

**Mendelsohn, Amitai**

*Behold the Man—Jesus in Israeli Art*. Jerusalem: Israel Museum, Jerusalem and the Magnes Press, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2017. Pp. 312 + 210 color illustrations. \$40.00 cloth.

The book *Behold the Man—Jesus in Israeli Art* was published to coincide with the exhibition of the same name at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. It is the fruit of the research and doctoral dissertation by Senior Curator and Head of the Department of Israeli Art at the museum, Amitai Mendelsohn. The book and the exhibition consider Jewish European artists from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and Israeli artists active in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who use imagery from the repertoire of Christian art. The book opens with two introductory chapters that discuss the image of Jesus and modern Jewish thought and Zionist philosophy and the image of Jesus in Hebrew poetry and literature. The book's major contributions to the literature are its broad survey of Jewish artists of the past and Israeli artists past and present who have made use of Christian imagery and its examination of the artworks in light of the cultures within which the artists worked.

Through the works of about forty artists from the late nineteenth century to the present, Mendelsohn demonstrates how Jewish and Israeli art engaged almost obsessively with the image of Jesus. Following in the footsteps of scholars who preceded him (most outstanding is Prof. Ziva Amishai-Maisels), Mendelsohn shows how Jewish European artists, members of a minority among the Christian majority, changed the meaning of the Christian Jesus by depicting Him as a Jew. Thus, similar to modern Jewish thinkers in Europe as well as artists such as Maurycy Gottlieb (1856–1879) and Max Liebermann (1847–1935), they proposed a liberal vision of the brotherhood of religions and nations. The book and the exhibition present, among others, the monumental work by Gottlieb *Jesus Before His Judges* (1877–1879) in which Jesus is depicted wrapped in a tallit (Jewish prayer shawl). Mendelsohn quotes his father, a scholar of modern Jewish history who wrote a book on Gottlieb, hypothesizing that the painter wanted to ridicule the accusation against the Jews as the killers of Jesus, since Jesus himself was a Jew (136). In contrast, European artists such as Mark Antokolsky (1843–1902) and Marc Chagall (1887–1985) who depicted Jesus as a suffering, persecuted Jew, offered a harsh critique of the Church and the antisemitic Christian believer, as if to say that anti-Semitism is a repeated act of crucifying the Jewish Jesus. Mendelsohn notes that Zionist historiography tended to ignore the Christian contribution to Zionism and convincingly shows how prominent Zionist artists such as Ephraim Moshe Lilien (1984–1925) and later Reuven Rubin (1893–1974) saw Jesus and his resurrection as a symbol of the Zionist revival in Israel.

The sections of the exhibition and the book devoted to early Israeli painters present additional references to Christian iconography. Artists such as Rubin and Moshe Castel (1909–1991) considered Jesus as the image of the lone artist struggling against the establishment (such as Van Gogh and Gauguin, their predecessors). Other artists such as Igal Tumarkin (b. 1933) and Moshe Gershuni (b. 1936) used Christian iconography touching upon the forbidden, the unclean, and the untouchable in works challenging the establishment and “normative ‘Israeli-ness.’”

Mendelsohn describes the reasons why European Jewish artists engaged in the image of Jesus: the fight against anti-Semitism, which was a significant part of Christianity for generations; the representation of Jewish suffering; the desire to present universalism as a value arising from Judaism; and more. According to Mendelsohn (following the scholars who preceded him), the Jewish artists of the modern era created new meaning for the image of Jesus in the spirit of the Enlightenment, which attempted to “adopt” the Jewish Jesus to create a modern Judaism that was integrated into the new space that Europe was proposing: a new world of moderation, objectivity, and enlightened intellectualism. The image of Jesus was, as they saw it, a tool for integrating into the new world while remaining Jewish. However, Mendelsohn justifiably emphasizes that first and foremost, the Jewish artists had a burning desire to belong to the artistic and cultural environment surrounding them.

Despite the high quality of the research, *Behold the Man* does not seek to overturn the accepted outlook; in fact, both the book and the exhibition are quite conservative. The Israeli artists whose works are presented and discussed form part of the Israeli art canon, which the Israel Museum played no small part in restructuring. Thus, the exhibition and the book replicate the hegemonic narrative of Israeli art, primarily based on male, Ashkenazi, and secular artists. Without a doubt, it would have been possible to present many more women artists who made use of Christian motifs in their work throughout the history of Israeli art, such as Chana Orloff (1888–1968), Batya Apollo (b. 1946), Ruth Schloss (1922–2013), and more. The secularist outlook at the foundation of the exhibition is a more complex subject. The argument that religious artists did not engage in the figure of the crucified Jesus is a commonly accepted stereotype. Art historian Naomi Meiri-Dann has in this context pointed to “a certain difficulty that local artists (mostly ‘religious’) feel, and to which the local art establishment responds.” But this is an erroneous argument: many religious Jewish artists make use of Christian iconography, and the exhibition and the book do nothing to break down the prevalent misconception.

Mendelsohn has mainly adhered to iconographic and iconological methodology and does not examine the narrative that he presents in the light of exist-

ing theories. As I see it, examining the engagement of Jewish and Israeli artists in Christianity would benefit from the distinction made by German sociologist Ulrich Beck who wrote about the contemporary engagement in religion. He opens his book *A God of One's Own* with an explanation of the concept coined by Virginia Woolf, "a room of one's own." He states that a woman who can close the door behind her has the opportunity to break down a consensus, explaining that a lock on the door means the freedom to develop ideas of one's own. Beck continues his argument describing the collapse of modern secularism, and states that religion now has a broader hold, even among modern people, because one can allow oneself to create "a God of one's own" in a way that is compatible with religious ideas as well as a modern "secular" outlook. In light of this understanding we may think about the Jewish artists represented in the exhibition and discussed in the book as artists active in a creative space constituting for them "a room of one's own" enabling them to create a kind of "religion of one's own," which is actually a hybrid, a new graft of elements that seem on the surface to be impossible to combine. These artists do not surrender to the dichotomy that distinguishes between Judaism and Christianity.

The research and curatorship of Mendelsohn continue a high-quality trajectory which has characterized the Israel Museum for years. The Museum exhibits important historical research-based exhibitions clearly connecting museological curatorship with academic-historical research. The Museum's critics often argue that it prefers to research and examine culture over creating it in practice. But this distinction is not at all unambiguous. The exhibition "Behold the Man" opened just before the western date of Christmas during the stormy discourse in Israel on exhibiting "Christian symbols" in the public sphere. The ethnocentrism and cultural chauvinism that characterized the arguments of those objecting to displaying Christmas trees in public spaces in Israel only increase the importance of this exhibition. It is not only an act of research and a study of culture, but the exhibition also actively creates culture. Ironically, the persuasive and covert connection that Mendelsohn creates between Jewish European art of the past and Zionist art and contemporary Israeli art becomes more solid precisely through the clearly non-Jewish theme: the figure of the Christian Jesus.

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