

JEWISH SUFFERING EXPRESSED IN ART

By Shira Atik

"Is there such a thing as Jewish art?" As the Jewish community becomes more involved in promoting and preserving its past and present culture, this question is becoming increasingly important. Many scholars are examining trends in art, hoping to define an inherently Jewish art form. One such scholar is David Roskies, Associate Professor of Jewish Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who spoke at Columbia on September 19.

In his lecture, entitled "Reactions to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Art," Professor Roskies showed that a "definable artistic tradition" emerged in the art of twentieth century Eastern Europe. The student of Jewish art, he advised, must keep three basic premises in mind. First of all, Jewish art should be considered professional art, not folk art as the artists whom he discusses learned about art outside of the Jewish community. Secondly, due to the Jewish taboo

"Jewish artists . . . making time-bound events timeless"

against images, the borrowing of artistic forms is inevitable. Finally, it is essential to understand that artistic responses to history do not necessarily have to include human figures. This is especially true for recent Jewish art, which reflects an historical period of "unrecognizable dimensions."

With this introduction, Professor Roskies proceeded to point out some of the recurring themes of recent Jewish Eastern European painting. In the works of both Ephraim Moses Lilian, a painter whose active years overlapped the Kishinev pogrom, and Marc Chagall, who painted during the Holocaust, martyrdom is an important motif. Lilian portrays a bearded Jew, wearing a Tallit (prayer shawl) being burnt at the stake; an angel hovers above this Jew, kissing his head and holding a Sefer Torah. Chagall also depicts a man burning at the stake, only this time, the martyr is Jesus. This scene is portrayed against the backdrop of what is clearly an Eastern European *shtetl*, (small village), aflame.

Jewish artists, said Roskies, were very concerned with "making a time-bound event, timeless." An example of this tendency is Samuel Hirshenberg's sketch of Jews in exile, trudging through in a line. Like Lilian, Hirshenberg is reacting to the Kishinev pogrom. This painting gained tremendous popularity; it could be found in the homes of middle-class Jews, and was circulated in the form of a postcard. Hirshenberg's work, asserted Roskies, "fixed an image of exile in the minds of Eastern European Jews."

Chagall tries to encompass all of Jewish history in his paintings; he does this by removing all specificities that would make his art time-bound. In his "White Crucifixion" of 1938, Chagall does not portray a single swastika, although his work is a response to the persecution of Polish Jews during the Holocaust.

Professor Roskies concluded his lecture with a discussion of two more recent artists and their interpretations of tragedy. In his "Proposal for a Monument," Samuele Bach depicts two tablets held together by metal bars, penetrated by bullet-holes. Bach is insisting that the Holocaust demands a new understanding of the ten commandments. Yossel Berner's "Destination X" represents a procession of furniture, plundered from Jewish homes. The inanimacy and sterility of furniture is analogous to what Bergner perceives to be a systematic method of killing.

The artists of twentieth century Eastern Europe span many years; each has a unique understanding of the horrors that they or their parents had witnessed. Although their styles differ, they share a mode and a motivation. All of these artists attempt to come to terms with a catastrophic and unbelievable history through the medium of art. The lasting impressions that their works leave on every viewer give credence to what Professor Roskies considers one of the crucial precepts of art: "It is not the facts that survive, but the meaning of the facts."

BOOK REVIEW

From Time Immemorial

by Joan Peters

By Noah Scheinfeld

If you say Palestinian, many will think of a man toting grenade launchers, or wailing women in long dresses and harried survivors barely surviving — all part of a nation with indisputable historical rights to Palestine.

Falsehoods provide the basis for such an assumption, states *From Time Immemorial* by Joan Peters. She dismantles the rickety historical claims of the Palestinians. Peters intended to write about the plight of Arab refugees, but this plan was destroyed by the facts. Peters discovered that United Nations data defined an Arab refugee as any person who had been in Palestine two years before Israel's statehood. Intellectual honesty refocused her inquiry. Piece by piece "Arab myths" began to fall away.

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Solidarity Through Shabbat

By Hannah Wacholder

The first time I walked into Earl Hall on a Friday night, I was asked whether I wanted to attend Orthodox, Conservative or Progressive services and was then pointed in the right direction. Immediately divided. Shabbat, however, is something that we all share, and to encourage this sharing the Shabbat Committee was formed toward the end of last year, made up of representatives from each of the three religious committees and *Seudot Shabbat* (Shabbat meal preparing group), its purpose is to plan activities on Shabbat that will involve all of the Jewish community, including the unaffiliated.

The Shabbat Committee's most recent event was an *Oneg Shabbat* (celebration) held on October 26 in John Jay lounge, organized by Eugene Rosenthal and Caroline Mostel. Sara Cohen, Debbie Farbman and Sari Press had prepared song sheets that were passed around. The songs were especially chosen to include those that would be familiar to many different people. Over 75 people came together that evening to sing, eat and socialize with other Jews in a Shabbat atmosphere.

Plans for future *Ongai Shabbat* include speakers and game programs. Also on the agenda of the Shabbat Committee are Shabbat workshops, which would provide those who are interested in observing Shabbat on their own with the opportunity to learn how to do so. Taking place during the week, Shabbat workshops might teach Shabbat *zemirot* (songs), rituals, like *kiddush* (prayer over wine) and *hamotzee* (blessing over bread), and baking *challah* (Shabbat bread). The workshops would culminate in a Friday night dinner incorporating all that the participants had learned. Another project that has been discussed is the formation of small Friday night dinners in which one or two unaffiliated Jews might be invited. For instance, if someone ordinarily has Friday night dinner in his suite with a few friends, he might consider having one or two additional people who might sign up in the Jewish Office or on a sign-up sheet in the dorm. This too would be geared toward those who want to observe Shabbat with Friday night dinner but who might feel more comfortable the first time with a small group of people than at the large communal meal organized by *Seudot Shabbat* each week in Earl Hall.

The Shabbat Committee was formed as part of an increased effort by the Council of Jewish Organizations at Columbia to run programs of interest to the general population of Jews on campus. If you are disillusioned by the divisiveness in the Jewish community, here is an opportunity to help change things. If you are interested in working on any of these projects, or have suggestions for future programs, do not hesitate to call the Jewish Office at x5111.