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Title: Asher Lev at the Israel Museum: Stereotyping art and craft

Date: 2013

Originally published in: Religious stereotyping and interreligious relations

Example citation: Vincent, A. M. (2013). Asher Lev at the Israel Museum: Stereotyping art and craft. J. Svartvik, & J. Wirén (Eds.), *Religious stereotyping and interreligious relations* (pp. 247-254). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Version of item: Author’s own version of pre-copy edited contribution

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/331940>

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Asher Lev at the Israel Museum: Stereotyping Art and Craft

In Chaim Potok’s novel, *My Name is Asher Lev*, there is a scene in which the eponymous protagonist, searching for some means by which to reconcile his drive to create art with his Jewish heritage, visits the Jewish Museum in New York City. There, he sees:

Torah crowns, Torah pointers, Torah covers, spice boxes, illuminated manuscripts. Some were very fine pieces of work. But there was no art. It was all crafts and unmoving. I felt vaguely betrayed.¹

What Asher describes is a standard staple of Jewish museum collections the world over. At the New York museum—and, incidentally, at the Israel Museum, where I have most recently been conducting research—such artefacts can now be found in the portion of the collection dedicated to “Jewish Life”, and a corresponding collection of “Jewish Art”, containing the sort of artefacts that young Asher might have been happier to see, exists elsewhere in the building; at other museums, such as the Jewish Museum Berlin, the collection as a whole is dominated by the “unmoving crafts” that Asher complains of. The labels attached to such items vary, seemingly without rhyme or reason, even within the same collection. The Israel Museum describes its “Torah crowns, Torah pointers, Torah covers, etc.” variously as: “finely crafted objects”, “ritual objects”, “ritual utensils”, —“ceremonial objects”, “decorative objects”, exhibits of “artistry”, “imaginative artworks”, “ceremonial art”, “designs”, or even the catch-all “works”.² In my analysis of the collection’s labelling, I could find no underlying

¹ Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (London: Penguin, 1974), 245.

² Thanks to the generous support offered by the *Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation*, I was able to visit the Israel Museum to study its collections on multiple occasions during my time as the Barbro Osher Fellow in

logic to the various descriptions; neither geography, period, type of object, or technique appear to determine whether an item in the collection is a “ritual object” or “ceremonial art”.

Both the Israel Museum’s apparent inability to proffer a consistent description of the contents of its collection and Asher Lev’s sense of betrayal at the contents of the New York Jewish Museum stem from a narrative about Jewish material production which has been entrenched, unquestioned, enforced from both inside and outside of the Jewish community. As firmly entrenched as this narrative is, however, it is not a simple, value-neutral description of the natural relationship between Judaism and materiality. Kalman Bland’s landmark book, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* has conclusively demonstrated that assumptions of Judaism’s hostility to images—and, by extension, to art—are grounded in the late 18th century, rather than the dawn of time, owing more to Kant than to *Kohelet*.³ In that book, Bland’s focus on intellectual history rather than material history, on written texts rather than artefacts, causes him to mostly overlook the strong Jewish craft tradition, which flourished even through the period in which aniconism became a taken-for-granted Jewish value, producing the sort of objects which Asher Lev deplored. However, this oversight does not damage Bland’s argument. Rather, as I show in this essay, Jewish craftwork during this period has been glorified precisely as an extension of the narrative of Jewish aniconism.

Potok writes Asher Lev speaking at the intersection of two problematic discourses: he takes for granted both the religious-cultural narrative, which insists that because of the second commandment’s prohibition against images, Jews do not make art, and also the culturally entrenched distinction between art and craft, which opens up the possibility of craft as an alternative, acceptable form of Jewish material production. This narrative insists, albeit implicitly, that most artefacts of Jewish material production which might appear to violate the commandment against graven images, or any of its Rabbinic interpretations, are simply craft intended to support the devotional system of Jewish religious life. Therefore their production is governed by a different set of rules to those found in Torah, Talmud, or any of the medieval or modern halakhic sources, which apply only to material production that lacks the immediate practical function of craftwork. For example, Russell Jacoby is critical of scholarship that

Memory of Krister Stendahl at the Swedish Theological Institute, during the 2010–2011 academic year. The set of visits in which I paid specific attention to the labelling of objects in the Jewish Life collection occurred in March and April 2011.

³ Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

attempts to ground contemporary Jewish art in such a previously-existing tradition: “To establish the reality of a Jewish visual arts, defenders usually begin with an appreciation of temple architecture, ornamental crafts, and illuminated manuscripts, which can be traced over the centuries.”⁴ That these are more or less the same sorts of material in which art historians ground the development of contemporary non-Jewish Western art does little to derail the religious narrative that dominates discussions of Jewish craftwork: prohibited by the second commandment from making art, Jews instead took up silversmithing (in areas where they were not prohibited from doing so by the Christian-only guild system) or else embroidery, and developed a rich craft tradition, of the sort extolled in museum catalogues and coffee-table books.

However, this narrative does not stand up to even the most basic level of scrutiny, either in regards to the history of interpretation of the second commandment or in regards to the actual form and content of Jewish material production. The *Shulchan ‘Arukh*, compiled by Yosef Karo in 1563, provides a fairly exhaustive discussion of what sort of material production is permitted and what is prohibited. Unlike Talmud, which records the substance of *halakhic* debates, leaving the reader (aided, in no small part, by a lengthy interpretative tradition) to discern which side is ultimately correct, the *Shulchan ‘Arukh* aims at a clear presentation of the rulings governing day-to-day life, and succeeds to the extent that it still retains the weight of normative Orthodox practice. And the *Shulchan ‘Arukh* reads the second commandment as a blanket prohibition on all sorts of carved images, even relief (flattened) carving, although it permits two-dimensional depictions of everything except the complete human figure or the complete human face.⁵ A two-dimensional representation of any partial segment of a human figure is permissible, as are depictions of the face if it is shown in profile or disfigured slightly.

This sounds restrictive enough that it might support notions of Jews as limited in their potential for artistic output. However, the ideas of permitted and prohibited representation, laid out so neatly in the *Shulchan ‘Arukh*, are sharply contradicted by the artefact record, which contains centuries of Jewish material production littered with carving, three dimensional images, and depictions of the complete human face and figure. In fact, many of these depictions can be found on precisely the sort of craftwork which Asher Lev deplored,

⁴ Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 116.

⁵ *Shulchan ‘Arukh* 168.1–3.

which museums struggle to find words for, and which art historians, who wish to market beautiful coffee-table books to a Jewish audience, represent as a distinctively Jewish response to the restrictions imposed by the second commandment. For an explanation of how and why Jewish material production has come to be so consistently represented as a matter of craft, over and against art, we must look elsewhere than the second commandment and its interpretation. I propose that the key to understanding this distinction does not lie in religious text at all, but rather in the development of the concepts of art and craft themselves.

The distinction—and the degree to which a distinction may be drawn—between art and craft has shifted, as the meaning of both words has changed over time. The word “art” is of Latin derivation, and there is thus ample room for confusion over the meaning of classical and medieval sources, in which *ars/art* is used primarily in reference to technical skill—a phenomenon which contemporary English usage would designate with the Germanic word “craft”—which originally carried, and in most other languages still carries, connotations of strength, power, or mastery.⁶ The power or mastery signalled by the term “craft” was more often technical (or mental) than a matter of sheer physical strength, and the word was, for several centuries, roughly synonymous with “art”. The art/craft divide dates to approximately the late 17th century, when “art” began to take on connotations of creativity and imagination; over time, this linguistic differentiation came to signal a sharp conceptual divide, representing two distinct modes of production.⁷

The treatment of art and craft as distinct modes of production has typically been focused almost entirely on product rather than process, form rather than function. Students today are taught that the current division derives from the Renaissance, in which the equivalent distinction was between “art” and “fine art”, the latter comprising painting, sculpture, and architecture, and the former every other sort of material production. Paul Greenhalgh rightly questions the historical accuracy of this neat division, noting that “fine art as such continued well after the sixteenth century to routinely include other disciplines such as poetry, music, rhetoric and eloquence, and that the Renaissance groupings were not in any way systematic.”⁸ Even in the more complicated picture drawn by Greenhalgh, one finds a vague sense that art or fine art is distinguished from its lesser cousin, craft (or art that is not fine art), by a certain

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “art” and s.v. “craft”.

⁷ *OED* notes that this use did not appear in English dictionaries until the 19th century; “before then, it seems to have been used chiefly by painters and writers on painting.”

⁸ Paul Greenhalgh, “The History of Craft”, *The Culture of Craft* (ed. Peter Dormer; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 26.

superfluity: shelter is necessary, architecture, in the sense of space designed with aesthetic concerns in mind, is not, and nor are paintings or sculptures meant to ornament that space; communication and information transfer are necessary, eloquence, rhetoric, and musicality are not. I will defer considering the questions raised by including works of literature or music in the discussion of art, not because I believe that they ought not qualify as such, but because at this point the distinction I am attempting to illuminate, and its historical development, is better understood when restricted to physical artefacts. In its simplest form, the product distinction does not engage with even the low level of functionalism apparent in the idea of superfluity; rather, an art object is simply an object which takes a form recognisable as art—which is to say, sculpture or painting—and a craft object is an object which takes a form recognisable as craft—“pottery, jewellery-making, basketry, weaving, etc.”⁹

However, function has become increasingly important to the definition of art. Thus, the philosopher R. G. Collingwood formulated a still-influential theory of art that rested primarily on the idea of art as a form of production which does not adhere to the criteria of craft production.¹⁰ This is not to say that art does not involve many of the same processes as craft, but the principle of superfluity comes into play. Art transcends craft; it may utilise similar materials and methods of production, but it engages, and elicits a response from, both the artist and the viewer that is incommensurate with its material origins. Art, as it is now understood, is a unique product of the imagination of its creator, a work of the mind as much if not more so than the hands; while a work of art might involve images, the goal is not to imitate, but to make something wholly new. Craft, by contrast, is understood to be formulaic, following a set plan in order to produce an object whose characteristics are pre-determined. This opposition is illuminated in T. R. Martland’s essay, “Art and Craft: The Distinction”, which, while outdated in its diction, is a fair summary of the reasoning that leads to a pejorative use of the word craft:

They are craftsmen all, Gepettos or Kings of Cyprus, who by their actions intend to bring to life their own favourite Pinocchio or their own favourite Pygmalion. Along with Faust in Auerbach’s cellar they all intend to evoke old experiences rather than move on to new experiences. They all want the security of repossessing the past, to release or defend again what they already experience. This means none of them have room in their work for what the

⁹ Charles. B. Fethe, “Craft and Art: A Phenomenological Distinction”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 17:2 (1977), 131.

¹⁰ See Fethe, “Craft and Art”, 129–131.

work itself might add. None of them want the obligation to relate to the open future. None of them have the intention to save themselves for what Delacroix calls “a certain abandon later on, for discoveries made as the work advances.”¹¹

Especially interesting for my purposes are the examples of craft that Martland selects: Pinocchio, Pygmalion.¹² According to Martland, the desire to imbue the object with life and then dwell with the companion of one’s own creation is a flight from originality, from the risk and unpredictability entailed by relationship with something outside of one’s own sphere of control. In striving to bring the work to life, he suggests, Gepetto and Pygmalion paradoxically rob the work of the capability to transform itself or its creator. They seek to avoid a lengthy engagement with work *qua* work. By transforming the object they manufacture into something other than what it is, by using the process of manufacture as a means rather than an end in itself, they produce variations on what already exists, rather than creating any new value. They bring the work into their world, rather than entering into the world of the work. In so doing, they control everything, and risk nothing. What Gepetto and Pygmalion seek to create, according to Martland, is reproduction, imitation—not art.

Craft, then, is understood to be formulaic. A craftsperson does not even need to have designed the thing they make—they just blindly implement someone else’s idea, following a set plan in order to produce an object whose characteristics are pre-determined—over, and over, and over again. A narrative that glorifies the transcendent nature of art while restricting Jewish material production to the realm of craft echoes and re-enforces the anti-Semitic trope of Jews as cultural scavengers, incapable of producing cultural value on their own.

At the same time, the history of Jewish exclusion from the medieval craft guilds of Europe led, in an attempt to prove that such exclusion was not logical or natural, to a valorization of craftwork within the Jewish community. Cultural history written by Jews, for Jews, places a great emphasis on craft traditions from the Mediterranean region, which flourished under Islamic rule, as well as on the Jewish guild system that formed relatively late—between the 16th and 18th centuries—in Eastern Europe.¹³ Jewish cultural history

¹¹ Thomas. R. Martland, “Art and Craft: The Distinction”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 14:3 (1974), 236.

¹² One must assume that Martland was preoccupied with the aesthetic effect of alliteration and neglected to note that Pygmalion and the King of Cyprus are the same person, and the statue with which he fell in love came to be named Galatea; nevertheless, the myth which he references remains recognisable, and the trope of made objects coming to life is clearly discernible.

¹³ See, e.g., Tudor Parfitt, *The Road to Redemption: The Jews of Yemen, 1900–1950* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 118–120; Michael Menachem Laskier & Reeva Spector Simon, “Economic Life”, *The Jews of the Middle-East and*

written with the goal of demonstrating the European-ness of Jews, by emphasizing their own craft history, in common with the guild-dominated society of the middle ages, actually served, by restricting the history of Jewish material production solely to the realm of craft, to underline the Jewish community's religious otherness as Romantic-era ideas about the uniqueness of the work of art and the individual genius of the artist took hold.

And so the narrative that emphasises Jewish craftwork over and against Jewish artistic production is enforced, albeit for different reasons, from both inside and outside of the Jewish community. Asher Lev is initially discouraged from embarking on an artistic career by his mentor, Jacob Kahn, who warns him that fine art (which he differentiates from the painting of portraits, “calendars for matzo companies” and “Rosh Hashonoh greeting cards”)

... is a tradition of goyim and pagans. Its values are goyisch and pagan. Its concepts are goyisch and pagan. In the entire history of European art, there has not been a single religious Jew who was a great painter.¹⁴

Indeed, Jacob's discouraging speech to Asher occupies three full paragraphs, which mirrors the tradition of Orthodox rabbis turning away potential converts three times before agreeing to accept them for instruction. This structure serves to emphasize what Jacob's words already warn: in studying not merely painting-as-a-representative-craft (portraits and calendars and greeting cards) but painting as an art form, Asher is not making a simple choice of vocation, but an alteration in worldview that amounts to nothing short of religious conversion. He will learn to see and inhabit the world in a manner entirely different from the rest of his community, and once he begins, he cannot *un*-learn; there can be no going back. But by the time Jacob issues his warning, it is too late; Potok has already spent more than half the book impressing the reader with Asher's inescapable compulsion to not just paint, but to make art. Nobody—not Potok, not Jacob, not the reader—expects Asher to back down, and, indeed, everyone—including, and perhaps especially, Potok himself—would be disappointed if he did realize that he could make a perfectly good living illustrating calendars and greeting cards,

Africa in Modern Times (eds. Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Melchior Laskier & Sara Regeur; New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 30–34; Dalia Manor, “Orientalism and Jewish National Art: The Case of Bezalel”, *Orientalism and the Jews* (eds. Ivan D. Kalmar & Derek J Penslar; Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 147; Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source Book 315–1791, with an Introduction and Updated Bibliographies by Marc Saperstein* (Detroit: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000), 508.

¹⁴ Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev*, 186.

without ever needing to come into conflict with the religious values of his community. We would feel not only cheated by the story, but also that Asher had cheated himself, had settled not just for the lesser of two evils, but simply for *less*.

The lack of creativity which constitutes the now taken for granted distinction between art and craft also guarantees that craft is viewed by Jews and non-Jews alike as an acceptable form of Jewish material production; it threatens neither European cultural superiority nor religious values which reserve true acts of creation for God alone. But it is precisely this failure to challenge the status quo which renders insufficient any attempt to valorize the history of Jewish material production while at the same time maintaining a distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish forms of making. The Israel Museum's flirtation with the category of "ritual art" or "ceremonial artworks" for the sorts of objects which Asher Lev finds "unmoving" is a perfect example of this: the meta-categories of "art" and "craft" are by now too well-established for such rhetorical shuffling to be convincing; even publications and museum displays which promote the category of "ritual art" on the surface slip frequently into the language of craftsmanship.¹⁵ While such slippage is in part a legacy of the shifts in meaning between art and craft, it also serves to re-enforce the exclusion of Jewish material production from the category of "real" art; it reveals the attempted rhetorical sleight-of-hand behind the category of ritual or ceremonial art as not even fully convincing to its proponents, much less to skeptics, like Asher Lev, steeped in a cultural tradition which glorifies fine art over and above all other forms of material production.

This leaves Jewish material production in a difficult double bind: if fine art is a tradition of goyim and pagans, and also the only tradition which truly matters, then Jewish culture will always be something not just other, but lesser. What is needed—what invented categories such as "ritual art" fail to achieve—is not so much a promotion of the status of craft, but a wholesale critique of the cultural hierarchy of value which creates the double bind in the first place. Such a critique may have been partially attempted by the early Bezalel School, though ultimately its emphasis on Jewishness over and above any other metrics of aesthetic or practical value steered it away from a head-on confrontation with the world of European art, and ensured that the reception of its distinctive style would be governed by the art/craft valuation prevalent elsewhere in the world, regardless of what influence such categories

¹⁵ These categories are also very popular in publications on Jewish material production; see, e.g., Michael E. Keen, *Jewish Ritual Art in the Victoria & Albert Museum* (London: HMSO, 1991); also the classic Cecil Roth, *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961).

actually had on production at the School.¹⁶ A more fruitful possibility for the re-valuation of Jewish material production lies in the feminist project of rescuing and elevating forms of work which are commonly dismissed as the traditional domain of women; most textile work falls into this category, and the theory developed in reference to primarily domestic forms of making can be expanded more widely to include other forms of practical objects, such as the ritual cups and candlesticks which comprise the greater part of most museum collections of Jewish artefacts.¹⁷ But this is work which remains to be done; at present, I hope I have at least contributed to a more precise articulation of the problem.

¹⁶ For an overview of the genesis of the Bezalel School, see Nurit Shilo Cohen, “The ‘Hebrew Style’ of Bezalel”, *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 20 (1994), 140–163; while Cohen seems to take the separation of art and craft at the School for granted, he at the same time provides evidence that the curriculum itself was aimed at forcing a greater integration of the two than existed at other academies at the time (or, for the most part, in the present day).

¹⁷ For an overview of the growing field of feminist aesthetics and its critique of the art/craft dichotomy, see Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004).