

MODERN ERA

Matthew Baigell. *Social Concern and Left Politics in Jewish American Art 1880–1940*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015. 262 pp.
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Matthew Baigell's *Social Concern and Left Politics in Jewish American Art 1880–1940* is a recent addition to the Syracuse University Press series, Judaic Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art. The current volume follows, but actually forms a prequel of sorts to Baigell's 2006 *American Artists, Jewish Images*, also in this series, where the author focused on more well-known, mostly mid- to late twentieth-century Jewish American artists. Here, with the exception of a forward-looking conclusion, Baigell chiefly treats an earlier group of artists, beginning during the late nineteenth century with the strong wave of Jewish immigration into the United States and stopping as World War II begins. The majority of illustrations (including only one by a woman) are from popular media, comprising in large part prints and cartoons from period magazines and newspapers. As a result, the author acknowledges, many images are unfortunately less than stellar in reproduction quality.

Baigell's introduction explains that this book "offers a collection of related essays about the conflation of Jewish memories, religious customs, and practices with left-wing politics as these relate to Jews from 1880–1940" (9). Training his lens on the graphic media provides a more direct form of commentary and visual editorializing. Baigell frames his thesis by quoting labor sociologist Moses Rischin's discussion of a 1927 *Menorah Journal* article, where Milton Hindus (mistakenly called Maurice in the bibliography) explained the Jewish radical of his day: "Many of his Hebraic beliefs and practices which had greatly influenced his thinking, many old Jewish traditions which had become part of his everyday psychology, fitted splendidly into the theoretical framework of ... radical causes" ("The Jew as Radical," August 1927, 372). "For most Jewish socialists, although unaware of it," Rischin observed in *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962, p. 166), "socialism was Judaism secularized." Although Baigell's book title implies a wider demographic, his arguments and examples are also primarily New York-centric. For instance, in listing Jewish artists who created antilynching imagery, Philip Guston, who worked on such themes in mid-1930s Los Angeles, is a glaring omission.

The fight against antisemitism is a key thread linking Baigell's five chapter essays. Tracing the intertwined trajectory of leftist impulses and imagery in Jewish visual production, he begins with late nineteenth-century eastern European immigrants' embrace of the biblical roots of US moral and ethical ideals embodied in the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. These, Baigell points out, became conflated with *tzedakah* in pre-World War I illustrations found in such periodicals as *Der groyser kundes* and *Yiddisher immigrant*, as well as on popular postcards sent back to the Old Country or to each other by newly minted Americans. Although Baigell, an emeritus Rutgers art history professor, includes

little discussion of their aesthetic value, interesting comparison is made between Jewish depictions of New York ghetto life and the more famous photographs of Jacob Riis, c. 1890, considered by many implicitly antisemitic.

By the 1920s, Baigell demonstrates, numerous Jews living in this country (again more specifically in New York) began to interpolate the Judaic roots of American democracy with their own socialist beliefs, conflating religion and left-wing politics. Concern for the plight of the working classes came into clearer focus through the work of the Educational Alliance Art School and Peoples Art Guild, predecessors to WPA government art programs and the Communist Party-sponsored John Reed clubs of the following decade. In light of their experience or knowledge of pogroms, Jews of the era reviled the Romanov tsar and many fervently believed that the Bolsheviks' apparent commitment to equality would erase antisemitism if spread worldwide. Baigell discusses the ensuing attraction of cadres of Jewish artists to Soviet Communism, as well as the impact of the rise of Hitler, which, before his 1939 pact with Stalin, further enlarged the attraction of the Communist Party for intellectual and creative urban American Jews.

Artists such as William Gropper and Jacob Burck, also discussed by other authors, including Helen Langa, in *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), are represented by Baigell with examples more critical of Nazi anti-Jewish policies. For instance, whereas Langa (161–62) mentions responses to antisemitism in Louis Lozowick's 1936 *Lynching* lithograph that incorporates his own self-portrait, she does not present sustained focus on Jewish printmakers' understanding of the Germans' *Judenrein* policies. Baigell's research in the Archives of American Art, the Taiment Library, and other specifically Jewish resources uncovered additionally explicit samples, like William Gropper's cover for the Communist monthly *Der hamer* in February 1935. Gropper depicted a menacing seven-headed Hydra inscribed with swastikas and labeled with Hebrew letters sounding out "hoirst," either a reference to the Nazi Party's anthem, the "Horst wessel lied," or an ironically Yiddish-inflected pronunciation of the last name of antisemitic publisher William Randolph Hearst (97–98).

The two primary chapters of *Social Concern and Left Politics in Art* are devoted to the 1930s, the first of which correlates Jewish artistic responses to "Soviet Communism, Nazi Germany and American Anti-Semitism." Baigell explains that a basic issue to be overcome during the early years of the Depression was "whether or how a revolutionary or proletarian art could develop in a country still committed to capitalism and where artists, even if from working-class families, did not necessarily consider themselves to be proletarians" (107–8). This led to friction in regard to following Communist Party dictates. Many New York artists, as a result, identified with Trotsky's cultural point of view, more open-ended and less prescriptive than Lenin's or Stalin's emphasis on Socialist Realism. Baigell also analyzes the ideas and philosophical concerns of influential Socialist art historian and critic Meyer Schapiro, and the religiously and politically uncommitted Jewish critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, both closely connected with the rise of abstract expressionism. Artists associated

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with this style (many, like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Adolph Gottlieb, were Jewish) reacted against totalitarian calls to heroize and embody the new world order, rejecting political and/or humanitarian dictates in favor of American (bourgeois?) freedom and individualism. Although this subject has been thoroughly mined by art historians, including Baigell, he provides an inflection here that fits with his arguments' trajectory.

By the early 1940s, Baigell explains, Jewish artists needed to figure out how to reconcile their sense of moral obligation (*tikkun olam*) with politically inspired universalism. Subsequently, as Greenberg's writings indicate, in light of the failure of socialism to prevent war and the Holocaust, many creative Jews in this country began experiencing an estrangement and alienation diametrically opposed to turn-of-the-century immigrants' embrace of American ideals. Rather than socially useful, Jewish artists such as Gottlieb often felt socially irrelevant. Baigell cites exceptions, like Ben Shahn, who continued to express a more optimistic spiritual presence, but maintains that it would not be until the generation born in the 1930s and coming to maturity in the 1970s (a period of minimal antisemitism and great pride in Israel's war successes) that Jewish American artists would begin to reexplore their heritage for significant subjects. This, he explains, is the subject for another book.

Matthew Baigell's *Social Concern and Leftist Politics in Jewish American Art 1880–1940* compactly summarizes the political and artistic currents of this critical period, and, despite their limitations, the atypical visual examples he unearthed help to expand our understanding of how, particularly for so many East Coast Jewish artists, cultural and political imperatives in this era became inextricably intertwined. History buffs, students, and Jewish studies scholars will likely find it a useful reference and guide.

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Michael Berkowitz. *Jews and Photography in Britain*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. 358 pp.
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The cover of Michael Berkowitz's book features a photograph of two men strolling down shallow steps in a garden. With a walking cane in his right hand, one man is instantly recognizable. Smoking his trademark cigar, Winston Churchill wears a double-breasted overcoat and homburg. The other man—younger, hatless and coatless, nattily attired in a three-piece suit—appears to be chatting with Churchill. Who is he and how does he come to be on such intimate terms with the extraordinarily influential British prime minister?

Those are the questions—among others—that Berkowitz seeks to answer in *Jews and Photography in Britain*. In fact, the cover photo aptly illustrates one