

**Kevin D. Murphy, *Memory and Modernity: Viollet-le-Duc at Vézelay*. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, xiv + 200 pp., 53 black-and-white illus., \$45 (U.S.)**

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[See table of contents](#)

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- 12 Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 147. See Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York, 1989), 49–76.
- 13 Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 16. However, she should not be singled out. *The Guardian Weekly*, vol. 156, no. 25 (the week

ending 22 June 1997), 24, reported the results of this year's Bad Writing Contest. Unfortunately, North American cultural theorists were over-represented in the list of finalists: Frederic Jameson won for *Signatures Of The Visible*.

KEVIN D. MURPHY, *Memory and Modernity: Viollet-le-Duc at Vézelay*. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, xiv + 200 pp., 53 black-and-white illus., \$45 (U.S.).

The church of the Madeleine at Vézelay, in Burgundy, has long held pride of place among monuments of the French Romanesque. In Steven Vickers's course at the University of Toronto in the 1970s on Romanesque sculpture, we memorized many of the nave capitals and the odd, angular figures of the sculpted tympanum in the narthex, never questioning the church's authenticity or canonical status. "Why these particular capitals?" and "Why not the tympanum over the main door?" are questions this undergraduate never thought to ask. If I had, Vickers's gruff answer might have been, "Because, Mr. Thomas, the church was so heavily restored in the nineteenth century by Viollet-le-Duc."

It is, precisely, to de-familiarize La Madeleine, so seemingly natural, so seamlessly medieval, that Kevin Murphy has written this book, based on a PhD dissertation at Northwestern University. Murphy rends the opaque veil of transparency that Viollet-le-Duc and his collaborators hung over the church on its picturesque village-hilltop. He shows that Vézelay the icon of medievalism is a conjurer's trick, a product of the modern architect's skill applied at vast expense under down-and-dirty material conditions of local and regional life overlaid by policy and goals of the national government under the July Monarchy (1830–48). Murphy's compact, well written, and well edited book joins a growing literature on the construction of public memory, especially national memory, most of all in France.

After the revolution of July 1830 that put him on the disputed French throne in place of the Bourbon king Charles X, Louis-Philippe worked to liberalize and modernize the national administration so as to impart a stability missing since the fall of the *ancien régime* while moving France toward a new bourgeois industrial and commercial order. From 1840 on, his policy of *juste milieu* was outstandingly successful. After fifty years of turmoil, with republics, empires, restorations, kings, imposters and pretenders appearing (and re-appearing) with dizzying frequency, the question of historic legitimacy – who could justly claim to rule France? – was understandably vital. At such a time history had its political uses. With the Gothic fashion strong in Britain and surging over European literature, art and architecture, and with France's credible claim to be the cradle of the

Gothic, medievalism naturally recommended itself as a vehicle with which to advance these arguments. The one to realize this fully was Romantic historian François Guizot, Louis-Philippe's minister of the interior. He viewed old buildings as concentrated distillations of historic memory, able to deliver political and pedagogical messages with subtlety and force. A building properly treated, Guizot realized, could be a "historic monument." This idea, departing from the vandalism of the Revolutionary era, led, in the 1830s and 1840s, to the creation and elaboration of a national bureaucracy of historic restoration, including a Commission of Historic Monuments, established in 1837. Into the structure created by these ideas stepped Prosper Mérimée, who became inspector general of historic monuments, and Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, just then starting out as a restoration architect. Fortuitously available as raw material for a national historic monument was the decrepit church of La Madeleine at Vézelay, an impoverished village in the extreme southern part of the Yonne department. The church had been in ruinous state since the seventeenth century and particularly neglected since the Revolution. Local authorities had done what they could to arrest the rot, for they were proud of the church, but had eventually to call on Paris for help. It was Mérimée, chiefly, who saw the building's potential to serve a national politics of memory. A backward area that could benefit from sharp infusions of Parisian cash and where the Catholic clergy were particularly weak, divided and unpopular made an ideal stage for an architectural drama of the historic continuity of the French state, now under the wise tutelage of the "Citizen King." All these background events, currents and characters are explored and elucidated in chapters one to three.

The heart of the book is Murphy's chapter four, idiosyncratically occupying more than a third of the text, "Viollet-le-Duc and the Reinvention of Vézelay." Here is traced the physical and metaphorical reconstruction of La Madeleine. The young architect took a particularly sweeping and aggressive approach to restoring it, among other steps dismantling several nave vaults that had been rebuilt in pointed Gothic form in the thirteenth century and replacing them with round, more typically Romanesque vaults, opening a ring of circular oculus-windows in the choir elevation to introduce more light, and entirely reconstructing the tower of the south transept for picturesque exterior effect. The final result was far more light, pale, consistent, abstract and diagrammatic than the church he had

started with. Viollet-le-Duc justified all his bold strokes to the head-office on grounds of structural stability and historic probability, but clearly his real goal was the fabrication of an image of architectural wholeness and integrity that had certainly never existed. As his first of many large restoration projects, Vézelay played a vital role in the crystallization of a bold new theory of restoration, eventually codified in his controversial entry on the subject in the *Dictionnaire raisonné* (1854–68): “To restore an edifice is not to repair it or remake it, it is to re-establish it in a complete state that may never have existed at a given moment.” Such “completeness” had been his goal in restoring Vézelay. When the planning of the project was at its most intensive, too, Viollet-le-Duc was feeling his way towards a new rationalist interpretation of the Gothic, which saw it primarily as the product of structural forces and as the cultural expression of a French society emerging from feudalism into proto-modern, urban form. In short, to him the Gothic represented the beginnings of modern France and could form the basis of a con-

temporary architectural style. This argument, though Murphy does not say so, was not substantially different from that of High Victorian Goths in England, such as Street, who looked to the stylistic revival to suggest a line of development on which to found an all-purpose modern architecture. Here, the two sides of Viollet-le-Duc, so apparently hard to reconcile, meet – the historicizing Gothic Revivalist and the modernist pioneer of structural expression. Vézelay, it proves, was more than a showy and expensive restoration project; it was a way-station in the emergence of Viollet-le-Duc’s theory of a modern, especially French modern, architecture. As he said of restoration in the *Dictionnaire*, “The word and the thing are modern.” Restoration, of Vézelay in particular, turns out to be all about modern conditions, politics and aesthetic expression.

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KALMAN P. BLAND, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, 233pp.

In the post-modern spirit of dismantling hierarchies, Kalman P. Bland’s *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* dislodges a persistent cultural myth: the so-called artlessness of Jews and the lack of a significant tradition of Jewish visual art. To amend this tradition, Bland takes on the vexed question of national character and national culture – what Alois Riegl, in *Late Roman Art Industry* (1927), championed as an intrinsic national *Kunstwollen*, an inner desire or will-to-form, but what today is often regarded as an essentialized approach to artistic expression and identity. The book also heralds the renewed importance of aesthetic issues – beauty, visual sensibility, artistic pleasure – in art historical discourse, distancing these questions from Enlightenment disinterestedness, and grounding them instead in cultural ideology and theological principle. Jewish art is the model here that calls attention to art history’s foundational structures and paradigms.<sup>1</sup>

Art history describes art since the Renaissance in terms of national schools. What, then, is at stake in deeming Jews an “artless” people, theologically and, by implication, naturally unable to excel in the visual arts? From a people dispersed for centuries through western nations, the production of Jewish art seems a parochial matter, set apart (like indigenous or native art) from their host nation’s main cultural formats and ideals. Even Israeli art – home product of a modern nation state – can hardly be said to encompass a global Jewish art and culture.<sup>2</sup> The option for Jews in diaspora seems to be cultural assimila-

tion to the mainstream, or insularity and consignment to the margins of a national and international art scene. As Margaret Olin writes in a recent essay on nineteenth-century art historiography, “‘Jewish art’ is the name of a concept but few scholars profess to believe it corresponds to anything that actually exists.”<sup>3</sup>

Why, to re-phrase the familiar feminist question, have there been so few great Jewish artists? Following Linda Nochlin’s revelatory insight that for women artists “the fault lies in not in our wombs but in our institutions,”<sup>4</sup> the artlessness of Jews may be understood by the inaccessibility of art schools and academies, national or international art markets, and other established routes to professionalization. Thus, like many women excluded from learning the essential forms of visual culture, ghettoized Jews remained untaught in mainstream forms and vocabularies, and their native skills remained undeveloped and scarcely visible.

Acknowledging the insights on cultural access provided by feminist methodology (p. 11), Bland’s project takes a different tack. Drawing on an impressive array of Jewish philosophical texts, the book unmasks the notion of an artless people as an ideologically driven, modern construct. The overarching frame of the argument is the Biblical Second Commandment and the injunction against graven images, repeatedly invoked to explain the relative paucity of Jewish visual art and artists in western cultural history. The issue has not gone unnoticed by contemporary scholars of Jewish art.<sup>5</sup> For Bland, the recurrent invocation of the Second Commandment as explanatory force of cultural history is deeply flawed; he refutes this formulaic account through three general concerns: the artless Jew as con-