

BEHOLD THE MAN: JESUS IN ISRAELI ART by Amitai Mendelsohn.
Trans. Simon Montagu, Carol Sutherland, and Richard Flantz. Jerusalem:
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The past decade has seen a wealth of new scholarship on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, as well as Jewish culture and its engagement with Christian iconography. Until now, those studies have largely focused on texts: from Peter Schaefer's and Daniel Boyarin's work on ancient Jewish and Christian texts and the entangled relationship of Judaism with early Christianity, to the modern scholars – including Neta Stahl and Matthew Hoffman – who have explored Jewish philosophical and literary engagement with Jesus and Christianity. Some of these scholars, along with the Israeli art historian Ziva Amishai-Maisels, have also touched on Christological influences in Jewish visual culture. However, until now there has been no attempt to create a comprehensive account of Christian imagery in modern Jewish art or to broadly explore the cultural relationship between Jewish artists and Christian iconography, particularly the figure of Jesus.

Amitai Mendelsohn's *Behold the Man: Jesus in Israeli Art*, steps into this gap. Written to accompany an exhibition on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem (also curated by Mendelsohn) in 2016–17, this volume is perhaps too narrowly titled: its subject actually extends somewhat beyond the boundaries of Israeli art, and beyond a focus on representations of Jesus. *Behold the Man* contextualizes the relatively brief history of Israeli art about Jesus within the much broader field of over a thousand years of Jewish thought and writing about Christianity. As Mendelsohn notes in his introduction, his study is focused on “identifying and discussing the sources that influenced the works of generations of Jewish and Israeli artists,” (15) and this includes not only artistic sources, of which he provides plentiful examples, but also philosophical and literary ones.

The chapters are organized both chronologically and topically, and the volume begins with two chapters that survey the history of the engagement with Jesus and Christianity in Jewish thought, literature, and modern art. Chapter One, “In the Shadow of the Cross,” draws its title from a line in a Uri Tzvi Greenberg poem, a Hebrew and Yiddish Expressionist poet who was drawn to the figure of Jesus in the early twentieth century. This chapter nicely summarizes a variety of secondary sources on Jesus in Jewish thought and literature, beginning with the medieval *Sefer Toldot Yeshu* (History of Jesus) and continuing through twentieth-century Israeli writers like the poet Yona

Wallach. Aside from an overreliance on secondary sources, this chapter concisely contextualizes the visual art of the modern period within broader artistic trends in Jewish culture.

The second chapter works in tandem with the first to offer a brief history of representations of Jesus in modern visual art, and to introduce early artistic engagements with Jesus by European Jewish artists, including Marc Chagall. These artists laid the groundwork for later Zionist and Israeli artists by “subvert[ing] his traditional significance in Christianity” (61). Mendelsohn argues that their work transformed the way that Jewish artists perceived Jesus and changed attitudes among Jewish artists regarding depictions and use of Christian iconography in their work.

The rest of the book is largely focused on close readings of individual artists, organized according to period, artistic movement, and ideology. This allows Mendelsohn to indicate both change over time in Jewish, and later Israeli, use of Christian iconography as well as draw connections between artists with similar ideologies or aesthetics. This begins in Chapter Three with an extensive discussion of E.M. Lilien, which is paired with less detailed overviews of his contemporaries Boris Schatz and Abel Pann. Although all three worked largely in Europe, they were also committed Zionists, and their treatment of Jesus and Christian iconography reflected their ideological commitments. Particularly in the case of Lilien, Mendelsohn carefully connects images that recall the crucifixion, the crown of thorns, and the white lily associated with the Virgin Mary to both *Jugendstil*, the artistic school to which Lilien’s work belongs, and to elements of Zionist ideology, like the masculine New Jew.

Chapter Four focuses on another early Zionist artist, Reuven Rubin, who, like Lilien before him, made use of the figure of Jesus to comment on the return of the Jews to the land of Israel. Rubin also personally identified with Jesus, and Mendelsohn argues that his paintings reflect “the artist’s personal identification with the anguish of Jesus the man” (109). Here Mendelsohn is at his best, illustrating the way Rubin was influenced by various iconic portrayals and poses associated with the artistic depiction of Jesus since the Middle Ages. At the same time, he demonstrates the way in which Rubin manipulated these classic images to reflect his commitment to Zionism.

The second half of the book is focused specifically on Israeli artists, organized both thematically and in a roughly chronological timeline, such that

the relationships between artistic movements as well as mentors and students become visible. In some cases, Mendelsohn's focus on these artists brings to the fore work that has not been widely considered or discussed in the past, as is the case with certain paintings by Moshe Castel, intimate and personal, which have never been shown in public. However, in other cases Mendelsohn's analyses overreach here, as in the case of Mordecai Ardon, as when he repeatedly claims an affinity between Ardon's representations of the kabbalistic sefirot and the cross with no clear support.

Discussions of contemporary Israeli art are among the strongest in the book, however, contextualizing the artists within Israeli art history and international art movements while pointing to the Christian iconography of the art as a mode of reflecting on some of the most contentious elements of Israeli history and politics, including war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, gender, and violence. While occasionally the reference to political events is rushed or parenthetical – for example, an oblique reference to the influence of the Yom Kippur War on 1970s Israeli body art (219), a topic that seems to deserve more attention – the depth and complexity of the analysis of this challenging and dynamic art more than makes up for it.

Impressively, this volume also contains hundreds of high-quality reproductions of both the images under consideration and many other pieces that illustrate the historical circulation of various iconic Christological images in Western art. Visually, it is a beautiful text, from the cover – which displays a colorful relief image of an Igael Tumarkin sculpture – to the final page, an image, cleverly shot from behind, of Mark Antokolsky's sculpture "Christ Before the People's Court," displayed in the exhibition hall of the Israel Museum. The abundant images provide an essential accompaniment to Mendelsohn's analysis and enrich his readings.

Behold the Man: Jesus in Israeli Art fills a crucial void in recent scholarship about the Jewish engagement with Christianity. Its comprehensive consideration of the topic, as well as the generally complex and innovative analyses of the art, make this a definitive volume for the study of the diversity and depth of not just Israeli, but Jewish visual culture as a whole.

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