

From the Editors

Mira Sucharov & Chaya Halberstam



A look back through the archives of *AJS Perspectives* is also an encounter with hundreds of images: primary source photographs, maps, portraits of Jewish thinkers. As the magazine evolved, images grew in prominence, often complementing (rather than directly illustrating) the research articles. In the fall of 2017, *AJS Perspectives* burst into full color. Art and illustrations began to be chosen with greater care, and the occasional issue would showcase a featured artist. As editors who specialize in texts and politics, we wanted to achieve as high a standard for the visual component of *Perspectives* as we had managed with the written one.

In the spring of 2020, we appealed to art historian Samantha Baskind, a longtime member of the *Perspectives* editorial board, for help. What began as an afterthought—finding some decent images (that weren't too expensive!) to round out the issue—grew into a vital part of the publication. Working with Samantha in her newly created role as Art Editor, we opened up a Call for Art, which was circulated in contemporary Jewish art circles, and we began to showcase original Jewish art alongside original Jewish Studies scholarship. For her last issue before Samantha passes the baton to Douglas Rosenberg, who will succeed Samantha as Art Editor, we wanted to honor her hard work and expertise and address a long-neglected subfield within Jewish Studies (and *AJS Perspectives*) by bringing her on as a full co-editor for the current issue: the Art Issue.

We've aimed to showcase art and artists through a variety of formats in this issue. We include original art and commentary by contemporary Jewish artists working across an array of visual media, analyses of

particular Jewish artworks (both historical and current) by Jewish Studies scholars in a range of disciplines, and scholar-artist collaborations on themes relevant to the field. We've also included discussions of how to teach Jewish art, including via the inaugural column called Teaching with Film and Media (curated by Olga Gershenson). Finally, scholar-artists reflect on the role of artistic production in their professional lives.

In the pages that follow, we are thrilled to have brought together a dynamic mix of artists and scholars working in studio arts, art history, and material culture. The themes that emerge are rich and varied—biblical and talmudic motifs, family and memory, Holocaust trauma and survival, migration and Jewish identity, feminism and Zionism, medieval Judaism, Yiddish, architecture, race, assimilation, and Jewish death and dying: the full gamut of Jewish experience, through a visual lens.

Chaya Halberstam & Mira Sucharov,
Editors

Let's look at the contemporary moment. The flourishing of Jewish art on American soil is tremendously exciting. Yona Verwer's efforts with the Jewish Art Salon have given Jewish artists a venue to discuss and display their art. Works by some of those esteemed artists are featured in the pages that follow, as is an essay by Verwer about the Salon. Curator Jennifer McComas is currently reinstalling the European and American galleries at Indiana University's Eskenazi Museum of Art, fruitfully integrating works by Jewish artists rather than segregating them into separate galleries—or banishing them to storage. In doing so, she recognizes their output as integral to the regions where they lived rather than ghettoizing their art, and points to



Samantha Baskind
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the artists' long-ignored religiocultural identities. In her essay, McComas explains one reason that Jewish art has been ignored for so long: Western art is typically understood as a product of national "schools," and its imagery was created within a dominant Christian society.

Jewish art cannot be understood within this rubric; Jews stand outside Western, Christian-based norms by virtue of their (often-marginalized) religion and because of their historic status as a diasporic people. So, too, the old canard about Jewish image-phobia has died hard. Then there is also the complicated question of where Israeli art fits into the conversation about Jewish art, the subject of Susan Fraiman's pedagogical contribution.

Archie Rand is not as optimistic. As one of the leading progenitors of Jewish art, he has at times suffered at the hand of art dealers and critics. Rand sees art with a Jewish position as an aesthetic liability. In his moving essay in this issue he voices concern about excommunication from the scholarly discourse because, as he's experienced firsthand, there's a role artists need to assume to assimilate into American art and culture. That role is not Jewish and surely not biblically based; although the subject is a recurrent theme in contemporary Jewish art, it has been deemed passé in the postmodern era.

But there's an artistic and scholarly effort underway at this crucial moment in the academy and the art world to expand and complicate the canon of art and to legitimize subfields of art history. In light of today's robust scholarship on minorities and their cultural production, the time is right to look carefully at (and celebrate) Jewish art—ancient and new.

And so this issue of *Perspectives*, the first of its kind, fleshes out connections between the Jewish experience and cultural representations.

Like literature, which certainly is never viewed merely through prose plot summaries or reduced to authors' messages, artworks are analyzed here for their pictorial purposes and in dialogue with visual traditions. Art cannot be reduced to extensions of the biographies of their producers or viewed at face value as illustrations. Indeed, the authors in this issue make art their central focus by privileging the visual properties of their objects of inquiry and closely decoding the meanings conveyed through those visual properties in concert, of course, with historical context.

Yes, Jews have long been dubbed "The People of the Book" and Jewish Studies as a discipline has indeed been primarily text oriented. Yet there is a different kind of Jewish text that has been mostly ignored—art—and with this issue we invite readers to think about how to draw intellectual sustenance from cross-disciplinary exchange by considering the vital possibilities of Jewish artistic culture. By "looking" Jewish.

Samantha Baskind,
Art Editor and Guest Co-Editor

*Samantha's headshot photo was taken by Bachrach Photographers, founded in 1868, which has been operated for over a century by four generations of a Jewish family, and is recognized as one of the oldest continuously operated portrait studios in the world. A Bachrach photographed every president from Lincoln to George H.W. Bush and immortalized hundreds of other American luminaries, including Thomas Edison, Amelia Earhart, and Hank Aaron.