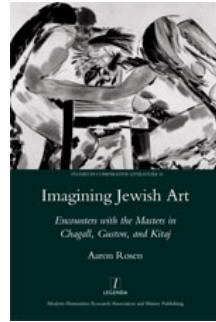


***Imagining Jewish Art: Encounters with the Masters in Chagall, Guston, and Kitaj*, by Aaron Rosen**

Legenda Studies in Comparative Literature 16 | Oxford: Legenda, 2009 | xii + 128 pages | ISBN: 978-1-9065-4054-8 (hardback) \$89.50



This book is a revision of the author’s PhD thesis completed at Cambridge University under the supervision of Professor Graham Howes. After a brief introductory chapter that deals largely with theoretical and methodological issues, the author deals exclusively with three Jewish artists, Marc Chagall, Philip Guston, and R. B. Kitaj, and concludes with a short three-page summary and a most informative bibliography. The book contains fifteen black and white images and each chapter contains quite comprehensive endnotes.

In his introduction, Rosen states his aim: he is interested in how works of art might speak—sometimes quite subtly—in theological terms, both for artists as well as viewers. His focus is specifically on Jewish artists and he asks, ‘how have Jewish artists responded to common artistic dilemmas and situations... in what ways do these responses reflect artists’ self-understandings as Jews?’ (1). While other studies have considered how a single Jewish artist relates to one or more of their precursors, Rosen claims that his study represents the first sustained attempt to deal with the overarching problem of how Jewish artists relate to art history. He presents three case studies all from the twentieth century in order to offer a chronological spectrum: the works of Chagall from the 1930s to the 1950s, Guston from the 1960s and 1970s, and Kitaj from the 1980s to 2007. He concludes his introduction by dealing with the issues involved in trying to define what is distinctive about Jewish art; he argues that it is better to adopt a “non-definitional approach” to Jewish art and instead to explore the possibilities that art might open up for Jewish life. Rejecting any specific definition of what Jewish art is or should be, he uses insights from four different current approaches (biographical, functional, compositional, and programmatic) to explore the possibilities of Jewish art—both culturally and theologically.

When Rosen begins to discuss Chagall, the first of his three case studies, it is then that the book becomes absolutely engrossing. A discussion of several works by Chagall is contextualised within the life and times of the artist and with many illuminating quotations from the artist. The influence of both the

Old Testament and New Testament on Chagall's works is dealt with in a most engaging way and there is a special section on "development and transition in Chagall's crucifixions" (25–30). Some of this ground had already been covered by the eminent Jewish art historian Ziva Amishai-Maisels, in particular the utilization by Chagall of the crucifixion to accentuate Jewish identity of Holocaust victims and Chagall's personal identification with this theme, but Rosen adds a new dimension by exploring the persistence of the crucifixion right into his late works. Another distinctive and original aspect of Rosen's study is his argument that, in Chagall's triptych, *Resistance, Resurrection, Liberation* (1937–52), Chagall drew subtly upon the often overlooked elements of hope in Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (1515).

Rosen's second twentieth-century artist is the abstract impressionist Philip Guston—he had changed his name from Goldstein upon his marriage. Rosen argues that "Guston's deepening sense of Jewish identity ... folds into the very structure of his late work; namely, in the artist's oft-repeated assertion in his last decade that he was attempting 'to make a Golem'" (51). Rosen provides a very interesting summary of the meaning of "golem" in Jewish thought—the notion of amorphous unformed matter and its earthy significance for the artist. Rosen discusses in particular Guston's *Deluge II* and *The Green Rug*. He concludes by summarizing Guston's contribution: "Instead of attempting to carve for painting an original place in this chain of Jewish tradition, to posit it as a conduit of revelation, Guston's late works ultimately suggest another role for painting. Art becomes a space in which to capture the breakdown of tradition, to bind it as an afterimage before our eyes" (69–70).

Rosen's third twentieth-century artist is R. B. Kitaj. For Kitaj, "Jewish texts—and even beyond that the ways in which texts have been produced, interpreted, and collected by Jews—represent ... unique resources for Jewish visual art" (77). Kitaj's works are characterized by themes and practices derived from texts. Rosen, unlike many contemporary critics, argues that Kitaj's "library" is not at all something that constrains the impact of his images, but rather on the contrary, serves to enhance them. Essentially beginning his Jewish education in his mid-forties, Kitaj travelled to Israel for the first time in 1980 and to the concentration camp at Drancy in 1987; meanwhile, ardently reading Jewish religious texts, commentaries and histories, he began to import his expanding Jewish interests into paint in the 1980s. Rosen explores in this chapter the notion that Kitaj was self-consciously creating and developing a "Diasporist" style of painting.

Rosen concludes, from his case studies of these artists, that all three draw upon Jewish concepts of family, tradition, and home as they relate to art history, but that in so doing they open up new understandings for these concepts.

This is a lively, intriguing, and well-written book which makes a really major contribution to our understanding of the distinctiveness of Jewish art in the twentieth century. It fills a serious lacuna in scholarship: while more and more volumes appear on Christian and Islamic art, few books have appeared that deal with Jewish art. Rosen, at various junctures in this book, subtly demonstrates the mutual interchanges between Christian and Jewish art and his vast and impressive knowledge of his topic is both authoritative and persuasive. I thoroughly enjoyed this book and have learned so much from it and would recommend it very highly to all those (both researchers and students) interested in the visual interpretation of Jewish life and tradition.

Martin O’Kane  
*University of Wales*  
*Trinity Saint David*