The Burgeoning World of Jewish Art

By Isa Aron

Potential for the Jewish School

The notion that the fine arts should form an integral part of the educational enterprise is by no means a new one. In 1948 Herbert Read published the now classic *Education Through Art,* in which he argued both cogently and eloquently that artistry and a sense of the aesthetic is involved in all the activities towards which we educate, and should, therefore, constitute a cornerstone of our educational system[1]. Since Read's time educational philosophers such as Elliot Eisner[2], Maxine Greene[3], and Harry Broudy[4], have added their own persuasive arguments for aesthetic education, and have been involved in various curricular projects informed by their philosophical outlook.

Despite this, the majority of the American educational establishment continues to treat the arts as a "frill." Art teachers are among the first to be fired in response to budget cuts; art programs are among the first to be eliminated when a "back to basics" groundswell begins.

The situation is not fundamentally different in Jewish education. Despite the statements of such influential thinkers as Abraham Joshua Heschel[5] and Mordecai Kaplan[6] regarding the centrality of the arts in Jewish life, the vast majority of Jewish schools do not incorporate Jewish art into their curriculum in any serious way. At the pre-school and primary level there are, of course, the requisite arts-and-crafts projects, but this relegation of art to the realm of young children simply reinforces the image of art education as an entertaining but trivial "filler."

As Maxine Greene noted in the 1981 NSSE Yearbook,[3] it is particularly ironic that a large number of art programs in the schools have been eliminated during the past five years, because these years have seen a remarkable resurgence of interest in art. Attendance at art museums throughout the nation has increased dramatically. Attempts by the current administration to cut the budgets of the National Ednowment of the Arts and the Institute of Museum Services have been thwarted by Congress. And business is booming at art galleries and auction houses.

The growing popularity of the arts in the society at large has been reflected in the Jewish community as well. In the mid-1960's the two extant Jewish museums began to expand their operations, and new museums were created in several cities. Today there are seven Jewish museums throughout the country; the audiences and activities of these museums have increased exponentially in the past five years. Art galleries in synagogues and community centers have proliferated. Art fairs have become annual events, and the quality of the art exhibited at these fairs has improved; a growing number of artists are creating new Jewish ceremonial art, and/or turning out fine art which explores Jewish themes.

Why should the Jewish educator be concerned with such a seemingly esoteric field as art? How can one justify adding art as both an activity and a subject matter to an already over-crowded curriculum, to compete with other key elements of Jewish life in a period of instruction that is already much too short? How can Jewish art become a serious concern in the curriculum of the Jewish school?

A fully articulated answer to these questions, which would draw upon the writings of Read, Heschel, Kaplan and others, and explore their implications for Jewish education in today's world, is a formidable task, and would make an important contribution. In this article I will try to answer these questions in a more modest fashion, generalizing from my own experience as coordinator of museum education at the Hebrew Union College Skirball Museum[7]. I will make a case for incorporating the fine arts into Jewish education in a very specific way, a way that differs from "aesthetic education" (whose aim is to sensitize students to the aesthetic dimensions of all experience), "art education" (whose aim is to impart artistic skills), and "art appreciation" (which typically involves the teaching of art history), but which includes elements from each of these fields.

The approach I am advocating involves the use of fine art as an opportunity, a means, and a resource for elucidating and exploring the Jewish tradition. It includes stimulating aesthetic appreciation, doing art, and teaching specific bits of information, but only insofar as these activities enrich our understanding and sense of connection with the past, present, and future of the Jewish people. In the following section of this article I will argue that students in Jewish schools should be exposed to Jewish works of art because these works are powerful communicators of values and ideas, and because these works afford unique opportunities for discovery learning. In the final section I will sketch the contours of a possible strategy for finding appropriate works of art and utilizing them to enhance the curriculum, outlining the steps by which to actualize their enormous educational potential.

Why Bring Art Into the Curriculum of the Jewish School?

A good work of art engages the viewer in a very special way. Its appeal is direct and concrete. It forges a connection between the creator and the viewer, and between viewers in this era and those in previous eras. Although this connection is difficult to articulate in words, it is one which everyone has experienced at some time or another. Consider the Torah scroll, for example: When it is taken out of the Ark, it draws our attention like a magnet. Upon closer examination, one cannot help but get lost, if only for a moment, in the beauty of the letters. The Torah scroll links Jews to the Torah and to one another in a way that differs from the link created by studying its content. Without diminishing in any way the value of studying the text, one can say that the art of the *sofer* and the art of

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dressing the Torah have an importance of their own. Why else would we maintain the tradition of the written scroll long after the invention of printing?

Consider another example, that of a photograph by Roman Vishniac of the Cracow shtetl. One can study all about the shtetl without using pictures, through literature, music, and historical accounts. But the experience of seeing the photograph is special. It communicates something beyond words; it gives us a different kind of knowledge and a different kind of feeling.

The objects in a museum — be they archeological artifacts, historical mementos, ceremonial objects, artworks of another time and place, or artworks of our own time and place — are witnesses to another era, another culture, another person's creativity. Their silent mystery intrigues us — if only they could talk, imagine what they could reveal! Objects carry a charisma of their own, which can, at times, be more direct and more powerful than an idea or a written statement.

Beyond the direct and emotional power of art to communicate, there is a second reason why educators may wish to utilize art. Art objects, particularly those from other times and other places, are bearers of a great deal of information that may not be derived from other sources. If one knows how to find and decode the clues, one can learn many things about the person who created the object, and the culture in which he or she lived. Viewed in this way, art objects function as primary sources. Rather than learning about a Jewish community of another era through a textbook, we can examine for ourselves the remains of that community's material culture. Besides merely listening to what people have said and written about their values and beliefs, we can look for evidence of what was (or is) important to them in their material culture.

As an example of the value of art objects as primary sources, let us imagine an illuminated *ketubah* created in Italy in the 18th century. This *ketubah* is filled with imagery, and at first one can only be overwhelmed by its sheer beauty. With the exception of a margin around the text itself, every available space on this large manuscript is covered by an intricate floral motif, with birds, pomegranates, a crown, and an elaborate geometric design peeking through the vines. Looking closely, one sees images of the accouterments of Solomon's Temple — the seven branched menorah, the showbread table, the ark of the covenant, and the laver used by the *kohanim.* Looking even more closely, one sees some surprises: all twelve symbols of the zodiac, and two nude angels flanking what seems to be a deer in a basket. These observations form the basis of an inquiry: Why did the couple put these decorations on their marriage contract? What is the significance of the deer and the basket? Visual references to the Temple are evidence of the couple's strong Jewish commitment, but what of the very lifelike figures of angels? Decoding these symbols and trying to recover their original meaning, comparing this document to others and to other Italian art of the same period, can tell us a great deal about the Jews of Italy, and about the ways in which they retained core elements of the Jewish tradition while adapting many of the styles and mores of Italian society.

Using Art in the Jewish School

The Jewish educator who wishes to harness the power of art to enrich the curriculum might begin by surveying the resources at his or her disposal. Is there a Jewish museum in your city? Does the local art museum have a collection of Judaica? What objects or exhibits are available at a nearby synagogue or JCC? Are there any private collectors in the area? What about local artists? It is hard to imagine that anyone could not answer affirmatively to some of these questions, but even if this is not the case, all is not lost. Many museums, Federations and art galleries circulate travelling exhibits at surprisingly low cost; a directory of such exhibits has been published by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture[8].

Imagine, now, that you have found a particular exhibit or a particular collection of objects that you would like to use. Your next step, regardless of the setting and regardless of the type of objects, is to spend some time with the works themselves, absorbing their beauty and trying to glean their message. Try to articulate the ideas and images that the works arouse, the questions and issues they raise. Notice which objects appeal to you in particular, and which anger or puzzle you. Try to resist the temptation to refer immediately to the opinion of the "experts"; trust yourself to arrive at a first interpretation independently.

Having gotten your bearings, you are now ready to add to your own interpretation the views of others. The text panels, catalogues and study guides that come with an exhibit are a good place to begin; the curator of the exhibition, the collector, and the artists themselves (assuming they are still alive) will be able to supply additional information and references. You will probably find divergent and even opposing answers to your questions. The open-ness of a work of art to a variety of interpretations is what gives it enduring value to a wide audience; it also provides a wonderful opportunity for an educator to utilize the techniques of discovery learning.

After you have explored a variety of interpretations, issues, and concerns, it's time to consider your goals and objectives. What themes in a particular exhibit seem especially relevant or powerful? What strikes you as particularly interesting and important about a group of objects? Which pieces of information would you like your students to retain? At this point an important caveat is in order. Most exhibits and/or collections of objects can serve as windows to a wide array of themes which can be expanded upon by massive amounts of information, and the natural temptation for the educator is to touch upon every possible theme, to raise all of the relevant issues, and to transmit all the information that he or she has acquired. This temptation must be resisted, for it results in tours and programs that are like "running commentaries," and may overwhelm or even bore the audience.

If one starts from the vantage point of the viewer, on the other hand, it is clear that he or she can only absorb so much, and that a museum tour or a lesson using objects ought to be conceptualized in terms of a limited number of interrelated objectives. The challenge of working with art and artifacts is to select from among a long list of possible themes, subjects, issues, and facts related to the objects at hand a smaller number of objectives appropriate to the audience in question, and to devise a series of activities which would aid the visitor in meeting

these objectives. Those fortunate enough to be located in an area in which there is a Jewish museum will find that museum's education department helpful in thinking through the objectives of a visit; regardless of whether you can find professional assistance, it is useful to have a friend or colleague with whom to brainstorm.

Having established, at least tentatively, a set of objectives, one needs to turn back to the rest of the curriculum and see where these objectives fit in. You may find that a particular travelling exhibit fits perfectly with the unit of study of a particular grade. Other exhibits or collections of objects may be appropriate for many different grade levels, though the program would, of course, have to be different. A third possibility is that an exhibit doesn't seem to fit in the curriculum at all; in this case, you may decide to pass up the exhibit, or you may decide that it is important enough to be added on its own.

Consider next the kind of preparation your students (both children and adults) will need in order to get the most out of their encounter with the objects. In some instances the necessary orientation or introduction can be done upon reaching the museum or just prior to viewing the objects; in others one or more preparatory sessions in the classroom may help set the groundwork for a full appreciation of the objects. At the Skirball Museum we created a number of kits which are taught by the classroom teacher in advance of a museum visit. Although these kits are rather bulky, and can only be loaned out in the Los Angeles area, the teachers' guides, which are available from the museum, can give a teacher a good idea of the kinds of materials and activities that might be created. Another factor to consider are followup activities; for example, a project favored by many of the teachers who have visited the Skirball Museum is the creation of some sort of classroom museum[9].

One objective deemed important by many museum educators is to have their students look closely at the objects on display, to think about their function, style, composition, and/or imagery, and to compare them to one another. A technique that I have found particularly useful in this regard is the museum "hunt" or "looking guide," which asks the viewer a set of questions about the object. These questions focus the person's attention on details he or she might otherwise miss, and invite speculation on questions of interpretation. Arranged in proper sequence, these questions can help the viewer discern the important issues and concerns on his or her own. Museum "hunts" have the added advantage of allowing people to work independently or in small groups, and thereby get a close look at the objects. When "hunts" are given to families in an exhibit, they encourage discussion between parents and children. They carry a subtle but important message: A museum is not a place to be silent, somber, and awed, or to defer to someone else's opinion; rather, it is a place to see for yourself, to engage in conversation, to ask and answer questions, and to arrive at your own conclusions.

A second technique which is used at the Skirball Museum whenever possible is the inclusion of a "hands on" activity, either in the gallery itself, or in an adjacent classroom. This sort of activity may involve a craft project, such as trying out a particular technique used by an artist, or designing a ceremonial object which might reflect the viewer's own milieu and values. Such projects should be significantly different from the sort of projects that are normally done at school or camp, either because they are linked directly to the art on exhibit, or because they involve the use of unusual and especially fine materials. For many years archeology tours at the Skirball Museum have included a simulated dig which allows visitors to handle ancient pottery shards and replicas of artifacts on exhibit. In connection with exhibits of contemporary art it is sometimes possible to include a fragment or a work in progress which visitors may touch. Some museums have used mimes or actors as tour guides. All of these activities develop a stronger connection between the viewer and the object, by incorporating some of the other senses into the visual experience.

Whatever techniques or activities you decide to try, it is important not to expect that all, or even most, will succeed at first. As in all new settings and subject areas it takes a while to arrive at routines that feel comfortable and appropriate to the objectives. At the Skirball Museum the education department is continually refining and even discarding old ideas, and experimenting with new ones.

Educators are often understandably resistant to introducing an unfamiliar object into the classroom, or teaching in a strange setting. Both teachers and students may find their first experience of looking closely at art slightly intimidating. Visual literacy is, unfortunately, a skill that is largely undeveloped in many people. My hope is that this article will inspire you to make an initial attempt to enter into this new but exciting territory. In time, I expect you will find the use of art in the classroom as emotionally rewarding and intellectually stimulating as I have.

NOTES

1. Herbert Read. *Education Through Art.* Pantheon Books, 1948.
2. Elliot Eisner. *The Educational Imagination,* chapter 8. Macmillan, 1979. See also *Teaching Art to the Young: A Curriculum Development Project in Art Education,* Stanford University, School of Education, 1969.
3. Maxine Greene. "Aesthetic Literacy in General Education." In Jonas Soltis, editor, *Philosophy and Education: 80th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education,* pages 115-141. University of Chicago Press, 1981.
4. Harry S. Broudy. "Preparing Teachers of Aesthetic Education." In *Teacher Education for Aesthetic Education: A Progress Report.* CEMREL, St. Louis, Mo., 1972.
5. Abraham Joshua Heschel. "Symbolism and Jewish Faith." In F. Ernest Johnson, editor, *Religious Symbolism.* Port Washington, N.Y., 1969.
6. Mordecai Kaplan. *Judaism as a Civilization,* pages 202-205. Jewish Publication Society, 1981 (originally published in 1934).

7. Many of the ideas expressed in this article have evolved from a six-year collaboration with a number of friends and colleagues at the Skirball Museum and the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, including Nancy Berman, Bill Cutter, Gail Dorph, Grace Grossman, and Sara Lee. I wish to thank them for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.

8. This directory may be obtained by writing to the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, 122 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10017.
9. The teachers' guides and other information on the M.U.S.E. Project may be obtained by writing to the Department of Education, H.U.C. Skirball Museum, 3077 University Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90007.

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