by certain historic developments and religious facts - that the Jews are not capable of expressing themselves fully in terms of visual art.

The decisive criterion in this respect were the excavations at Dura Europos. Even in 1901, however, the Viennese art historian, Professor Josef Strzygowski suggested that Jewish art in Antiquity, with Alexandria as a centre, may on the contrary have had even a decisive influence on the formation of early Christian art. We have to re-examine the question which exercised a former generation of Jewish art historians, as to whether there was something which could be called Jewish art or whether, as they asked, it would be more appropriate to speak only of Jewish artists.

Jewish artists themselves have taken up this problem often with greater competence than the scholars. Instances are Solomon J. Solomon, R.A., (1860-1927), Jankel Adler (1895-1949) and Endre Nemes (b. 1909). In using, instead of the general term of Jewish art, the notion of Jewish style, the peculiarity of the Jewish destiny as mirrored in its history has to be taken into consideration. We can say that it is the strange history of the Jewish people which adds strangeness to the history of its art and that this circumstance demands from the art historian the application of a special viewpoint.

The criteria which might define a work of art as a Jewish work of art are as follows:-

- (1) That the work of art is produced by an artist of Jewish descent.
- (2) That its subject matter is Jewish, or that it is conceived in a Jewish spirit, - which is difficult to define, because there have been significant changes in the mental climate, although not basically where religious content is concerned - throughout the ages.
- (3) That the Jewish approach is discernible not only in questions of ideology and feeling but also in formal values, i.e., in style, and its tradition.

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- (4) That it is produced in a Jewish milieu of a specific, i.e., an unique cultural constellation and distinction.

These requirements would condition, strictly speaking, any work of art seen from a Jewish national or racial viewpoint. We deny that such a viewpoint is workable either from the historical or from the morphological standpoint.

There are certain analogies between our age and other ages in which mature cultures have decayed and the seeds of new spiritual values begun to germinate. All historians adhering to the cyclic conception of history, - commencing with the Stoa, Vico and Goethe; continuing in our time with Oswald Spengler, Pitirim Sorokin, Arnold J. Toynbee - agree that we live in an age in which not only European culture, <sup>but the culture</sup> based on the Jewish-Christian ideology is decaying and that a new spiritual world, based on the actualities of modern science and technology with a new metaphysics and a new social consciousness, with its own mythical and irrational elements which lie beyond the early materialistic - and mechanistic concepts of science, is beginning to grow.

The Jewish style has in all ages to be considered as variation and part of a larger cultural unity. The Phoenician arts and crafts in their time represented an international style which was famous, hailed alike by Homer and the Bible, with an area of influence from Assyria to Armenia in the East, Hellas, Etruria and Gallia in the West, even in the Holy centre of Olympia Aramaic inscriptions were found. The Phoenician style combined all the stylistic elements of the near East welded together into a unity. It was also the style given to the Temple of Solomon. A similar situation developed in the Hellenistic age, and we find it in our own age too.

We come of necessity to the conclusion that the national approach to the problem of Jewish art is not the appropriate one. Jewish works of art must be seen in connection with the greater cultural units in the life of which the Jewish people has taken and still takes part.

The significance of the Ecole de Paris for our time defines the modern movement which is universal and common to us all.

No modern people has been able to preserve a national style of its own in art. There are characteristics, however, variants, due to race, climate and tradition.