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JEWISH ARTISTS YOU WANT TO (RE)DISCOVER

by Tatiana von Beelen



For any questions or feedback,
please contact: tkrupinina@theus.org.uk


**The
United
Synagogue**



INTRODUCTION

By Tatiana von Beelen, Senior Graphic Designer
and Brand Lead at the United Synagogue

Last year, while waiting for a friend in the Tate Modern shop, I stumbled upon an offer: six postcards for five pounds. Intrigued, I decided to select six, all featuring works by artists of Jewish descent. The stand had a vast selection of cards, yet I found it surprisingly easy to discover pieces by Jewish artists. This is especially notable, given Judaism's traditional association of figurative art with idol worship. As a result, the development of figurative art within Jewish culture started relatively late.

In this new series "Jewish artists you want to (re)discover" I will explore the contributions of Jewish artists and delve into how their cultural and historical backgrounds have shaped their exceptional creativity.

However, before proceeding, we must confront an important and difficult question: what is a "Jewish artist"? Is it ethical to label any artist of Jewish descent as such?

This question is more complex than it may first appear. The term "Jewish artist" encompasses various layers, including ancestry, religious practice, cultural identity, and even the subject matter of the artist's work. It is not simply about the artist's Jewish heritage but also their connection to Jewish traditions and how that influences their art.

As an example, for many of us, Marc Chagall with his poetic and nostalgic depictions of Jewish life, blending surrealism with rich symbolism comes to mind first when we think of "Jewish art". However,



Marc Chagall. *Green Violinist*, 1923-24.
Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

"The Green Violinist" is one of Chagall's interpretations of a recurring figure in his art, the fiddler, from Shalom Aleichem's famous play Fiddler on the Roof. The play, along with the general tone of Shalom Aleichem's work, resonated deeply with Chagall's own experience of life in a shtetl.

his close colleague at the Vitebsk School of Art, El Lissitzky, believed that non-figurative art was not only compatible with Judaism but could also express the spiritual essence of Jewish culture in a modern form.



El Lissitzky. *Arba'ah Teyashim*, 1919.
Courtesy of Wikipedia.org

The book cover that El Lissitzky created for Arba'ah Teyashim (The Four Billygoats), written by Ben Zion Raskin, is a rare example of Hebrew lettering in a Constructivist style, featuring an arrangement of letters as architectural elements in a dynamic design.

From early 20th-century painters to contemporary masters, Jewish artists have left an indelible mark on art history. Through their remarkable creativity and resilience, they have made profound contributions to art and culture, continually pushing the boundaries of artistic expression. Their works not only reflect their individual talents but also the rich, complex history that shapes their unique perspectives.

This series will examine how cultural and historical backgrounds have influenced the creative processes of Jewish artists, highlighting their diversity and exploring the nuanced question of what it means to be a "Jewish artist."



NATHAN ALTMAN

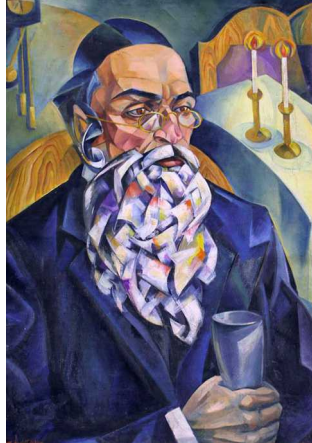
1889 Vinnytsia, Russian Empire –
1970 Leningrad, USSR

Nathan Altman was born in 1889 in Vinnytsia, Ukraine. His father, Isai, a small trader, died when Nathan was just four. Soon after, his grandfather also passed away. Nathan's mother left him to be raised by his grandmother and emigrated to the United States to escape hardship and anti-Jewish pogroms.

Despite extreme poverty, Nathan completed his education at a cheder and at a state school. A talented artist from a young age, he later reflected: "I endowed animals and objects with human feelings... Sitting under the table, I would draw with chalk on the floor, and received paper and pencils only much later."

In 1902, he moved to Odessa for art school, embracing Impressionism, but feeling that the academic style was not for him. Returning to Vinnytsia, he painted portraits to fund study in Europe. In Paris, he lived in "La Ruche" (the beehive), a Montparnasse dormitory for struggling artists like Chagall, Soutine and Lipchitz. Chagall famously remarked, "In the Hive, you either froze to death or became famous."

Jewish culture and themes were important to Altman's art. He co-founded "The Jewish Society for the Encouragement of the Plastic Arts," creating a platform for Jewish artists. His series of biblical illustrations, such as *King David*, reflected his deep engagement with Jewish identity and tradition, blending modernist aesthetics with spiritual themes.



Shabbat Eve, c. 1910.

Courtesy of Wikipedia.org

His costumes and set designs for performances at the Jewish Theatre explored folklore and contemporary issues within the Jewish community.

Altman's film work, such as his contributions to *Jewish Happiness*, a movie based on Sholom Aleichem's novels, reflected the struggles and resilience of Jewish life, drawing on symbolic imagery and vibrant motifs rooted in Jewish art and culture.

Moving back to Russia, Altman quickly captured the attention of the Silver Age bohemia with his charm and talent. During this period, he created one of his most famous works, the portrait of the renowned poet, Anna Akhmatova. This portrait combines cubist forms, colour



Jewish Mourning, 1911.

Courtesy of Wikipedia.org

contrasts and angular lines, breaking conventions to convey Akhmatova's mood and character with striking intensity and skill. After the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks sought visionary artists, and the 28-year-old Altman emerged as one of their key figures. His talents extended to book design, theatre and cinema, including collaborations with legendary directors such as Solomon Mikhoels, the artistic director of the Moscow State Jewish Theatre.

Despite international acclaim, his career was stifled by Stalinist restrictions in the 1930s. Forced to abandon painting, he turned to design, focusing on stamps, books and illustration.

Altman's innovative blending of modernism with Jewish themes left a profound impact, preserving the vibrancy of Jewish culture within his avant-garde legacy.

Nathan Altman passed away in Leningrad on 12 December 1970.



GRISHA BRUSKIN

Born 1945
Moscow, USSR

Grisha Bruskin is a contemporary artist whose work intricately weaves together Jewish mysticism, Soviet mythology, and a profound exploration of identity. Born in Moscow in 1945, Bruskin gained international recognition when his huge almost 3 metre painting "Fundamental Lexicon" was sold at the first Moscow Sotheby's auction in 1989 for an unprecedented sum – reportedly around half a million dollars. While the exact amount remains debated, Bruskin himself revealed that he received only a fraction of it.

Nevertheless, this event marked a turning point in his career, establishing his status as a major figure in post-Soviet contemporary art and enabling his emigration to the United States in the same year. There, he further developed his art and explored themes of Jewish identity and mysticism in greater depth.

Bruskin's art is a dialogue between text and image, history and mythology, and the sacred and the profane. His "Alephbet" series, one of his key works, is an intricate visualisation of Jewish cosmology, structured like an illuminated manuscript. The tapestry-like arrangement reflects the textual nature of Judaism itself. As Bruskin once remarked: "Judaism is a culture of interpretation. My work transposes this into the realm of aesthetics while preserving the sense of a universal text."

Bruskin's visual lexicon is rich

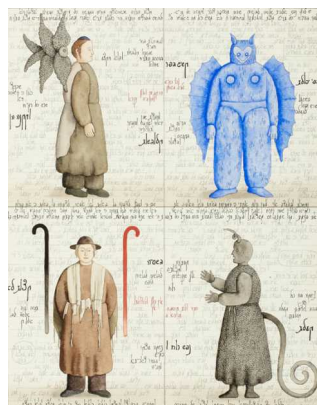


Fundamental Lexicon series. Part III 1986.

Courtesy of Yuri Traisman's Virtual Museum of Russian Art

with archetypes: a faceless man with a spiral for a face symbolising infinity, a figure clutching a fish alluding to the *Tashlich* ritual, angels, warriors, and Torah scholars, each embodying elements of Jewish thought. "Real reality is absent from my paintings," says Bruskin. "I am interested only in ideal models, ideal structures."

Bruskin's success parallels that of other late-Soviet émigré artists, who constructed biographical myths to transcend the label of Eastern European art. However, his work remains uniquely situated at the crossroads of Jewish knowledge, Soviet history and contemporary conceptualism - an invitation to decode, interpret and seek meaning in an ever-unfolding sacred text.



From Alephbet series, 1984.

Courtesy of Yuri Traisman's Virtual Museum of Russian Art



MARK GERTLER

1891 Spitalfields, London –
1939 Highgate, London

Mark Gertler was born in 1891 in Spitalfields, London, the fifth and youngest child of an Austrian-Jewish immigrant family struggling to survive. When he was just a baby, during a period of economic downturn, the family was repatriated to Przemyśl in Galicia. Life there was no easier. His father left to find work in America, and for years, the family lived in severe poverty before finally returning to London in 1896.

Gertler showed artistic talent early, but opportunities were few. Thanks to a loan from the Jewish Education Aid Society, he entered the Slade School of Fine Art in 1908, a turning point that allowed his talent to flourish. He twice won the prestigious Slade scholarship and quickly gained recognition, exhibiting with important groups such as Vanessa Bell's Friday Club and the New English Art Club. He showed his work in the 1914 "Jewish Section" exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, standing proudly alongside other Jewish artists like David Bomberg and Jacob Epstein.

After graduating from Slade, Gertler's work became increasingly experimental, influenced by Cézanne and the emerging Cubist style.

The piece that touches me most is Rabbi and Rabbitzin, one of a series of drawings from 1914-16, inspired by Gertler's observations of the Jewish community in the East End of London. Sarah MacDougall, Head of

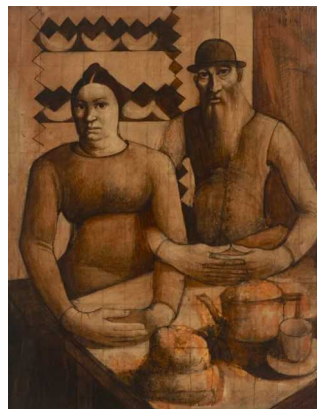


Daffodils in a Blue Bottle, 1916.
Courtesy of the Ben Uri Collection

Collections and Special Projects at the Ben Uri Gallery, says the centre of the composition - linked arms in this double portrait - carries particular symbolism for the artist. The arms reflect the hardship of their lives, yet their being linked also convey their strength as a couple.

During the First World War, Gertler was turned down for military service on the grounds of his "Austrian" parentage. "What luck!" he told fellow artist Dorothy Brett. "Now I am free to go on with my work."

He expressed his pacifist convictions in his famous painting Merry-Go-Round (1916, Tate). It is Gertler's most outstanding contribution to British modernism, and is one of



Rabbi and Rabbitzin, 1914.
Courtesy of the Ben Uri Collection

the strongest anti-war statements of its time, a dizzying and painful image of people caught in a mindless cycle of violence, forever trapped in the endlessly rotating carousel.

Alongside growing success, Gertler's life was marked by illness. Tuberculosis, diagnosed in 1920, often forced him into sanatoriums, and long periods of depression followed. Still, he kept working, teaching at Westminster School of Art, and showing his paintings in London's leading galleries.

Mark Gertler died in 1939, at just 47 years old. He was buried at Willesden Jewish Cemetery, where you can see his grave on one of our guided walks, 'Artists and their Work.'



JULIE HELD

Born 1958

Hampstead Garden Suburb, London

Julie Held is a talented painter and educator born in Hampstead Garden Suburb, whose work explores themes of loss, grief and family relationships.

Held was born to German-Jewish émigrés, with her mother, Gisela, a professional sculptor, playing a key role in shaping her creative journey. Julie fondly recalls, “On my third birthday, my parents bought me a miniature vacuum cleaner and a drawing book. I knew instantly what thrilled me more – it was the drawing book and colours.”

Julie Held, a member of The London Group, NEAC, RWS, and The Arborealists, is a noted contemporary artist. Her work is in public collections such as Nuffield College (Oxford) and The Usher Gallery. *Girl with Cat* (2000) was acquired by Ben Uri through the International Jewish Artist of the Year Award (2001).

One of the most pivotal moments in Held’s life was the death of her mother in 1976, when Julie was just 18. She became aware of death and “internalised the presence of death”. This experience inspired a series of portraits imagining how her mother would have aged, including one showing her on her 90th birthday with

Held’s father.

Rooted in Jewish family life and childhood memories, Held’s work is imbued with both a sense of loss and a sense of presence. She has frequently depicted family scenes, describing them as “a way of recreating something that I no longer have. When a mother dies, things like big family suppers fall apart. These paintings are a way of reuniting with those who are no longer with us.” Her paintings of empty dinner tables evoke not only personal grief, but also the broader destruction of Jewish life by the Holocaust.

In her later work, Held focused on painting her friends and relatives, city views, or even just a florist on the street. A modern and extremely skilled painter, Held depicts everyday life in London and the lives of Londoners, aspiring to make her inner feelings tangible through painting. Through her exploration of her personal history, her work resonates with a broad audience, allowing us to connect with her reflections on love, loss and memory in the context of urban life. And as with any good art, through Held’s paintings we might begin to understand more about the world around us and ourselves.



Girl with Cat, 2000.

Courtesy of the Ben Uri Collection



The Shoe Shop III, 2008.

Courtesy of the Ben Uri Collection



WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

Born 1955

Johannesburg, South Africa

The Yom Tov Mussaf prayer states: “But because of our sins we have been exiled from our land and sent far from our soil...” This powerful statement reflects the lasting impact of displacement on Jewish identity, a theme central to many Jewish artists. For William Kentridge, exile and the search for identity are at the heart of his work, shaped by his Jewish heritage and South Africa’s political upheavals.

Born in Johannesburg in 1955, Kentridge grew up during apartheid. His father, Sir Sydney Kentridge, was a lawyer who defended Nelson Mandela, exposing Kentridge to both the struggles of his heritage and the fight for justice. His family’s Jewish roots and anti-apartheid activism inform his work, which explores themes of exile, displacement, and identity.

The Jewish diaspora serves as a

backdrop to Kentridge’s art. Many Lithuanian Jews, including his ancestors, fled pogroms in Eastern Europe and settled in South Africa. Though many arrived with little, education was highly valued, and the community eventually thrived.

Kentridge’s artistic process is distinctive—he creates animations by drawing with charcoal, then erasing and redrawing, leaving traces of the past. This technique serves as a metaphor for memory and history, mirroring the fragmented experience of diaspora. His work does not simply recall history; it examines how it is recorded, erased and reinterpreted.

Kentridge challenges viewers to consider how history is remembered and how memory shapes identity. His work is particularly significant within the contexts of Jewish history and apartheid, where survival and identity

are intertwined with the fight for justice.

The Jewish experience of exile, whether in Eastern Europe or South Africa, provides a lens through which Kentridge explores resilience and survival. His work speaks to the universal experience of displacement, urging reflection on how history shapes individuals and communities.

Ultimately, Kentridge’s art reminds us that displacement, whether Jewish or South African, is part of a shared human experience. His work underscores the importance of remembering, honouring cultural heritage, and acknowledging the struggle for identity in the face of oppression. By engaging with themes of exile and memory, Kentridge’s art contributes to a global conversation about displacement and the search for belonging.



Embarkation' triptych, 1986. Courtesy of the artist. Private collection



R. B. KITAJ

1932 Chagrin Falls, Ohio, US –
2007 Los Angeles, California, US

Jewish painter R. B. Kitaj (born Ronald Brooks) was a prominent figure in modern figurative art. Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1932, he later became a key member of the School of London, a group of artists that included Frank Auerbach and Lucian Freud. Kitaj's work is known for its bold use of colour, fragmented compositions, and intellectual depth, drawing inspiration from history and philosophy. However, his fascination with Jewish identity set him apart, making his art a deeply personal exploration of heritage, exile and cultural belonging.

Kitaj often described himself as a "wandering Jew," believing his art reflected the experiences of a people shaped by migration and displacement. He developed the concept of the "diasporic imagination" - a vision of Jewish creativity that thrives in exile, constantly reinventing itself through history. As art historian David H. Rosenthal noted, "Kitaj's work envisions Jewishness as a modernist challenge, both personal and universal, a history of rupture and reinvention."

In 1989, Kitaj introduced the idea of Diasporism in his First Diasporist Manifesto, a bold and deeply personal exploration of what it means to be an artist living in exile. He saw displacement not as a limitation but as a powerful creative force, arguing that being an outsider fosters innovation and new ways of seeing. For Kitaj, this experience of exile linked him to a long tradition of

artists, writers and thinkers whose work was shaped by migration and cultural hybridity. At the same time, he passionately defended figurative painting, asserting its enduring relevance in an art world increasingly dominated by abstraction. His vision of Diasporism positioned Jewish history, especially the trauma of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, as central to his personal artistic journey.

His painting *The Jewish Rider* (1989) presents the Jew as a traveller, echoing both Chagall's dreamlike symbolism and Kafka's realistic absurdity. In *The Wedding* (1989–93), he transforms his marriage to artist Sandra Fisher into an allegory of Jewish endurance, blending biblical allusions with modernist abstraction to create a composition rich in both personal and historical meaning.

Kitaj's relationship with the art world soured after the harsh criticism of his 1994 Tate retrospective, which he interpreted as rooted in anti-Semitism. When Fisher passed



The Jewish Rider, 1984.

Courtesy of Astrup Fearnley Collection, Oslo, Norway

away suddenly, he publicly blamed the British press for her death, feeling deeply betrayed by the art establishment. Heartbroken, he left London and returned to the US, where he continued painting introspective self-portraits until his passing in 2007.

Kitaj's work remains a powerful exploration of modern identity and cultural heritage. His paintings challenge viewers to see Jewish history not as a static narrative but as a dynamic force. Through his Diasporist Manifesto and visually striking compositions, Kitaj gave voice to the complexities of Jewish existence, making his art a lasting testament to resilience and reinvention.



JACOB KRAMER

1892 Klincy, Russian Empire –

1963 Leeds, UK

Jacob Kramer was just eight years old when he arrived in Leeds with his family in 1900. They had fled Ukraine to escape the pogroms, like so many Jewish families at the time, hoping for a better life in England. It was not easy, but Leeds became their home, and it was there that Kramer's artistic journey began.

His parents were both creative. His father, Max, was a painter, and his mother, Cecilia, had once sung with an opera company. That creative influence clearly shaped Jacob. With help from the Jewish Educational Aid Fund, he got the chance to study properly, eventually winning a scholarship to the Slade School of Art in London. But life in the capital did not suit him, and he returned to Leeds, where he became a key figure in the city's growing art scene during the 1920s and 30s.

Kramer developed a bold and distinctive style. He became known for his sharp, angular paintings, influenced by Vorticism (Futurist-inspired abstractionism), but there was something more personal running through his work. He drew strongly on his Jewish roots, not just in theme but in spirit. Many of his paintings reflected stories of persecution and resilience, passed down by his parents and neighbours who had made the same journey from Eastern Europe.

One of his most powerful works is 'The Day of Atonement'. It took nine months to complete and shows worshippers on Yom Kippur, draped in tallitot (prayer shawls) caught in a moment of quiet intensity. The figures are stylised, the colours muted, and the lines bold – a mix of Vorticism and deep emotion that gives the painting real weight.

Leeds-born filmmaker Simon Glass remembers seeing Kramer's work when he was a teenager. "It persuaded me that exploring Jewish culture and history was something I should also take on and express in my own work," he says.

Jacob Kramer died in 1962 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery at Gildersome, Leeds. Today, his paintings can be found in the Tate, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum. But for many, what matters most is how he managed to capture something rarely seen on canvas: the strength, soul and quiet endurance of Jewish life.



The Day of Atonement, 1919.

Courtesy of Ben Uri Collection, London



The Philosopher, 1919.

Courtesy of Ben Uri Collection, London



EL LISSITZKY

1890 Pochinok, Russian Empire –
1941 Moscow, USSR

El Lissitzky was a pivotal figure in the avant-garde movement, and his work has continued to influence generations of artists and designers. Born in a small Jewish village near Smolensk, in 1890, Lissitzky's artistic journey began when, at the age of 13, he moved to Vitebsk to study under Yudel Pen. Later, like many other Jews in the Russian Empire, he travelled to Europe to expand his education. In 1909, he left for Germany to study architecture in Darmstadt. During his time in Europe, Lissitzky's passion for his cultural roots deepened, leading him to study the rich visual traditions of Eastern European Jewish communities, especially the sacred geometry and iconography found in synagogues and on Jewish tombstones. This profound connection to Jewish culture helped Lissitzky shape a modern visual language that was simultaneously forward-thinking and rooted in tradition. At a time when many artists were moving away from the figurative, Lissitzky's work showed that abstraction could not only coexist with Jewish culture but could also be a powerful means to express its spiritual essence.

Lissitzky's early works reflect his Jewish Renaissance spirit, notably through his illustrations of books. One of these, *Sichat Chulin* (An Everyday Conversation), is a striking example of his early design. The shape of the book resonates with that of a Torah. The book is not merely a functional object but a visual statement that reflects a modern Jewish identity—

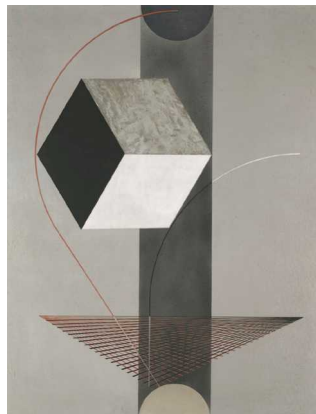


Shifts Karta (Ship Ticket, illustration to the novel by Ilya Ehrenburg), 1922.
Courtesy of [Wikipedia.org](https://www.wikipedia.org)

one that is both proud of its roots and forward-looking in its approach.

When the First World War broke out, Lissitzky returned to the Russian Empire, where, in 1919, he was invited by Marc Chagall to teach at the newly established People's Art School in Vitebsk. The school quickly became a hub of creative energy.

It was also during his time in Vitebsk that he met Kazimir Malevich, the Ukrainian-born artist behind Suprematism, who would become a major influence on Lissitzky's style. Under Malevich's guidance, Lissitzky developed the Proun—an abstract form that moved from two-dimensional to three-dimensional,



Proun 99, c. 1923–25.
Courtesy of [Wikipedia.org](https://www.wikipedia.org)

blending Suprematism's geometric shapes with a sense of depth and movement. The Proun works represent how Lissitzky used abstraction not merely as a style but as a language—powerful, simple and evocative, communicating complex ideas through basic colours and shapes.

During the interwar years, Lissitzky moved across Europe, teaching at the Bauhaus in Germany and further establishing himself as a key figure in modern design. He died from tuberculosis in 1941, but his work in typography, architecture and graphic design reshaped the visual landscape, and his influence can still be seen in contemporary design.

Lissitzky's work reflected a bold, innovative approach to Jewish identity—one that embraced modernism while staying deeply connected to Jewish cultural heritage.



CHANA ORLOFF

1888 Konstantinovka, Russian Empire –
1968 Tel Aviv, Israel

Chana Orloff's story begins in 1888 in the small Russian village of Konstantinovka (now Ukraine). Orloff was the eighth of nine children in a Zionist family. In 1905, fleeing pogroms, the family emigrated to Petach Tikva, one of the new settlements in the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in the Land of Israel pre-May 1948). There, Chana worked as a seamstress.

Her remarkable sewing skills caught the attention of her school director, who encouraged her to study in France. The idea was ambitious: Chana would train in dressmaking and then return to teach. In 1910, she made the journey to Paris. However, with its vibrant art scene, it opened up a world far beyond dressmaking. A year later, she ranked second in the admissions exam for the School of Decorative Arts, marking the start of her transformation into a sculptor. She joined the thriving art community and formed connections with leading figures such as Picasso, Rivera and Modigliani.

In 1916, Chana married Ary Justman, a Warsaw-born poet. Two years later, their son Elie was born. In 1919, Ary died of the Spanish flu, leaving Chana a widow. At this period in her life, Orloff wrote: "Three heavy burdens have fallen to me: being Jewish, being a woman, being a mother."

Chana channelled her grief into her art, achieving recognition for her sculptures of the Parisian elite. She exhibited internationally while keeping her residence and studio in Paris.



Mother and Child at Kibbutz Ein Gev, 1954. Courtesy of Ateliers-Musée Chana Orloff

In 1930, Tel Aviv's first mayor, Meir Dizengoff, invited her to help establish the Tel Aviv Museum. Over the next few years, Chana created multiple sculptures that celebrated the growing cultural landscape of the fledgling *Yishuv*. Her first exhibition there was a resounding success, strengthening her connection to the emerging Jewish state.

Then the Second World War began. In 1942, during the largest series of mass arrests of Jews in France, Chana, warned by her friends, fled Paris with her son and crossed the French-Swiss border on foot. In 1945, she returned to Paris and found her atelier had been raided by the Nazis. One hundred and forty sculptures had disappeared and, to this day, only four of them have been found. Undeterred, she continued creating, producing works like



Le Retour, 1945. Courtesy of Ateliers-Musée Chana Orloff

'The Return', a moving portrayal of Holocaust suffering.

In 1949, following successful exhibitions across Europe and the United States, Orloff immersed herself in shaping the cultural fabric of the new State of Israel. From her tender 'Mother and Child' at Kibbutz Ein Gev to her sculpture of David Ben-Gurion, her sculptures became iconic representations of the era. Even in her later years she remained prolific, creating monuments that honoured Israel's history and its people.

In 1968, Orloff travelled to Tel Aviv for a retrospective exhibition celebrating her 80th birthday. Shortly afterwards, she fell ill and passed away. She was buried in Kiryat Shaul Cemetery, where her son placed her final work, a testament to her enduring legacy as an artist, and her dedication to Israel.



YUDEL PEN

1854 Ezhereni, Russian Empire –
1937 Vitebsk, USSR

Yudel (Yehuda) Pen is a notable figure in the history of Jewish art. Born in 1854 in Ezhereni, now part of Lithuania, he became a significant portrait painter and an influential educator. Pen's deep admiration for Rembrandt influenced his warm, evocative portrayals of the Jewish community.

Pen's early life was marked by tragedy; he was orphaned at thirteen and had to start working as an apprentice to a house painter. Surprisingly, this was the first step in his remarkable artistic career. While decorating a hall, young Yudel demonstrated ingenuity by drawing handrails on a real staircase. The realism of his work not only misled the house painter but also convinced him of the apprentice's considerable artistic talent. For this 'joke,' Pen earned a significant sum for himself - 25 rubles, his first 'artistic' payment.

In 1879, Pen moved to St. Petersburg to study painting at the art academy. After his studies, he was unable to remain in the capital of the Russian Empire because Jews were not permitted to live outside the Pale of Settlement. He relocated to Riga and later to Vitebsk, where in 1898 he opened a private art school - the very first art school in Belarus. Talented children from poor families studied for free. His school became a nurturing ground for Jewish artists, most famously Mark Chagall, who benefited from Pen's guidance. Among his other notable pupils were El Lissitzky and Issachar Ber Ryback.

Central to Pen's teachings was the concept of Judaism embodying

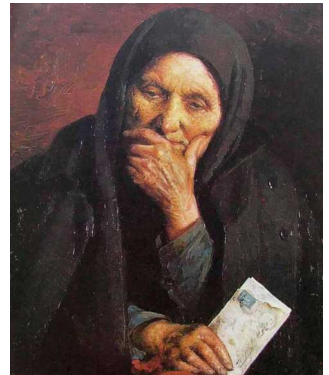


Get, 1907. Courtesy of Wikipedia.org

the essence of Jewish life and spirit. His artwork meticulously captured everyday scenes and the lives of ordinary people - moneychangers, clockmakers, and family members - imbuing his subjects with a documentary quality. Works like *Get*, and *Letter from America* reflect the vibrancy and struggles of Jewish life during a tumultuous period.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Pen's private school was closed, but he continued to teach at the Higher National Academy of Art at the invitation of Marc Chagall. Until the very end of his life, he maintained close relationships with his pupils, always ready to offer advice or help them in any way he could.

Tragically, Yudel Pen was killed in Vitebsk in February 1937, and the circumstances of his death remain unclear to this day. Pen is buried



Letter from America, 1903. Courtesy of Wikipedia.org

in Vitebsk at the Old Semenov Cemetery. His contributions as a painter and educator, especially as a mentor to Chagall and El Lissitzky, have left an enduring legacy in Jewish art.



MICHAL ROVNER

Born 1957
Ramat Gan, Israel

Michal Rovner is a star of contemporary global art and a pioneer in using moving images as a non-narrative, non-cinematic medium for creating installations. She has held more than sixty solo exhibitions, including at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2002), Jeu de Paume, Paris (2005), and the Louvre, Paris (2011). In 2003, she represented Israel at the 50th Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art.

Born in Tel Aviv in 1957, Rovner studied cinema, television, philosophy and fine arts. Her Jewish heritage and upbringing profoundly shaped her art. Rovner's practice has centred on bringing issues of identity, memory, place and dislocation to the fore. Rather than telling linear stories, Rovner constructs contemplative spaces where the personal and collective intermingle.

In early works such as *One-Person Game Against Nature*, Rovner used



One-Person Game Against Nature I #33, 2001. Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Gift, The Bohlen Foundation

traditional processed photography and large-scale Polaroids to depict blurred human figures and isolated houses, often floating or dissolving into their surroundings. Even then, she sought to abstract the human form, condensing it to a near-archetypal essence. Her art moves between concrete and abstract, new media and archaeology, evoking human existence at a level of almost elemental simplicity. Though her figures move, the situation remains static: she conveys not events but states of mind - mental, political and universal - allowing viewers from any background to find their own reflection.

A major example of her work with memory is *The World That Was*, a ten-minute film shown at the entrance to the Yad Vashem museum, displayed on a triangle-shaped screen. The film reconstructs everyday Jewish life in Europe



The World That Was, 2005. Courtesy of Yadvashem.org



The World That Was, 2005. Courtesy of Yadvashem.org

before the Holocaust. Rovner pieced together rare, low-quality footage from private collections, striving, in her words, "to truthfully recreate the atmosphere of Jewish life" and weave disparate fragments into a single, living tapestry.

In 2023, Rovner created *Signaling*, a video installation featuring rows of figures waving towards the viewer, each emitting a red glow from their chest. The work references the more than one hundred hostages taken by Hamas during the 7 October attack on Israel.

As the artist explains: "These hand movements are a universal code for a call for help, a signal of distress. 'Pay attention! I'm here, see me, don't forget me.' The colour red is related to body heat, and its movement is like accelerated breathing, a beating pulse. It's a colour of urgency, danger, red lights that come on in emergency situations, alarm signals."

Signaling has been displayed in Times Square, New York, as well as in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, serving as a haunting symbol of Israel's resilience, loss and hope.



ISSACHAR BER RYBACK

1897 Yelizavetgrad, Russian Empire –
1935 Paris, France

Issachar Ber Ryback (1897–1935) was a prominent Jewish artist whose works were inspired by Jewish life while embracing modernist aesthetics. Born in Yelizavetgrad (now Kropyvnytskyi, Ukraine) into a family of Chassidic descent, Ryback's upbringing blended traditional Jewish education with the intellectual currents of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment). His father, an admirer of modern culture, supported his children's education but was initially hesitant about Ryback's pursuit of art. Nevertheless, Ryback followed his passion, studying at the Kiev Art School, where he joined a group of artists seeking to create a distinctly Jewish art style.

While in Kiev, Ryback became a key member of the Kultur-Lige, an organisation dedicated to promoting Jewish culture through art and literature. His work often drew from his childhood experiences in the *shtetl*, portraying its rituals, folklore and everyday life. Graphic cycles such as *On Jewish Fields in Ukraine* and *The Shtetl* series exemplified his ability to blend emotional depth with avant-garde styles, making use of bold forms and expressive lines.

In the aftermath of World War I and the pogroms that devastated Jewish communities, Ryback turned to documenting these tragedies. His *Pogrom* series, created during his time in Berlin, stands as a harrowing depiction of the violence suffered by Jews, rendered in stark, angular compositions that evoke anguish



Blessing, 1917. Courtesy of Wikipedia.org

and chaos. While in Berlin, Ryback continued to collaborate with other modernist Jewish artists and contributed to the revival of Yiddish cultural expression through book illustrations and set designs.

Ryback's later career took him to Paris, where he explored new mediums, including sculpture and ceramics. His works were featured in prestigious exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale and the Autumn Salon, further establishing his reputation in Europe. Despite these successes, his life was tragically cut short by tuberculosis in 1935 at the age of 38.

Throughout his life, Ryback remained deeply rooted in his Jewish identity, traditions and struggles while pushing the



Houses in a Small Town, 1917. Courtesy of Wikipedia.org

boundaries of modern art. His legacy is a profound blend of cultural heritage and innovative expression, making him a cornerstone of early 20th-century Jewish art.

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Produced by Tatiana von Beelen
and the United Synagogue
Contact: tkrupinina@theus.org.uk
WWW.THEUS.ORG.UK

