

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES

**Jewish Artists in New York
During the Holocaust Years**

Matthew E. Baigell

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**Jewish Artists in New York
During the Holocaust Years**

Matthew E. Baigell

MONNA AND OTTO WEINMANN LECTURE SERIES
16 MAY 2001

The assertions, opinions, and conclusions in this occasional paper are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council or of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Second printing, ??

Copyright © 2001 by Matthew Baigell,
assigned to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

THE MONNA AND OTTO WEINMANN ANNUAL LECTURE focuses on Holocaust survivors who came to America, and on their families. Born in Poland and raised in Austria, Monna Steinbach Weinmann (1906–1991) fled to England from Vienna in the autumn of 1938. Otto Weinmann (1903–1993) was born in Vienna and raised in Czechoslovakia. He served in the Czech, French, and British armies, was injured in the D-Day invasion at Normandy, and received the *Croix de Guerre* for his valiant contributions during the war. Monna Steinbach and Otto Weinmann married in London in 1941 and immigrated to the United States in 1948. Funding for this program is made possible by a generous grant from their daughter Janice Weinman Shorenstein. The Monna and Otto Weinmann Annual Lecture is organized by the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

SEVERAL BOOKS AND ARTICLES have been written about Jewish intellectuals and cultural figures who lived in New York during the 1940s. I am referring here to people such as Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, and Clement Greenberg. The general consensus is, and these figures have admitted as much in their own writings, that through these years and immediately afterward they hardly acknowledged the fact that six million of their co-religionists were being and had been murdered.¹ By comparison, several artists did show great concern and did respond in their work either directly or indirectly, but despite the number of books and articles that have been written about them, their responses as Jews to the events of the day have received very little attention from art historians. And here I am referring to refugee artists such as Marc Chagall and Jacques Lipchitz as well as local figures such as William Gropper and Mark Rothko. In fact, I know of only one art historian who has explored their art in a Jewish context to any serious extent. It is Ziva Amishai-Maisels, an American who lives in Jerusalem and teaches at Hebrew University.² But since she discusses artists all over the world and because of her particular organizational approach, references to events in New York are quite scattered. Consequently, there is no easily available source for information about the effects of the Holocaust on Jewish artists in New York

literally as it was in progress, New York being the principal center of art in the Western world at that time.³

Around 1940, the Jewish art scene in New York hardly existed. Obviously, there were many Jewish artists, but very few painted expressly Jewish themes or wanted to be identified as Jewish rather than as American or international artists. They did not want to situate themselves in an artistic ghetto and, unlike many artists today who seek out their ethnic, religious, and racial identities through their art, most Jewish artists at that earlier time ran from such identification. Of course they knew they were Jewish—many spoke Yiddish—but because of pressures from art dealers who thought Jewish themes would not sell, because of American antisemitism, because of embarrassment over their Jewish origins, and because of their desires to assimilate, a Jewish art hardly existed.⁴

Throughout the 1930s, artists were made aware of the increasing virulence of German antisemitism. Literally within days of Hitler's ascent to power in 1933, the art press and art organizations as well as general newspapers and magazines informed the public of increasing German restrictions on Jewish artists and art dealers as well as the verbal, physical, and economic assaults on German Jews. Max Weber, a major American modernist painter who also painted works with Jewish themes, responded to the destruction of many synagogues and Jewish businesses during *Kristallnacht* (November 9, 1938) with a painting called *Whither Now?* completed in 1939. It shows two obviously Jewish men talking to each other. In a 1958 oral history, Weber recalled,

When I heard of Hitler (I knew a Hitler was coming several years before anybody heard the name) and when I heard that he was beginning to break Jewish shops in Berlin and all that, I walked around [my] studio hurt, disturbed. I could see what an anti-Semite could do when he's bloodthirsty and fanatic and crazy....Where are the people going to go now? What are these Jewish people in Germany going to do? And [Hitler] is awakening an antisemitism that is going to be ruinous. So I said "Where to?" And I painted a large canvas of two Jews called "Whither Now?"⁵

Many German and other Jews came to America then. In New York, refugees could often be seen and heard, if not in one's own apartment house, then on the streets, in stores, and on the subways. Their presence was both known and felt. Artists also came, both Jewish and non-Jewish, especially around 1940, and their presence was felt

almost at once through gallery exhibitions and through their general participation in the city's art life.⁶ Among the Jewish artists there were the American expatriates Abraham Rattner and Man Ray. Europeans included Nahum Aronson, Max Band, Eugene Berman, Marc Chagall, Joseph Floch, Eric Isenburger, Mané-Katz, Arthur Kaufmann, Moise Kisling, Jacques Lipchitz, Maximilian Mopp, Hans Richter, Irma Rothstein, Arthur Szyk, and Ossip Zadkine. Some artists continued painting as before, creating portraits, stilllives and such. Others occasionally painted a scene with Jewish subject matter or a scene that reflected the deteriorating and then terrifying European situation. A key moment was late 1941. Before that time, everybody knew about Germany's repressive antisemitic policies. But in late 1941, information began to leak out that the systematic murder of Europe's Jewish population had begun in earnest. The *Contemporary Jewish Record*, for instance, carried monthly news of roundups, deportations, and the general mayhem visited on Jewish populations country by country. By 1942, most artists, I believe, knew exactly what was happening in Europe. I knew and I was only nine years old in 1942. And if I knew, they must have known at least as much as I. After all, they too could read headlines in the English- and Yiddish-language newspapers as well as listen to the radio.

But how to record that knowledge? After America entered the war and its news correspondents were either interned or thrown out of Germany, written accounts still appeared, but visual images essentially disappeared. What did German brutality look like? Widespread knowledge occurred only with the publication of murder and concentration camp scenes at the end of the war. Some photographs did appear in newspapers such as *PM* or in the *Morgen Freiheit*, but very rarely.⁷ There really was no visual history or tradition with which to describe the enormity of the events taking place, no available tradition to deal with the private and public traumas. In addition, Jewish-American artists living in New York had experiences different from those of refugee European artists who had fled from persecution. There was no time to develop a collective memory for events evolving daily, no retrievals or reconfigurations of past histories, but rather the responses of individuals to the present moment. Basically, each artist was alone and could do little more than share his or her thoughts and anxieties with a handful of friends as news reports were heard on the radio or read in the newspapers.⁸ After, say, reading or hearing accounts of yet additional hundreds of thousands brutalized and murdered, and assuming the artist wanted to respond in some

way to the ongoing devastation, what was he or she to paint or sculpt once in the studio?

With the exception of cartoonists such as William Gropper, very few created scenes of violence. Occasionally, an artist might attempt an imaginative recreation of the battle of the Warsaw ghetto, which Sigmund Menkes (b. 1896) did in 1943. (From Lvov, Menkes came to America in 1936.) But there were no victories to celebrate, and violent scenes had never been part of Jewish visual culture. The three most common types of subject matter included remembered images of the once vibrant culture in process of decimation, Christian subject matter with Jewish inflections, and ancient history and mythology. For the most part, the scenes portrayed were remarkably free of animosity, truculence, and protest.

Mané-Katz (1894–1962), who was born in the Ukraine and who had spent most of his adult life in Paris until escaping to New York in 1940 where he lived until 1945, painted a handful of memorials to the destroyed community. For example, his *Benediction* of 1942 shows a bust of an old rabbi or perhaps *Kohen* with raised arms blessing seven young boys who represent the symbolic future of the Jewish people. In another work, he painted the busts of two rabbis flanking a Bible placed on a Torah scroll. A menorah is located in the background, invoking the story of the Maccabees who in 176 BCE defeated the Syrians, thus saving Judaism from annihilation. Hannukah is the only Jewish festival that commemorates a warring event, but this painting, completed around 1942, reflected, for its date, wishful thinking by Mané-Katz more than anything else.

Ben-Zion (1898–1987) who had emigrated from the Ukraine in 1920 made a lithograph in 1942 entitled *Holding the Scrolls*; it shows a person holding high the Torah scroll after the reading of the weekly portion and when the congregation says that this is the Torah that God gave to Moses. In effect, the person is holding up the word of God for all to see. The Torah scrolls are the most sacred possession of every congregation and if one is damaged beyond repair it must be buried as if it were a person. All Jews knew that Germans, when ransacking synagogues, invariably burned or soiled scrolls as an act of purposeful desecration. Therefore, in 1942, to paint or lithograph this moment in the Torah-reading part of a service meant that the artist was recalling such hateful acts and at the same time asserting the survival of the Jewish people despite the events in Europe. It was a defiant call to hold fast to the faith whatever the consequences.

Around 1940, other American artists also painted works that contain both defiant and commemorative elements. Hyman Bloom (b. 1913) and Max Weber (1881–1961), among others, painted portraits of rabbis and biblical figures; these invoked bearded East European personages. Bloom, who lived in Boston, portrayed virtually an entire congregation, especially its cantor, in exalted prayer in his *The Synagogue* of 1940. Before the arrival of remnants of ultra-Orthodox groups after the war, these were images of persons and of a kind of worship that was fast disappearing in Europe and, because of assimilation, in America. Works such as these memorialized a culture that in 1940 was in distress abroad and disappearing in this country.

So it is interesting to speculate about the reasons Max Weber painted *Hasidic Dance* in 1940 and *Adoration of the Moon* in 1944. In the former, men in Hasidic garb dance in a circle. Such dancing is a traditional way to express joy in Hasidic communities and commonly occurs on certain holidays such as *Simchas Torah* and *Purim*. It is also a religious blessing to entertain the bride and groom at a wedding by dancing as well as to celebrate the Creation, human creation, and the renewal of life itself. *Adoration of the Moon* celebrates the beginning or waxing phase of the new moon, known as *Rosh Chodesh*, and is performed outdoors. The new moon symbolizes continuous creation and the renewal of the world, as well as the waxing and waning phases of the Jewish people over the centuries. Hasidic men dance during this ritual especially during the first *Rosh Chodesh* after *Yom Kippur*. Since neither of these paintings commemorates a victory or a miraculous event in Jewish history, it would seem that Weber chose these traditional scenes, scenes that the average Jewish man performed on countless occasions during his lifetime, because he hoped they would be performed by future generations, thus assuring the continuity of Jewish culture, Jewish memory, and the Jewish community after the murdering had ended.

The idea of memorialization was perhaps best summed up in Ben-Zion's exhibition entitled *De Profundis* at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery in 1946 when he exhibited ten gouaches and two oils of slightly abstracted religious elders surrounded by barbed wire. He said,

If the patriarchic type of Jews dominated my conceptions, it is because they were the backbone of the nation and its cultural source. It is their children and grandchildren, migrating to western Europe and America, who contributed so much to the culture and civilization of their adopted countries. I chose them also because their humiliation was the deepest, for

they had the strength of character and rare courage to keep to their belief and made life inwardly as well as outwardly—and because the mockery of the murderers must have reached hell’s hilarity in handling these martyrs.⁹

William Gropper (1897–1977) also used the title *De Profundis* for one of his paintings in 1944, an image of a rabbi in a prayerlike conversation with God. Gropper repeated this image several times to commemorate the anniversary of the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto. Because of the original title, Gropper probably had in mind Psalm 130, which begins: “Out of the depths, I call to you, O Lord.”

The works by most of these artists, then, are not derived from the Bible. In fact, there seemed to be very little appropriate biblical imagery upon which they could fall back. Abraham Rattner (1895–1978), an expatriate in Paris between the two world wars, painted a seated man in 1944; he called the subject and the work *Job*. But Job just sits hand to cheek, which suggests passive acceptance rather than active response, and so he was not a good model for artists. The story of Abraham and Isaac was also inappropriate, since Jews believe that it symbolizes the end of human sacrifice, the very opposite of what was taking place. Instead, several artists turned to Christian subject matter as a source for their Holocaust imagery. Max Band (1900–1974), who immigrated to California from Paris in 1940, painted a work called *Ecce Homo*, or man of sorrows, in which a man in modern dress stands opposite a jury in what seems to be a Kafkaesque modern courtroom. The man seems completely unaware of and disconnected from the crime of which he is accused.

Probably the most popular image was the Crucifixion. In fact, an exhibition of crucifixions took place in New York in 1942.¹⁰ Most of the artists who participated were Jewish. One American, Joseph Foshko, painted a crucifixion a few years later in 1945 and entitled it *Forgive Them NOT Father for They Know What They Do*. His is certainly not a portrayal of Christ the redeemer of humankind, but the Jewish Jesus who is being crucified. In this work, Jesus is witness to the Holocaust. He appears not in a moment of transcendence, but in the historical moment of the murder of European Jewry.

This was the kind of image Marc Chagall (1887–1985) used both before and after he came to America in 1941. In his most notable American crucifixion, the *Yellow Crucifixion*, painted in 1943, Jesus is on the cross and wears a prayer shawl as a loincloth. He also wears phylacteries. To our left, there is an open, blank Torah scroll illuminated by an angel blowing a shofar, indicating the presence of God, but the words

of God are missing. In the foreground a group of figures suggests the Flight into Egypt or fleeing refugees. Behind the figure of Jesus, a shtetl burns and one sees wandering Jews exemplified by a man with a sack on his back. This figure of the Wandering Jew appears in many of Chagall's paintings. As the artist said in 1950, "The man in the air in my paintings...is me....It used to be partially me. Now it is entirely me. I'm not fixed anyplace. I have no place of my own....I have to live someplace."¹¹ On the left side of the painting a shipwreck scene memorializes the sinking of the *Struma* on February 24, 1942, in the Black Sea. Unable to proceed to Palestine with its 769 passengers, it was towed out into the Black Sea and sunk. Only one person survived.¹² Since all the figures in this painting are suffering, Jesus' physical death on the cross does not redeem anybody. Again, he is portrayed as a Jewish Jesus.

Chagall also painted a work called *The Crucified* in 1944; it is about the crucifixion of East European Jews. In a largely abandoned *shtetl*, a Jewish man appears crucified on a cross on the main street. And in a 1943 painting called *War* a dead man lies on a rutted *shtetl* street on his back as if crucified. While the entire village is aflame, a mother and child try to escape. In the foreground is the Wandering Jew, or Chagall himself.

Chagall understood Jesus as a historical and poetic figure in his own way. In 1944, about the time he painted *The Crucified*, he said, "For me Christ was a great poet, the teaching of whose poetry has been forgotten by the modern world." Then, decades later in 1977, he said,

For me Christ has always symbolized the true type of the Jewish martyr. That is how I understood him in 1908 when I used this figure for the first time....I was under the influence of the pogroms. Then I painted and drew him in pictures about ghettos surrounded by Jewish troubles, by Jewish mothers, running terrified and holding little children in their arms. This is undoubtedly the primary meaning of my use of this image.¹³

In these works, Chagall combined Christian gospel imagery with contemporary events as well as with the fantastical elements that found their way into virtually everything he did. We should keep in mind that the contemporary images—the burning *shtetls* and fleeing people—were not documentary but fanciful in nature. It would not be in Chagall's nature to portray scenes accurately, nor would he have known what, in the 1940s, they looked like.

Abraham Rattner did not even try to describe contemporary events in those works that are clearly about the Holocaust but that are couched largely in Christian iconographic terms. Nor was Rattner, who caught literally the last boat to leave France before its defeat, prompted to reflect on his experiences through the use of personal subject matter. In *Darkness Fell Over the Land* of 1942, he painted a limp, bloodied Jesus being removed from the cross. Of works such as these, Rattner said, “It is myself that is on the cross, though I am attempting to express a universal theme—man’s inhumanity to man.” On another occasion, he said that “The Crucifixion is not a single incident: it is symbolic of what is the matter with the world today.”¹⁴

These are very guarded statements that suggest that Rattner was playing down the Jewish angle, perhaps on advice from his dealer and/or he was trying to be statesmanlike and rise above commenting on the specific events of the day. It is also very possible that he used this kind of subject matter because Christian rather than Jewish suffering would be more understandable to Christian viewers. Yet, Rattner must have been seething inside, for on another occasion he said that “We gave Christ to the world. The Crucifixion is me because I’ve suffered so much, because it’s me in the Crucifixion. Not just me: everyone who’s suffered.” Years later, we do not know exactly when, he could finally admit,

As Hitler’s voice grew louder and louder..., I felt at odds with aesthetics and pure art. I had to express something with my art. [Using current art styles were] escapes from my emotional entanglement with the suffering of my fellow men...a sort of betrayal of my inner self....His voice took me back to my childhood and I found no way to ignore these feelings....The Jewishness of way, way back somehow finds it way into my living moment now.¹⁵

In subsequent decades, Rattner did paint many works based on the Torah and the Prophets. But the closest he could approach that subject matter in the 1940s was to call a painting of a praying figure *Lamentation*, which he completed in 1944.

There is no reason to criticize Rattner for suppressing his feelings or for substituting images of Jesus for his real subject during the 1940s. Openly asserting one’s Jewishness must have been very difficult at that time even in New York where antisemitism was not as widespread as in the rest of America. I can remember as a child being told never to act too Jewish, whatever that actually meant, and to try to pass whenever possible: the lesson being publicly to deny one’s Jewishness.

Jacques Lipchitz (1891–1973), the great sculptor, arrived from France in 1941. He left a brother and other close relatives about whom he worried constantly. In his art, he explored a variety of subjects to express feelings about contemporary events, including his own versions of mythological themes and occasionally expressly Jewish subject matter. As early as 1935, in response to the rise of Hitler, he said of a study he had made of David slaying Goliath, “My Jewish skin has tingled for my scattered and persecuted blood-brothers. But the monster whom we are killing is not merely antisemitism, it is everything which hinders man from moving forward.”¹⁶ His comment here is interesting in that, like Rattner and other Jewish artists as well as a host of other people, Lipchitz, while acknowledging the precariousness of the position of the Jews, is still concerned with the general progress of humankind. Wherever else this thought comes from, and one does not have to be Jewish to have it, it also comes from the messianic tradition of the Prophets and the cabalistic notion of *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. While their own world was falling apart, Jews were still concerned with helping humanity.

Through these years, Lipchitz explored three mythological themes, the Rape of Europa, Theseus and the Minotaur, and Prometheus. In a version of the Rape of Europa from the 1930s when he was still in Paris, Lipchitz portrayed Europa riding off on the bull’s back. In his version of 1941, she stabs a very humanoid bull who has human arms, hands, and front legs. As the artist observed, “Europa is fighting against her rapist (Hitler) and is trying to kill him. Europa has become specifically modern Europe threatened by the powers of evil and fighting for her life against them.”¹⁷ In *Theseus and the Minotaur* of 1942, an enormous Theseus also stabs the Minotaur. Of this work, Lipchitz said, “The Minotaur is Hitler and I was thinking about de Gaulle as Theseus...I was in a sense making a magical image, like a witch doctor who makes images of an enemy he wishes to destroy and then pierces it with pins. Through my sculpture I was killing Hitler.”¹⁸ In his *Prometheus Strangling the Vulture* of 1943, Prometheus does exactly that—strangle the vulture. In the Greek play, *Prometheus Bound*, however, Prometheus does not do that. Although he maintains his beliefs in his argument with Zeus whom he considers to be ruling outside the law and who will ultimately be defeated, Prometheus says only at the end of the play that he was wronged.

One wonders what were Lipchitz’s thoughts while making this work. We know that he was very upset about members of his family who were still in Europe. Were they alive or had they been murdered? Clearly, he substituted Zeus for Hitler.

Prometheus represented forces for good, but Lipchitz limited his comments on this work to the relatively bland assertion that the theme was about “the fight of light against darkness..., education against ignorance.”¹⁹

But certainly like Rattner he had to have been filled with rage despite his amazing demonstration of self-control. Some of that rage emerges in *The Pilgrim* of 1942, a standing figure with leaves growing from all parts of its body and its stomach eviscerated. Lipchitz provided this work with two meanings. First, the leaves on the body represented his own sense of self-blooming after arriving in the United States, but those covering the figure’s head were meant to suggest “an exploding bomb.”²⁰ Lipchitz used basically the same figure in *The Prayer* of 1943, but with an entirely different meaning. One of his most obvious “Jewish” responses to the Holocaust, it was completed during the days of the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto. The figure is of an old, Jewish man wearing a prayer shawl and swinging a rooster over his head. He is involved with the prayer of expiation, *shlohn kapores*, said before Yom Kippur in which the rooster takes on one’s sins and is then put to death or given to somebody for food. Lipchitz later said that the figure was,

Everyman, every Jew who has to do this, who is asking for forgiveness. The figure is completely disemboweled....The entire subject is the Jewish people whom I thought of as the innocent victims of this horrible war....It had something to do with the horror I felt about Auschwitz and the other Nazi concentration camps.²¹ An unborn lamb, the survivor, lies in the figure’s open stomach.

As a person knowledgeable in traditional religious practices, Lipchitz no doubt hoped that Jews had by this time atoned for whatever sins they had committed and that God would bring them into a new season.

Lipchitz was not the only artist to use this motif. In the issue for October 9, 1943, during the week of Yom Kippur, William Gropper (1897–1977) made a cartoon for the Yiddish-language, Communist newspaper *Morgen Freiheit*, of a Soviet soldier twirling a rooster over his head. The Yiddish text reads: “This is the scapegoat. This is Hitler going to his death. A scapegoat for all of us.”

Information about the war was of course available everywhere, but in New York it was virtually impossible to miss news of the shocking reports of brutality to and murder of Jewish people as the months and years went by. Young Jewish artists who

became associated with abstract expressionism, no less than others, were just as dismayed and anxious and responded in their way to the events of the day. I want to consider only two here, the sculptor Seymour Lipton (1903–1986) and the painter Mark Rothko (1903–1970), but others would include Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, and Herbert Ferber. In general, all responded to the presence of the European surrealists who fled Europe for New York during the war and each responded in varying degree to the interest at the time in the philosophy of Nietzsche, the psychology of Karl Jung, the anthropology of figures such as Sir James Frazer, and to Greek tragedy.

During the war years, none, with the exception of an occasional piece by Seymour Lipton, explored explicitly Jewish subject matter, but their Jewish anxiety is clearly evident in their work and in their statements. Lipton, then a figurative sculptor, carved a torso of a bearded man in 1942, entitled *Prophet*, whose head is covered by a prayer shawl that sweeps down around his shoulders to become powerful forearms and hands. But by the middle of the decade, his work turned entirely abstract and he found inspiration in pre-Columbian death ritual sculptures and in the few references in Leviticus, Kings II, and in Jeremiah to Moloch to whom children were sacrificed. That is, Lipton's images suggested violence. His work sprouted spikes that might impale, and contours developed jagged edges. He said that in "meeting the challenge of contemporary life, it [inventing sculptural concepts] must in the main be provocative, searching, harsh, and tragic."²² His aim was to find "sculptural structures that stemmed from the deep animal makeup of man's being....The ferocity in these works relates to the biologic reality of man....They are tragic statements on the condition of man...." The *Moloch* series of 1945–1946 was based, he said, on "hybrids and mutants..., bestial forms possessed by mordent fury....Moloch, a god of Eastern human sacrifice, I probably felt, related to the war."²³

This kind of language speaks of an awareness of events taking place in Europe without calling them by name. A similar deflection of meaning can be observed in his later comments about his *Exodus* series of 1947, groups of small figures arranged on narrow, rectangular bases:

The Exodus pieces were part of a tragic mood of history and reality that has always concerned me...It is possible that Israeli history and emergence entered. I don't really know....The underlying mood is tragedy...[These pieces are a model for] a kind of wailing wall monument to human suffering."²⁴

Lipton did not really know if Israel was involved? Of course he did. Why call the series *Exodus* and invoke the Western Wall, a sacred place for Jewish people? Like Lipchitz, Chagall, and Rattner, Lipton, too, I believe, was tied up in emotional knots and repressed his true feelings for whatever reasons. But like them, his true feelings did work their way out through his art.

Rothko, who no doubt also repressed his feelings, sublimated these feelings through his concern with what he repeatedly termed terror and tragedy and he associated these feelings with ancient and primitive cultures. For example, he, along with Gottlieb and Newman, wrote a letter to the art editor of the *New York Times* in June 1943 stating, among other things, that the only valid subject matter was the tragic and the timeless.²⁵ He and Gottlieb claimed that the titles they used recalled known myths of antiquity because they were symbols of “man’s primitive fears and motivations, no matter in which land or what time....Those who think that the world today is more gentle and graceful than the primeval and predatory passions from which these myths spring, are either not aware of reality or do not wish to see it in art.”²⁶ That is a very elliptical way of saying that if you have read the newspapers recently, you will have read about the murders of, by 1943, at least two million Jews.

How does this work out in his art? Rothko both read in and read about ancient myths to find in them archetypal patterns that were common to the past and to the present. This was not unusual at the time as exemplified by James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Rothko’s mythic paintings were derived in great measure from Aeschylus’s plays, particularly *Agamemnon*, a play about the House of Atreus, a totally dysfunctional family that indulged in cannibalism as well as the murders of children, husbands, and parents over a few generations. Rothko could certainly find in the murders and mayhem in that play connections to contemporary events.

But there is something more—a Jewish angle that might also have prompted this interest. It was, perhaps still is, a Jewish habit to conflate present with past tragedies, of collapsing present time into past time as a way to connect terrible contemporary events, such as the pogroms wrought by crusaders in the eleventh century or the Holocaust in the twentieth, with biblical events, especially the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Present-day historians have commented upon this phenomenon.²⁷ Rothko might even have experienced this conflation in person. One of the several protest rallies held in Madison Square Garden in New York during the early 1940s, events that were well publicized in the local press, took place on July 21,

1942, the day before *Tisha b'Av*, a day of fasting set aside to commemorate the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. At this particular rally, Rabbi Stephen Wise, then president of the American Jewish Congress said the following:

Tomorrow will be the eve of *Tisha b'Av*, the destruction of the holy Temple in Jerusalem. Tonight we meet not only in sorrow over an ancient grief, but also [over] a limitless wrong of our own day, the Nazi threat to destroy the Jewish people.²⁸

Since Rothko, who had Orthodox schooling as a youth in what is now a town in Latvia, certainly had Jewish memory, it is plausible to assume that he automatically collapsed contemporary tragedy into ancient tragedy, but he did so into Greek rather than biblical or Jewish tragedy. The Greeks became his surrogate Israelites. In an era of widespread antisemitism in America and because of Rothko's desire to appear as a modern artist, he simply could not proclaim connections with ancient Israelite memories or archetypes, but could with ancient Greek ones, instead. It was an old Jewish habit. So the trials of King Agamemnon became his destroyed Temple in Jerusalem.

In the early and mid-1940s (dates are uncertain), Rothko made several paintings that have nebulous, diaphanous vertical and horizontal forms approximating human figures. These have been associated with Christian themes of mourning over the dead body of Jesus. But there are certain heretofore overlooked Jewish inflections that I feel make these works the most original responses by a Jewish artist in New York to the Holocaust as it was taking place. Two, called *Entombment*, suggest Pieta-like poses. All contain either obvious or near-obvious body parts and are about death and burial, a subject certainly on the mind of any Jewish person anywhere in the world at that time.

The question is: How does one respond to the increasingly devastating numbers of those murdered? These works, in part, were Rothko's response. Before considering them, I want to mention some traditional Jewish burial customs, which are not uniform, with material from the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, which are also not uniform, but in these sources there is basic agreement about essentials. For Jews, concern and respect for the dead body is of paramount importance. For example, a body is never left alone from the moment of death until burial and, with few exceptions, is buried on the day of death. This is done to respect the deceased and because some believe that since the soul suffers intense pain at death, it should not be upset by abandonment, for the

soul is aware of the body it is leaving. The soul should not witness the body being treated badly. Cremation is out of the question. The custom is to wash the body; dress it in *tachrichin*, simple handmade white linen garments, as well as a prayer shawl if it is a male; cover it with another shroud; and place the body in the prescribed way—laid out horizontally, arms and legs straight, not bent in any way, and the mouth closed. The soul goes to heaven, but there is disagreement about exactly when—immediately at burial, three days later, seven days later, or eleven months later. One reason prayers are said for a year after death is that many believe that the soul ascends and descends to and from heaven for that length of time, and after the soul realizes that the body no longer exists, it ascends after twelve months, never to return. So Jewish funerals and death rituals are as much concerned with the feelings for the deceased as for the living.

Among a series of related and untitled works Rothko painted in 1942 or 1943, there is one in which three crucified figures appear at the upper right. At the top left are heads, a bearded one might be Greek or Jewish. Beneath these heads there are body parts—hands and arms with stigmata—placed in horizontal boxes to the left of a vertical bar. These boxes could be the two arms of the horizontal bar of a cruciform placed on the left side of the vertical bar. In the lower left of the painting, there are dangling legs topped by male genitalia. The legs belong to people who might have died by hanging. The most Jewish elements here are the limbs in boxes, since for Jews all parts of a body must be buried together if possible, and in containers if they have been severed. For example, when a terrorist bomb explodes in Israel, specially trained people, the *khevra kedisha* or holy brotherhood, scrape body parts including finger nails from trees, cars, buildings, and sidewalks to ensure proper burial of and respect for the remains. Rothko's paintings in this context might suggest a crucified form or forms, torn asunder, and then reassembled for burial.

Another untitled painting, dated around 1943, is associated in the literature with figures in a Pieta. This work contains a centrally placed horizontal figure whose skinny, emaciated legs appear akimbo at the left, whose midsection is partially wrapped in a shroud, and whose head falls limply at the extreme right. It seems to be held by four vaguely painted vertical figures. The body is reminiscent of those photographs of starved and starving Jews in German-run ghettos. The two central vertical figures are not wearing halos above their heads as has been suggested in the literature, but skull caps that even the most liberal-minded Jews will wear at funerals. The skinny legs recall a cartoon by William Gropper in the *Morgen Freiheit* in December 1942 in

which a body has been dumped unceremoniously on a pile of other bodies arranged helter-skelter, none in the proper face-up burial position.

I do not know if Rothko was familiar with Gropper's work. But in both, none of the figures are obviously prepared for burial or attended to properly. I would like to believe that both Rothko and Gropper show in their work the desecration and defilement of dead bodies by the Germans and the fact they have been treated with utter disrespect.

The two entombments, by their names, are burial scenes. The earlier one, dated 1944, includes a defiled figure, very naked and with obviously bent arms and legs, lying on the lap or laps of one or two persons. The scratches of paint around the midsection of the corpse might possibly refer to an old Jewish custom of placing the body initially on a straw mat. The raised arms of the three-headed figure might symbolize wailing and crying.

The second entombment is dated 1946, after knowledge of the crematoria had been made public and after the release to the public of concentration and murder camp photographs. I do not know what Rothko believed, but there are those Jews who feel that if a Jew is not properly buried, then his or her soul will never find rest nor entirely leave the body. This will cause torment and pain throughout eternity. Such thoughts are applicable to this work. In it there is a horizontal figure lying either on straw or on a shroud. Five vertical figures are in attendance. In addition, a mysterious, floating, weightless form hovers around the heads of the figures. This form did not appear in the earlier paintings. Rothko scholars think this figure might have something to do with ascension and rebirth, but this is a Christian concept. An observer more familiar with Jewish traditions might think instead that Rothko meant this hovering form to symbolize the collective souls of the six million dead who will never find their places of rest, the souls of all of those who had been murdered and not buried properly, their bodies desecrated and defiled. Perhaps Rothko also meant to memorialize all those millions who will never be remembered in annual ritual observances of the dead, in the saying of kaddish, because their families had also been murdered. For an artist who sought the tragic and the timeless, this painting might very well be his most tragic of all, the single work completed in New York during the Holocaust that comes closest to memorializing those murdered, if such a thing is possible.

Not all Holocaust-inspired works are so mournful. There are at least two works by Jacques Lipchitz that allow the viewer to respond more positively to the events of

those years. One such work is *Miracle II*, completed in 1948 after the founding of the state of Israel. It shows the back of a praying figure wearing a prayer shawl. His body is united with a menorah that has flaming ends and with the Tables of the Law. Numbers written in Hebrew are on the Tables. Lipchitz said that this work was like a prayer of thanksgiving for him.²⁹ The other work, which might be the most bittersweet of all artistic responses to the Holocaust, is *Mother and Child*, completed in 1945. Its design is based on his memory of seeing a legless woman singing in front of a theater in Russia in 1935.³⁰ The sculpture is of a legless woman who is also missing her hands. On her back she carries a child. The work exists in several versions, but the most poignant is the one located on the grounds of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. For in that location it seems to be saying, "I have been maimed and bloodied, but I am here. I am in Israel, and I am carrying the future generations with me." Taken altogether, this and other works reveal that many paintings and sculptures were made between 1941 and 1945 and immediately after which did reflect the artists' ongoing concerns with the fate of the European Jewish community. It is a story that needs to be told because it involves some of the leading Jewish artists of the period and because their responses are so varied.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 137–40; and Edward Alexander, “Irving Howe and the Holocaust: Dilemmas of a Radical Jewish Intellectual,” *American Jewish History*, 88 (March 2000): 95–113.

² Her principal study is *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1993).

³ I am currently working on such a study. The present essay is based on my 2001 Monna and Otto Weinmann Annual Lecture presented at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁴ The most recent study covering these issues is Gulie Ne’eman Arad, *America, Its Jews and the Rise of Nazism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). See also the classic article by Kurt Lewin, “Self-Hatred Among Jews,” *Contemporary Jewish Record*, 4 (June 1941): 221–26.

⁵ Max Weber, “The Reminiscences of Max Weber,” Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, interview by Carol Gruber, 1958: 29–30. Subsequent material on Max Weber is taken from Matthew Baigell, “Max Weber’s Jewish Paintings,” *American Jewish History*, 88 (September 2000): 341–60.

⁶ *The Art Digest*, the magazine of record during these years often briefly mentioned the arrival of yet another artist or the confiscation of works in Jewish-owned art galleries.

⁷ See, for example, *PM*, 1 (February 5, 1941): 15–19; and *Morgen Freiheit*, 21 (February 19, 1942): 6.

⁸ There are a variety of sources for ascertaining what was published and when. Probably the most thorough account is Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust: 1933–1945* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

⁹ From the exhibition catalogue in the Ben-Zion Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm roll N69–122, frame 265.

¹⁰ *Modern Christs*, exh. cat., Puma Gallery, New York, April 6–26, 1942; and *The Art Digest*, 16 (April 15, 1942): 22.

¹¹ From Israel Shenker, “Art Editorial—Paris Dispatch 316,” March 1950, typescript, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, p. 3, cited in Ziva Amishai-Maisels, “The Artist as Refugee,” in Ezra Mendelsohn, ed., *Art and Its Uses; The Visual Image and Modern Jewish Society: Studies in Contemporary Jewry, an Annual*, VI (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 45.

¹² See especially “The ‘Struma’ Protest,” *Contemporary Jewish Record*, 5 (June 1942): 315.

¹³ Franz Meyer, *Marc Chagall: Life and Work* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1964), p. 16.

¹⁴ Allen Leepa, *Abraham Rattner* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1979), p. 42; and *Abraham Rattner*, exh. cat., February 14–March 8, 1970 (New York: Kennedy Galleries), n.p.

¹⁵ Susan J. Bandes, *Abraham Rattner: The Tampa Museum of Art Collection* (Tampa: The Tampa Museum of Art, 1997), p. 32n; and Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Abraham Rattner Papers, microfilm roll N681, frame 568.

¹⁶ E. M. Benson, “Seven Sculptors,” *The American Magazine of Art*, 28 (August 1935): 458.

¹⁷ Jacques Lipchitz with H. H. Arnason, *My Life in Sculpture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 151.

¹⁸ Lipchitz, *My Life*, p. 159.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 167.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 159.

²¹ Ibid., p. 163.

²² Albert Elsen, *Seymour Lipton* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1974), p. 22.

²³ Harris Rosenstein, “Lipton’s Code,” *Art News*, 70 (March 1971): 47.

²⁴ Elsen, *Seymour Lipton*, p. 27.

²⁵ The full text appears in John McCoubrey, ed., *American Art, 1700–1960* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 210–12.

²⁶ From “The Portrait and the Modern Artist,” 1943, full text in *Mark Rothko: 1903–1970* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1987), p. 80.

²⁷ See, for example, David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 13, 16; and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), p. 22.

²⁸ “In Sorrow and Protest,” *Congress Weekly*, 9 (August 1942): 4.

²⁹ Lipchitz, *My Life*, p. 180.

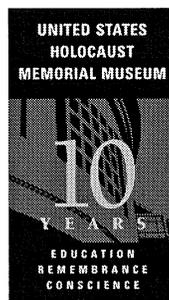
³⁰ Ibid., p. 148

MATTHEW E. BAIGELL has been a professor of art history at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, since 1968. Receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1965, Dr. Baigell is the author of fifteen books and nearly fifty published articles. His essay, "From Hester Street to Fifty-seventh Street: Jewish-American Artists in New York," was published in *Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York, 1900–1945*, which won the 1992 National Jewish Book Award in the Visual Arts. His first foray into the subject of Holocaust art in the United States was in 1983, with the publication in *Art in America* of his essay "Segal's Holocaust Memorial: An Interview with George Segal." Since then, Dr. Baigell has continued to explore Holocaust themes in the works of modern American artists. His "The Persistence of Holocaust Imagery in American Art" appeared in *Witness and Legacy: Contemporary Art about the Holocaust* (1995) and "Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust: The Responses of Two Generations" in the volume *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (2001). His book *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust* (1997) is the only work of its kind to examine the ways in which Jewish-American artists have used their work to respond to the Holocaust. Dr. Baigell found that beginning in the 1960s the Holocaust became a galvanizing theme that allowed these artists to express their Jewish identity.

The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum promotes the growth of the field of Holocaust studies, including the dissemination of scholarly output in the field. It also strives to facilitate the training of future generations of scholars specializing in the Holocaust.

Under the guidance of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the Center provides a fertile atmosphere for scholarly discourse and debate through research and publication projects, conferences, fellowship and visiting scholar opportunities, and a network of cooperative programs with universities and other institutions in the United States and abroad.

In furtherance of this program the Center has established a series of working and occasional papers prepared by scholars in history, political science, philosophy, religion, sociology, literature, psychology, and other disciplines. Selected from Center-sponsored lectures and conferences, or the result of other activities related to the Center's mission, these publications are designed to make this research available in a timely fashion to other researchers and to the general public.



CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW • Washington, DC 20024-2126 • www.ushmm.org