

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

Carol Zemel

Volume 26, Number 1-2, 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071558ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071558ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Zemel, C. (1999). Review of [Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, 233pp.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 26(1-2), 112–116. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071558ar>

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 contem-

porary 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.

CHRISTOPHER THOMAS
University of Victoria

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.¹

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.² 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.”³

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,”⁴ 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 unmaskes 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.⁵ 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-

struction of modern cultural historiography, the place of visuality and the beautiful in the medieval Jewish sensorium, and rabbinic debates on idolatry and iconoclasm.

The book begins with the modern construction of an artless Jewish people, framed on the one hand by particular interpretations of the Second Commandment and Jewish iconoclasm, and on the other by the national cultural capital derived from seeing Jews either as inferior for their lack of visual sensibility, or as a spiritual people attuned more to voice and word than to visual sensitivity. Without succumbing to essentialist notions of a Jewish aesthetic, Bland's citations make precisely the other claim: that Jews have always admired and produced works of visual art. It is canonical art history that has left their artistic traditions and skills unrecognized.

Bland accounts for this omission through a historiography of modern aesthetics. Beginning with Enlightenment thinkers, he shows how the aesthetic schema of Kant and Hegel produced contending and contradictory positions for Jews and visual art. For Kant, the commandment against images was "the most sublime part of Jewish law" (p. 16); it set Jews in a lofty theological position, attentive to abstractions like text and music, while repudiating the concrete, material pleasures associated with visual art. Thus bound by spiritual commitment, Jews could hardly stoop to a sensual cultural form. Hegel argued just the opposite: it was the Jews' failure and limitation not to have produced the sublime representations of the divinity that characterized the cultures of Christianity. For German Jewish intellectuals associated with a *Wissenschaft des Judentums* [Science of Judaism] ⁶ and eager to share Enlightenment culture, the choice here was clear. Unable to refute the Hegelian position, they embraced the Kantian view; their "Judaism," as Bland writes, "became fundamentally aniconic, pre-eminently spiritual, coterminous with ethics, and quintessentially universal" (p. 16).

Several Jewish thinkers, nevertheless, attempted to negotiate the strictures of this moralized aniconism, and a series of distinguished names – Heinrich Heine, Franz Rosenzweig, Sigmund Freud, among others – contributed to what soon became a conventional stance. In 1874, historian Heinrich Graetz reiterated the moral purpose and success of Jewish aniconism. Noting the sensual pleasures and licentiousness of ancient Hellenic art and culture – a culture, he pointed out, now lost – Graetz claimed that because they were "devoted to holiness and sexual restraint, the Jews survived history" (p. 22). But a similar Greek/Hebrew split became a power-inflected binary in the writings of Richard Wagner, who aligned modern German culture with that of ancient Greece and, in *Judaism in Music* (*Das Judentum in der Musik*, 1850), lamented the "jewification of modern art" (p. 26).

Burgeoning nationalism and rising anti-Semitism at the end of the nineteenth century brought new tangles to the

argument and the peculiar double-bind of a minority people. Jewish intellectuals, in Bland's words, now had to "neutralize charges of Jewish racial inferiority as well as account for Jewish art without sacrificing altogether the cherished principle of spiritually driven aniconism" (p. 28). Philosopher Martin Buber, who in 1903 edited *Juedischer Kuenstler*, a collection of essays on six Jewish artists, sought to answer Wagner's scheme of Jewish racial and cultural inferiority.⁷ In his introduction, Buber acknowledged both the prescriptive aniconism of Jewish orthodoxy and that most Jewish artists were no more than "a banal group of unimportant imitators" [eine Schar bedeutungsloser Nachahmer]. But, he insisted, for a ghettoized population there were considerable barriers to artistic achievement, and he celebrated a new Jewish turn to cultural expression, facilitated by the joyous affirmation that he saw in the populist and mystical practices of Hasidism.⁸ Without underestimating Buber's valorizing attention to Hasidic culture, his idealization of the *Ostjude* [eastern European Jew] ⁹ as a type, his activities as a promoter of a renaissance in central European Jewish culture and his efforts to find authentic Jewish cultural forms and expressions is no less problematically essentialized than any other notion of *Rasseneigenschaften* [racial characteristics]; it too should be seen in the context of nationalist needs and desire. Indeed, in his writings on Jewish art, Buber promoted a romantic notion of the artist who "pushes through a wilderness" – a striking Jewish metaphor – obedient only to the "laws of his own being ..." But a national art, Buber believed, was based on both genealogical and territorial community – "a homeland out of which it develops, and a heaven toward which it strives."¹⁰

In sections particularly valuable for scholars of modernism (which, one might say, has its own diaspora), Bland extends his historiography beyond German Enlightenment scholarship into different diasporic settings.¹¹ He marks the impact of a presumed Jewish aniconism in America among such prominent Jewish writers and critics as Harold Rosenberg, Cynthia Ozick, Geoffrey Hartmann (p. 51); in eastern Europe (birthplace of Chagall and Soutine); and in Palestine, where after the founding of the Bezalel Academy of Art in Jerusalem in 1906, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) set aside the national issue – from his perspective, he was in home territory – and returned to the intricacies of theological permissions. Calling for Jewish renewal, Kook affirmed the premises of Jewish art as decorous and distinguished from pagan idolatry, but still within "the entire realm of adornment, ornamentation, beautification and painting ..." (p. 34).

Having detailed the modern construction of the artless Jew, Bland turns his expertise as medievalist to theological issues and the capacious place of the visual in the medieval Jewish sensorium. He centres the debate on two thinkers who lived in

the competing theological and aesthetic milieux of Islam and Christianity: Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), the towering figure of medieval Jewish philosophy, who wrote from Egypt, and Profiat Duran (ca.1360-ca.1414), who wrote from Spain. Each took distinctive positions on the role of the bodily senses and beautiful artifacts as catalytic agents to meditative and spiritual knowledge. The rationalist and Aristotelian Maimonides accepted sensory pleasure as long as it was not confused with spiritual enjoyment, for which it could only serve as preparatory agent. For Maimonides, the pleasures of art were utilitarian and restorative – almost like the Islamic contemplation of arabesque patterning as a meditative tool, or in a modern secular mode, like Matisse’s famous statement that a painting should function like a good armchair for the tired businessman at the end of the day.¹² Thus, beautiful ritual objects and illustrated texts might be viewed in positive terms as human products enabling viewers to move beyond the quotidian and closer to moral or spiritual concerns. Duran’s Platonic or symbolist orientation produced, in Bland’s terms, a more “aestheticized position,” closer to Christian justifications of the icon, whereby pleasure derived from sacred text and beautiful surroundings might be more than a catalytic force; objects themselves might be “sacramentally charged” (p. 105) and potent enough to produce their own “cultic, soteriological effects” (p. 89).

The discussion centres on objects, but the primary concern is actually the viewer and the role of beauty or sensory experience in the understanding of higher things. Bland elaborates a Maimonidean position in which a beautiful artifact is valued through conventional aesthetic judgement. Thus, the argument goes, if judgements of beauty and repugnance are bound to cultural principles rather than to individual intellect, they are part of a social experience of seeing. In more theological terms, this judgement derives from post-lapsarian experience, since before the fall, Maimonides argues, human beings used their intellect to determine what was true or false, not for aesthetic assessments of what they saw. Adam’s and Eve’s new knowledge of each other’s nakedness is social knowledge, a seeing of self in the eyes of the other. “For Maimonides,” Bland writes:

Adam’s pre-lapsarian inability to invent beauty proves that an aptitude for beauty is neither an essential feature of human nature nor does it belong to the divine plan for the most excellent human being. (p. 98)

One implication of the Maimonidean view is the safe distance it sets between noting – not to mention making – visual beauty and a divine plan. The human impulse to make art may thus be an imitation of God’s creative power; it is an arrogant imitation possibly, but one securely planted in the modern ideal of artistic genius. Outlining this position, however, Bland ignores an in-

teresting Biblical passage. The trees planted in the Garden of Eden are described by God as both “a delight to the eye and nourishing to eat” [Genesis 2, v.9]. What is that delight, one wonders? And if human beings are able to see only conventional beauty (after the fall), a delight to whose eye? If, as this verse suggests, there is a pre-lapsarian visual pleasure, how does it relate to conventional beauty and aesthetic experience?

The last chapters of the book address idolatry and iconoclasm, a central concern for Judaism. Following immediately from the First Commandment’s assertion of God’s presence and rescue of his people, the Second Commandment declares the proscription against graven images (Exodus 20, v.3–6). This proscription, Bland claims, is often misunderstood as an absolute injunction. Citing rabbinic sages, he points out that the commandment refers only to figurative representations to which is ascribed divine power, and not to secular representational forms – even figures – that claim mimetic but not iconic force. Following this logic, the modernist abstractions by Jewish artists Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman might be acceptable meditative allusions to God’s ineffable presence. On the other hand, given God’s propensity for concealment within clouds, smoke or other veils of visibility, such pictorial evocations might be precisely the kind of blasphemy the Bible cautions against. In any case, Bland argues that *halakha* [Jewish law] does not insist on no imagery at all, though the forms and practices that test this commitment are subjects of great concern. One of the best-known and amusing examples cited by Bland is that of Rabbi Gamaliel at the Baths of Aphrodite in second-century Acre. Despite the presence of Aphrodite’s statue, Gamaliel’s bathing there is a non-idolatrous act, for the rabbi declares: “I did not come within her limits, she came within mine! People do not say ‘Let us make a bath to adorn Aphrodite,’ but ‘Let us make an Aphrodite to adorn the bath.’”¹³ It is this ambiguity of meaning and purpose – and not the absolute proscription – that opens the way to a variety of cultural practices.

All three great faiths – Christianity and Islam, as well as Judaism – grapple with idolatry and the strictures of the Second Commandment. The ninth-century Christian Iconoclastic Controversy challenged the status of religious icons, and the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation stripped the churches of northern Europe of their religious imagery. The emblematic example for Jews is the Golden Calf, the sculpture fashioned by Israelite tribes in the desert, impatient for Moses’ return from Mount Sinai with God’s commandments. While rabbinical explanations vary, turning on questions of idolatry, forgiveness, punishment, the Golden Calf stands as the shameful episode of Jewish history, the event that caused the Jewish wandering in the desert for forty years as punishment until a new, less-tainted generation had come to adulthood.

But the debate itself testifies to puzzling areas along the

theological axis of image/non-image and the intermediate zone in which image seems to allow or encourage idolatry. Bland observes that rabbinical discussions tacitly alluded to the medieval Christian environment which, since St Paul, relied on the Golden Calf story to fuel notions of Jews as unforgiven idolaters (p. 120). Reversing that accusation, the rabbis presented Christian visual practice as idolatrous decoration of churches and shrines. These differences served to strengthen the arguments and commitments of both sides, for Bland writes, "In reviling one another's images, [Christians and Jews] dialectically reinforced their profound attachment to their own."

With this impressive range of arguments, Bland effectively installs Jewish thinking on aesthetic issues in the broad theological setting of three major religions. In doing so the modernist accusation of Jewish aniconism falls away – at least in theory. These texts marshal convincing evidence, but they are so copious and often so detailed that they seem overwhelming and anchored only to each other in theoretical debate. Indeed, despite its meticulous scholarship, there are omissions in the book. The most glaring absence is a nuanced notion of art as a category. Bland discusses visuality, visual beauty, idolatry and art, but he hardly acknowledges the historicity of these terms, their changing meaning and historical impact. Does visual sensitivity necessarily translate into aesthetic sensibility and the production of visual art? What is the distinction between icon, picture, artifact? Does a work of art in the secular post-Enlightenment world share an aesthetic function with a Renaissance fresco on the walls of the Cathedral at Padua? Is what they share itself a product of Enlightenment culture and philosophy?

Exacerbating this omission is the lack of reference to artistic or professional practice, or specific works of art. Except for sweeping categories of Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Enlightenment, medieval, there is little sense of cultural context. To be sure, the book centres on theoretical issues, and their uses for cultural ideology, but without a social frame or practice, these theses hang untested and unconnected to their artistic impact and effects. The reader yearns for more situational complexity – like Gamaliel at the baths – to animate the ambiguities and arguments.

Even with these reservations, *The Artless Jew* is required reading for scholars working in any period of Jewish art and aesthetics; it is certainly essential for students sorting through the complexities of post-modern cultural claims. It brings little known theoretical texts to the forefront of art historical discourse. And in a world where multi-ethnic traditions claim their place in cultural history, it offers a model of how aesthetic and philosophical texts enable us to understand disciplinary structures, exclusions and stereotypes. The book elucidates issues that are neither parochial nor limited to study of specific cultures. Iconoclasm and idolatry, the aesthetic status of holy

objects, the ideology of national artistic character: all of these bear on our understanding of art's production and histories in a global setting.

CAROL ZEMEL
York University

Notes

- 1 For other recent studies of Jewish art, artists and art history that address similar issues: Margaret Olin, "C[lement] Hardesh [Greenberg] and Company," in *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New York, 1996); *Jewish Identity and Modern Art History*, ed. Catherine Soussloff (Berkeley, 1999); and Richard I. Cohen, *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley, 1998).
- 2 The subject is much debated in Israel, in an attempt to assign "authenticity" to Israeli Jewish culture, as opposed to the Jewish culture in diaspora (or, pejoratively in Hebrew, exile and *galut*). This in-house distinction does not, of course, deal with the character of art produced by non-Jewish Israeli communities. For art in that country, see Gideon Ofrat, *One Hundred Years of Art in Israel*, trans. Peretz Kidron (Boulder, Colorado, 1998).
- 3 Margaret Olin, "From Bezal'el to Max Liebermann: Jewish Art in Nineteenth Century Art Historical Texts," in Soussloff, ed., *Jewish Identity*, 19–40.
- 4 Linda Nochlin, "Why have There been no Great Women Artists?" (1971), reprinted in Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power, and Other Essays*, (New York, 1988). Bland also cites Michele Wallace's "Afterword: Why are There No Great Black Artists, The Problem of Visuality in Black-American Culture," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle, 1992), 333–46.
- 5 Most recently, Lisa Saltzman, "To Figure or Not to Figure: the Iconoclastic Proscription and Its Theoretical Legacy," in Soussloff, ed., *Jewish Identity*, 67–84. The same publication contains a version of the first chapter of Bland's study.
- 6 *Wissenschaft des Judentums* designates the project of German Jewish thinkers of the Enlightenment which sought to align Judaism – its theology, philosophy, history, etc. – with the intellectual mainstream of modern European culture. Bland omits the important aesthetic writings of Moses Mendelssohn, who claimed that Jews were commanded to be like God, and so to make beautiful things. For a recent account of Mendelssohn's aesthetics, see Jonathan Karp, "The Aesthetic Difference: Moses Mendelssohn's *Kohélet Mussar* and the Inception of the Berlin Haskalah," forthcoming. My thanks to Dr Karp for sharing the pre-publication text of his essay.
- 7 The six were: Lesser Ury, Max Liebermann, E.M. Lilien, Josef Israels, Solomon J. Solomon and Jehudo Epstein. *Juedischer Kuenstler* (Berlin, 1903).
- 8 The populist mystical forms of orthodox Judaism developed in the eighteenth century by the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name) and by the twentieth century were widespread in southeast

- Europe (south Poland, Galicia, Rumania, Ukraine). The legends and tales of Hasidic rabbis were a strong component of Buber's celebration of Jewish spiritual tradition.
- 9 On the invention and uses of the *Ostjude*, see Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred, Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore, 1986), 270-86. Bland's footnotes outline the complexities and reversals of Buber's views of Jewish visual art (note 64, p. 162).
- 10 Martin Buber, "Letter to Lesser Ury" (1901), reprinted in *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, Vivian B. Mann, ed. (Cambridge, 2000), 144-46. See also *The First Buber: Youthful Zionist writings of Martin Buber*, ed. and trans. Gilya G. Schmidt (Syracuse, 1999).
- 11 To be sure, Bland restricts his modern focus to Ashkenaz [western, central and eastern Europe]; he includes no discussion of modern Sephardic Jewish culture.
- 12 Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter," *La grande revue* (25 Dec. 1908), 731-45.
- 13 Mishnah, *Avodah Zarah*, Chapter 3, Mishnah 4, quoted in Vivian B. Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, (Cambridge, 2000), 23. For an account of Judaism and idolatry, see Moshe Halberthal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).