

Jewish Aboriginal Art

We have a lot to learn from our Aboriginal cousins.

Aboriginal people have been living in Australia for between 40 & 60000 years. They occupied every part of this continent. They evolved into what we would today refer to perhaps as independent nations. The Aboriginal map of Australia before the arrival of the white man consisted of over 200 nations with separate languages and dialects, clear territorial borders and varied rituals and customs based on totemic kinship and tribal law. Their original use of art was purely for spiritual or ceremonial purposes as it was intimately integrated into their belief system we call 'the Dreamtime'. The Dreamtime is an elaborate creation story which was passed on from generation to generation through story telling, rock, bark, sand or body painting, dance and songs. The body, bark or sand paintings were very temporary and destroyed at the end of each ceremony. The rock paintings were more permanent and often repainted on a regular basis as a way of teaching and of getting in touch with ancestral beings / spirits who they believe created these paintings originally.

Aboriginal people never regarded their art for its aesthetic value alone or as a commodity. Their art had a particular function in the sense that it was used specifically to teach their stories and as mystical depictions during ceremonies. The art you see around you in this gallery or that you see fetching enormous prices at auctions is only a very recent development since the early 1970's when a number of Aboriginal artists with the support of galleries and art dealers decided to produce art objects for Western consumption. This art is somewhat different to the traditional art and its purpose is somewhat different. For obvious reasons, it does not contain the sacred or secret imagery used in ceremonies.

Of course the white colonizers didn't understand any of the complexities of Aboriginal culture and as the colony expanded the Aboriginal lands were being taken over by white settlers to a point when the different Aboriginal languages, customs and so on, almost disappeared. Land dispossessions, massacres, forced assimilation, having so called half-caste children taken away from their parents and the creation of missions where people from different tribes, often tribes that were in conflict with one another, were forced to cohabit in the same location were only some of the atrocities that the Aboriginal people suffered. Against such extraordinary odds, with relatively few survivors, they managed to keep the languages in some cases, rituals and customs alive until today. In fact, the sense of pride in Aboriginal Australia is growing – just look around this gallery. Aboriginal art is the most recognised Australian art around the world today. Through painting, dance, story telling etc, Aborigines are asserting their culture.

Ancestral imagery combined with a unique understanding and dependence on their land that has been passed on through the generations is blended with a strong sense for symbolic pattern in these new paintings you see around you. They found a way to fuse ancient ideas and modern processes to grow their culture into the 21st century.

We can learn a lot from our Aboriginal cousins.

Jewish history is not as long as the Aboriginal one, we trace it only to 5767 years. Although our history is much shorter, our contributions in that short time have been immense. Virtually in every sphere of human endeavour Jews have been at the forefront of achievers: with numerous Nobel Prize winners, high profile professionals, business leaders and so on. Jewish culture is famous for its unique humour, its literature and music. However, if I were to ask you to name some famous Jewish visual artists - Chagall would perhaps be a name that would be mentioned but beyond that one would begin to struggle. For a long time I found it rather puzzling that such a rich and complex culture has not produced more painters and sculptors.

Of course, the historical reality is a little more complicated.

Almost immediately after the Torah (our Jewish Dreamtime story) was given to the Jewish people at Mt Sinai, Bezalel was appointed as the official artist and he in turn appointed an assistant Ohaliab to create all the utensils, curtains, altars, cherubs and the menorah for the tabernacle. This is an amazing fact - no other culture can name the artists that helped to create it. Yet we not only know the names of the first Jewish artists but we also know their patron - none other than God himself, communicating through Moses. If you start out with such a high patronage, where possibly could you go. Until today, Bezalel and Ohaliab are the most famous Jewish artists although none of their original creations exist. Jewish Art was born at the beginning of the Jewish nation. At the beginning, like in Aboriginal culture, Jewish art was integrated into the spiritual ceremonies and rituals. Art was understood only as part of that 'religious', ritualistic context. When the Jewish people entered what was then Canaan, current Israel, they were allocated specific areas of land according to tribal and family ties – not unlike the Aborigines of Australia. After 40 years of wandering in the desert and upon settling in Israel, the story of Jewish Art becomes very sketchy. It's like a puzzle with a number of pieces missing. There are only very few references in Jewish historical texts to the debate about the use of art both Jewish and the art of others within the context of Chalacha. Although there are examples of Haggadot, Torah and Arc covers, spice boxes and a few other ritualistic objects, even records of Jewish artists and artisans

from the Medieval and Renaissance periods, Jewish Art doesn't seem to figure very prominently in Jewish life until Emancipation. These long periods of Jewish artistic absence are understandable. Over the centuries Jews have suffered expulsions, forced conversions, pogroms, massacres, not to mention the Holocaust. During these terrible times we didn't need art to survive as a people because we had the Torah. Having the written instruction for survival seemed enough.

By comparison, Aboriginal culture didn't develop writing so it relied upon oral telling, dance, song and painting to tell their stories.



Jewish art continues to be an enigma. Jewish art as a category of art is not well defined or even acknowledged. It hasn't attracted scholarly attention perhaps because it's impossible to identify it as a continuous culturally distinct art. Or perhaps we simply don't have the tools with which to identify it yet?

Until the 1970's Aboriginal painting was treated in the same way as a wooden spear, a stone tool or another cultural curio that belonged in Museums of Natural History. It took a number of events to converge at the same time in order to change that perception both within the Aboriginal Community and the wider Australian one: 1) a renewed sense of pride in Aboriginal identity, 2) an increased sense of social justice in the Australian community, resulting in full citizen recognition by the vote given to Aborigines in 1967 – (It's perhaps timely to remember that Jews in Europe received full citizenship only about 100 years prior to this date), 3) a thirst by the elders in various communities to pass on their stories to the younger generations, before they will be lost forever and part of that teaching was through painting their stories and also 4) a bit of historical luck that at that same time, Abstract Art; Abstract Expressionism. Minimalism, Conceptual Art etc was sweeping the Western world and this gradually accustomed our Western eyes and ideas in preparation to appreciate the Aboriginal 'abstract' style of painting. Once that political, conceptual and emotional shift started, there was no stopping it. Beginning with the Pupunya Community in the Central Desert, this new Contemporary Aboriginal Art spread to all corners of Australia and the globe. Today, most major Museums of Art around the world proudly own and display their Contemporary Aboriginal paintings.

We have a lot to learn from our Aboriginal cousins.

When it comes to visual art, perhaps Jewish culture needs to go through a similar process of transformation? Unfortunately, the popular view of Jewish Art are the illustrations of Jewish rituals on calendars that some synagogues produce or pages from religious texts, often embossed with gold Hebrew letters purchased in Jewish tourist outlets, or ritualistic Judaica, brought back from a pilgrimage to Israel. However, just as the brightly decorated boomerangs tourists take away with them as their souvenir of Australia is not what Aboriginal culture is about, so the Jewish touristy trinkets do not represent Jewish culture. I would like to think that we can move on from such an unambitious and sentimental view of Jewish Art. Jews have a distinct religious and cultural perspective on everything. Our Torah both as a literal story as well as a mystical well has unlimited depth and happens to be extremely visual and unique. It's not surprising that non-Jewish artists have borrowed from our Torah over the centuries. Some of the greatest European artists have painted some of the most recognizable masterpieces inspired by it. Apart from the Torah inspired, spiritual Jewish subject matter, there are countless secular and folkloric stories and legends that are just waiting to be dealt with by our artists. At various times during the 20th century, Jewish artists have been amongst the leading artists of European and American Art. A lot of them, if not all of them created (at times) what I would call Jewish Art. But because such a category of art is so ill defined, we think of them only as part of the accepted categories of art, not as part of our own Jewish culture. Equally today, in most Western countries and of course in Israel, Jewish artists are amongst the leaders of contemporary culture but they are seen as American, English, Australian, Israeli – but not Jewish. Although, I feel that Israelis are beginning to identify more and more with their Jewishness – they seem to discover their Jewish roots when they confront the Diaspora. We have a Jewish state but what we need in addition is a change in our collective Jewish consciousness and specifically in relation to Art, perhaps a reassessment or rather a contemporary

understanding of the 2nd Commandment prohibiting idolatrous imagery. We need to develop a renewed sense of pride in who we are and in what our artists are creating, not unlike the transformation Aboriginal people went through. We need to learn to appreciate our stories, our images, our heritage, not as victims of the past but as participants in our Jewish present. We need to challenge the popular limitations defining Jewish Art and celebrate our contemporary Jewish artists who are stretching the boundaries of our Jewish culture. We need to encourage our cultural commentators to become a little more daring and address Jewish Art as a cultural phenomenon with the same passion as they have for Jewish cinema or literature.

With the development of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, a whole new category of art criticism and critical theory evolved to digest and understand this art.

We have a lot to learn from our Aboriginal cousins.

I think we need to transform our attitude towards the word Jewish in relation to art and see it not as a type of enforced, yellow star on our chests but as a cultural pride of our identity. I find it ironic that we can unashamedly bathe in the glory of our Jewish Nobel Prize winners, even if their prize happens to be for literature written in Yiddish, or find a renewed, proud, contemporary relevance in the Torah or Kabbala. Yet when it comes to Jewish visual art we seem to revert into a Ghetto-like sense of inferiority.

We don't need to look very far. I could use numerous examples but I'll just use one - last year a publication called 'New Under The Sun' was published in Melbourne by a Jewish publisher. The editors and contributors were Jewish. It's a book about contemporary Jewish cultural attitudes in Australia. I was hoping that this book would have included something about Jewish Art in Australia. Or at least that it would feature the work of some of our Australian Jewish artists. There are two examples of art in this book: the cover by a Greek Australian and a photographic essay of the orthodox Jewish community, by a Malaysian Australian. Neither example represents Jewish art and they are not even by Jewish artists. Although this recent publication may suggest that there aren't any Jewish artist in Australia, this is of course not true and very disappointing. It is insulting to the numerous Jewish artists in this country and is yet another opportunity missed. In my mind this is cultural cringe at its worst.

Indeed we have a lot to learn from our Aboriginal cousins.

One of the main things we must learn is that a cultural transformation has to begin with ourselves, our own community. Such a transformation I would suggest begins with - how we see ourselves and how we represent ourselves to each other. Part of that responsibility lies with our artists. However, partly because of our unwillingness to even acknowledge our own artists, it's not easy to function as a Jewish artist in Australia. I find myself often isolated, in an undefined position, almost in a state of being torn between two worlds – the broader world of Australian art and the pioneering world of Jewish mystical art that I have been exploring for the past couple of decades. It's frustrating, financially unrewarding and a type of career suicide in terms of a reputation as an artist in this country. I made the choice to pursue my passion for Jewish ideas, Jewish subject matter and Jewish spirituality in spite of all the obstacles – perhaps in the end I had no choice, like all artists, I was driven. Unfortunately, a number of other Jewish artists choose to be less motivated by their Jewishness. Perhaps they have good reason to believe that their Jewish art and identity would hinder their careers. They steer away from Jewish subjects and try to assimilate into the general art of Australia. I can understand



their predicament. Even Jewish collectors of art will collect Australian, Aboriginal and art from every part of the globe but when it comes to Jewish art, well – “it’s too Jewish”. With Aboriginal art it’s the reverse, it can never be Aboriginal enough! We quickly identify and embrace new categories of Aboriginal art like the more recent Urban Aboriginal Art, in order to accommodate and celebrate the different, developing types or styles of Aboriginal identity. Like the current retrospective of Gordon Bennet, a young, urban, Aboriginal artist at the NGV in Federation Square, Melbourne.

We can learn a lot from our Aboriginal cousins.

I’m currently preparing for an exhibition of paintings that explore our Torah from a specifically Jewish perspective. In the publication that will accompany this exhibition at the Jewish Museum in July 2008, I wrote an essay explaining my personal journey about my Jewish spiritual awakening. In it I state that I often feel like the lone voice of Don Quixote, venturing into the undefined landscape of Jewish Art. My Jewishness at least as much as my Australianness defines who I am. I’m thankful that we have a Jewish Museum in Melbourne. Without it, I don’t know where I would exhibit my Torah or my other Jewish works. It’s a shame that the National Gallery of Victoria would not exhibit these Jewish Australian paintings – although this is where they should be seen – in a public context beyond the Jewish community. My paintings may be Jewish in subject matter but they are part of our broader, human, universal cultural content. Just like Aboriginal Art is very local in content yet universal at the same time. My hope is that one day Jewish Art will have its pride of place amongst the arts of other cultures as it deserves. I hope this happens soon.

V. Majzner © August 2007

This paper was delivered in a gallery exhibiting Aboriginal Art at a fundraising function for The Holocaust Centre, Melbourne.