

Through the Golden Door

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In France, a critic once coined the phrase *École Juive* to encompass the activities of all the Jewish-born painters and sculptors who had flocked to Paris from Eastern or Southeastern Europe soon after 1900. A somewhat similar "Jewish School" flourished also in the United States, especially in New York City, between the years 1905 and 1945. Art histories generally do not use the designation, and one cannot say truthfully that the men and women of this "School" clung together as firmly as, for instance, the impressionists did when they rallied around Monet and Pissarro.

Yet while the existence of the "School" cannot be demonstrated by exclusively Jewish artists' organizations, group shows, or manifestoes—except for some rare cases—anyone who has ever talked with American Jewish artists over sixty must have gotten the notion that for some time a loosely knit group of men and women of Jewish descent did exist here as a curiously disadvantaged enclave within American art, and within an open society that, in 1917, was perhaps not as open as it appears to be today.

These talented individuals had been children when brought to the United States in the period between 1880 and 1910. Those fortunate enough to have been born here spent their formative years in the "ghetto" of one of our four or five largest cities. As art students, and even as professional artists, they often clung together for a while, partly because of their fondness for some of the things they or their parents had brought along from the Old Country—the mellifluous Yiddish language and the more secular aspects of Jewish legend and lore—and partly because, for long

stretches of time, they felt like awkward outsiders in the largely Gentile-dominated "Art Establishment."

No exact numbers can be given, but there must have been hundreds among the 2,300,000 Jews who came through the "Golden Door" and among their American-born children. A few managed to break out of the ghetto; the names of the sculptor Jo Davidson and the painters Maurice Sterne, Abraham Walkowitz, and Max Weber among the pioneers spring quickly to mind, and Jacob Epstein would have belonged here, had he not left his native New York for good as a mere student, migrated to Europe, and become completely identified with modern British art. Of these hundreds, perhaps no more than twenty or thirty names entered general reference works like the *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Art*, the *Praeger Encyclopedia of Art*, or the *Britannica Encyclopedia of American Art*. Many, one surmises, did not have talents strong enough to engage the attention of the influential critics, the well-established gallery-owners, or the wealthy collectors. Time is a merciless eliminator, and not always a just one. It often ignores life's stepchildren. There were quite a few Jewish artists whose importance remained hidden because of the long and sinister shadow cast upon them by their restrictive Lower East Side milieu.

Instead of Orgies

Many discoveries have yet to be made. To give an example, Louis Lozowick (1892-1973) was one of the more widely known of the "Unknown" artists. Yet of the three reference works mentioned above, only one, the *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Art* (volume 3, [1969]), found him worth mentioning—in a couple of unenthusiastic lines: "Industrial complexes, buildings, and bridges in New York provided themes for his early work, which emphasizes strongly simplified structural lines and modeling, sometimes with cubistic overtones. His later work is more textural and romantic." At least Lozowick had the satisfaction of being "re-discovered" just before his death, when the Whitney Museum of American Art mounted a large show of his remarkable lithographs.

Several other cases of neglect could be cited. Yet the anti-Semitism encountered by Max Liebermann in Germany and by Marc Chagall in France never hurt a Jewish artist in America.

Besides, from the mid-twenties onward, an increasing number of American commercial galleries, devoted to the selling of contemporary art, came to be owned or at least managed by Jews; in the 1950's, Jews began to hold responsible jobs as directors of art museums, publishers of art books and art magazines, and critics attached to major newspapers. Still, it was the proletarian backgrounds of the Jewish artists, their foreign accents, and their lack of *savoir faire* that often made it difficult for them to rise to the top; their Gentile colleagues, most of them scions of the middle class, if not the upper middle class, generally had an easier time of it. At the same time, the American Jews sparked no scandals, as did some of the *peintres tragiques* of the *École Juive*—the very uncouthness of the European Jews, their alcoholism and diabolic behavior, often led American millionaires to Paris to ferret a Chaim Soutine out of his lair, to accompany a Pascin on his Red Light district excursions, and to hunt for extant Modiglianis in obscure bistros.

The "Jewish School" did not appeal to our Babbitts, our *nouveaux riches*. They often looked like "paintners" rather than painters, and indeed many were forced to perform a variety of odd jobs, when sales of pictures did not materialize. For they were all married—unlike Modigliani, Soutine, *et al.*—and many raised children. Since America offered no Montparnasse cafés in which to meet, they congregated in cheap luncheonettes, minute Jewish clubs, or at home, and a glass of tea took the place of pernod. Instead of orgies, there were conversations, often stormy ones, and though they were conducted in English, the participants occasionally switched to Yiddish, especially in moments of anger.

They got some support from the Yiddish daily press, but the "reviewers" were more interested in the subject matter—especially if it was a *sheyner yid*—and in anecdotes than in evaluations in aesthetic terms with which they were not familiar. The Anglo-Jewish press—among which *The American Hebrew* had the greatest prestige—often published interviews with Jewish artists. But all of this was of no great help to the painters, sculptors, and print-makers, since the texts rarely reached people of means eager to purchase works of art to embellish their homes.

Still, our "Jewish School" was better off than the *École Juive*; even post-Dreyfus France, after all, retained many pockets of anti-

Semitism and xenophobia. Gradually, the young students learned to assimilate to the New World (“... I learned that there was a history quite apart from the intimate Biblical legends,” Ben Shahn wrote in *Love and Joy about Letters* [1954]; “there was an American history and a world history that were remote and unreal and concerned people who were strange to me and had nothing to do with my family or with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”). At least they were free men, which they would not have been had they remained in the Pale (“I have benefited by all the advantages [America] has to offer one: schools, museums, art galleries and libraries. My work has been influenced by the multinational character and the pluralistic culture of this country,” one artist was quoted in the catalogue for the Hirshhorn Museum show of 1975, *The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876-1976*). Maurice Sterne expressed his gratitude in *Shadow and Light: The Life, Friends and Opinions of Maurice Sterne* (New York, 1965): “Although much has been written about immigration to America, only those who have known the agony of repression can appreciate the blessing it was to be here.”

Father Had Other Ambitions

I have deliberately confined myself to the years between 1905 and 1945. In 1905, Max Weber, then aged twenty-four, returned to the United States after several years of travel and study in Europe; he became the first American Jewish artist of this century to cause a stir in the art world. During the four decades which followed, Jews were prominent here as leaders of Expressionism and Social Realism* and most active in the aggressive American Artists' Congress; they held important jobs in the WPA Federal Project inaugurated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to aid artists during the Depression. But both the Congress and the WPA petered out after America's entry into World War II. By 1945, most of the erstwhile “revolutionaries” had become middle-

*Expressionist “refers to spontaneous, free, intuitive distortion or exaggeration of ordinary forms and colors in nature in order to achieve an emotional or esthetic effect”; Social Realism was “an American art movement preoccupied with comment upon political, social and economic conditions” (*Painting and Sculpture in the Museum of Modern Art*, edited by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. [1942]).



Courtesy, Alfred Werner

Seeking Work (1938) by Max Weber

aged men with some money in the bank, and a new element dominated the scene: Abstract Expressionism—imageless, anti-formal, improvisatory, unlinked to any of the schools based on Renaissance concepts. The sixty-four-year-old Weber had to yield leadership to Jackson Pollock, then thirty-three years of age. Among the Action Painters, of which Pollock was the most widely advertised, there were few Jews; the most prominent were Adolf Gottlieb, Philipp Guston, Mark Rothko, and Jack Tworikov. Expressionism and Social Realism did not disappear overnight, and men much younger than Weber, men like Hyman Bloom and Jack Levine, David Aronson and Leonard Baskin, stubbornly clung to representational, figurative art, but they were pushed into the background by Abstract Expressionism and by the non-objective schools to follow.

Looking back at the now virtually extinct Jewish School—its “members” now reduced to a few septuagenarians and octogenarians—one still wonders how this School could have erupted here in the years preceding America’s entry into World War I. How could Weber and his confrères, who, like him, grew up in iconophobic neighborhoods, have even developed the idea of becoming artists instead of, say, lawyers or physicians? Weber, it is true, did not encounter strong parental opposition when he decided to study art at Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute. Perhaps he was just lucky! In all likelihood, Weber’s milieu was not much different from that of Maurice Sterne (1878-1957), brought to the United States from Latvia at the age of eleven. In his autobiography, Sterne insisted that his own *shtetl* had shown no tolerance for the visual arts: “Religious Jews took very seriously the Biblical injunction against ‘graven’ images, and I was punished badly one day by the rabbi of the school for drawing his picture on the ground with a stick.” Sterne’s sister, Rosa, was more enlightened. She took her little brother to the Tretyakoff Gallery in Moscow. Precocious as he was, little Maurice dared to offer help to an artist he saw copying a picture there: “At that, my embarrassed sister whisked me away, but I went home from that gallery determined to be an artist.” His parents did not encourage his “burning desire” and enrolled him in a trade school. Yet Maurice refused to learn “a useful skill”; instead, “every moment I could I spent in drawing, and I gave very little attention to the teachers who tried to make me a locksmith.”

Two other boys, impressed by what they saw at the same Tretiakoff Gallery, were the twins Moses (1899-1974) and Raphael Soyer. Their father, a self-made intellectual—Abraham Schoar was a Hebrew teacher who gained fame as a Hebrew writer—happened to be different from the parents of all the other American Jewish artists. He adorned his home at provincial Borisoglebsk with small reproductions of classic masterworks, and told his sons—the twins and the much younger Isaac—about Michelangelo, Raphael, and Rembrandt. Schoar was an exception. But even where there was no outright hostility to art, there was at least the feeling that the practice of art was *meshuggah* in a materialistic society like that of America which tended to regard painters and sculptors as improvident outsiders. This is what the father of Jo Davidson (1883-1958) thought. In his autobiography, the sculptor recalled the “long, dark halls, crowded tenements, strange smells, [and] drab, unpainted walls” of the Lower East Side; “We were exceedingly poor and often didn’t have enough to eat.” Understandably, there was vehement objection when he declared it his intention to become an artist: “My family was opposed to the idea of my becoming an artist because that meant a loafer, a perpetual pauper, an absolute[ly] useless person.” Jo’s mother eventually was reconciled to the idea and even posed for her son, but her husband remained angry. When Jo proudly placed on the mantelpiece of their home his bronze *David*, which had just been accepted for the annual exhibition of the Society of American Artists, the elder Davidson pointedly and disdainfully left the room: “Father had had other ambitions for me.”

The middle-aged immigrants who so strongly disagreed with their sons were not necessarily reactionaries or individuals devoid of spiritual values. They were just realistic; they knew that the material success they never achieved was more likely to come to a man with a practical occupation than to a painter or sculptor. Had these parents been rich, they might have aided their talented children, as well-to-do parents do in 1976. But they were poor! To support herself and her three children, Mrs. Walkowitz ran a newsstand on Delancey Street, and her son Abraham spent all his spare time helping her sell papers. To contribute to the support of the household, Jo Davidson worked as a messenger boy for the Western Union Telegraph Company, as an office boy in a sausage factory,



Courtesy, The Jewish Museum, New York
Artist's Parents (1932) by Raphael Soyer

and as an errand boy in a bookstore and publishing house. William Gropper, born in 1897, had a father who was unable to feed and clothe his family. Hence, the burden fell on his mother, a seamstress: "Gropper's first working experience was carrying bundles of cloth home from the lofts for his mother to sew on at night. At fourteen, Bill Gropper left PS 171 and began working twelve hours a day, six days a week, for \$5 and nothing more for overtime." Biographer August L. Freundlich adds: "With such a beginning in the proletarian world, it is no wonder that Gropper has a keen social consciousness, that he feels for the downtrodden, the victims of injustice."

A Great Genius Will Soon Arise

A few artists—among them William Zorach (1887-1966) and Ben Shahn (1898-1969)—managed to enter the arts through a backdoor, namely, lithography, for, as Zorach put it, this occupation was once "one of the legitimate ways of making a living for artists who could not make a go of it by painting alone." Shahn was apprenticed to a lithographer, then went to college to study biology, and finally, realizing that he was not meant to be a scientist, attended the National Academy of Design and then the Art Students League. Indeed, New York's institutions of higher learning never rejected non-Christian applicants, as schools in Tsarist Russia nearly always did. Yet Shahn also got some of his training at the Educational Alliance Art School, for it was only logical for ghetto boys and girls to seek shelter in a place where there was no need to feel uncomfortable about their accents, poor clothing, or foreign names and manners. The Alliance had been founded on East Broadway in 1889—a few years after the surge of Russian Jews into the United States began. It owed its existence to the generosity of some Jewish philanthropists who realized that a community center was needed on the Lower East Side. Art instruction was offered almost from the beginning, but increased in scope and depth during the first World War, when young Abbo Ostrovsky, born in 1889 in the Ukraine, created the nucleus of a genuine art school. (He retired from the directorship in 1955.)

Ostrovsky began a night class for two boys who worked in clothing factories during the day. Gradually many more enrolled—

among them newsboys, capmakers, shoe workers, shirt cutters, and window trimmers. Since the models—fish peddlers, pushcart men, bearded scholars recruited from the streets had to be paid, the students were required to chip in three cents a night for the cost (if they could afford it). The school also found jobs for those who needed them, and sent students to summer camps as “art teachers,” or waiters. Some of the students availed themselves of the soup kitchen operated by the Alliance for the neighborhood poor.

For many, this school, this activity, offered virtually the only escape from spiritual starvation. While most of the students were Jews drawn from the low-income groups of Manhattan’s “ghetto,” the school never asked questions as to the religious or racial background of would-be-students (in 1976, a large percentage of the student body consisted of Blacks and Puerto Ricans). The teaching staff included non-Jews; among the instructors were, for instance, Henry McBride and Jerome Myers. The artists-to-be were given a rigorous academic training, but there was no squelching of imagination, and they were encouraged to find their individual styles. The school eventually began to draw the admiration of knowledgeable New Yorkers. In 1916, the *New York Post* indulged in a glowing prophecy about the contribution of the Alliance to American cultural glory: “Out of the teeming squalor of New York City’s East Side will soon arise a great genius, a great writer, a great artist, and Abbo Ostrovsky . . . is doing what he can to keep alive and fan the fire latent there that may make the artist.” In 1919, a cub reporter named Maxwell Anderson—later to become famous as a playwright—wrote in the *Globe*: “An art school that grew up among the immigrants on the East Side would be interesting even if the work were only conventional. But when we find the East Side Art School doing work in painting, etching, drawing and modeling that equals or excels the best work produced in old established and reputable schools, we may be pardoned for enthusiasm and surprise. The immigrant evidently knows more about art than we have given him credit for.”

The list of the school’s alumni includes Saul Beizerman, Leonard Baskin, Peter Blume, Jo Davidson, Jacob Epstein, Louis Ferstadt, Maurice Glickman, Adolf Gottlieb, Chaim Gross, Elias Grossman, Lena Gurr, Joseph Margulies, Louise Nevelson, Barnett Newman,



Dancer by Moses Soyer

Courtesy, Alfred Werner

Elias Newman, Louis Ribak, Iver Rose, Mark Rothko, Louis Schanker, and Isaac and Moses Soyer (Raphael Soyer studied at the National Academy of Design). Of these, at least a third were no longer among the living by 1976. The late Moses Soyer once aptly summed up what set this art school apart from all others. He recalled that Ostrovsky had been "imbued with a consuming desire to create an art center for immigrants and children of immigrants." Soyer went on to say:

It was this dedication, this singleness of purpose which perhaps gave this school its quality and set it apart from larger and better equipped and endowed schools, such as the Academy and the Art Students League. Its standards were extremely high. It was free from the restrictions that governed other art schools. The students were allowed to come and go as they wished, for most of them were poor and had to work for a living. Ostrovsky accorded them absolute freedom of expression, even though he may have differed (he often did) with their ideas, goals and motivations. He was young and didactic, and the students were young and rebellious. Consequently, there were clashes, mostly idealogical, and to the good, I think, because, to paraphrase freely an old Hebrew saying, clashes and jealousy in art and knowledge are stimulating.

One of the most remarkable things about the school was perhaps its models. They were the people who made up the teeming, multivaried, vital East Side. After painting for years the eternal nude, male or female, against the eternally gray school wall, it was a relief and almost a rediscovery to face a bearded, Rembrandtesque Hebrew patriarch, or a jolly Italian woman, or a pregnant gypsy, or a wistful Negro child.

Those were good days. We painted life-size canvass and carved heroic sculpture. We made alliances which lasted through life. We argued and fought endlessly about life and art, and the relative importance of Piero della Francesca and Cézanne. We differed in all things. Only one thing united us—the consuming desire to become artists.

Expressionism Was What Attracted Jews

These gifted young Jews, immigrants or the children of immigrants, were in no way segregated, nor were obstacles put in their paths on account of their origins. At first, there were no Jewish-owned galleries they could turn to, but in 1905 Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), the pioneer photographer, opened the Photo-Secession Gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue (later known as "291").

There he would champion Walkowitz and Weber—though Stieglitz, the somewhat arrogant German middle-class Jew, and Weber, the hot-tempered immigrant, soon quarreled and abruptly ended their association. Due to his fight with the organizers of the important Armory Show at New York in 1913, Weber was not included; a number of his coreligionists were—artists like Samuel Halpert, Maurice Sterne, and Abraham Walkowitz. That same year, however, John Cotton Dane arranged a Weber exhibition in the fledgling Newark museum; when one considers the nature of the artist's daringly unorthodox canvases, it was a hazardous undertaking.

The story of the help given by the enlightened journalist Hutchins Haggood to Jacob Epstein, a young New York Jew, need not be told here again. Strangely, of the young artists extolled in Haggood's *Spirit of the Ghetto*, only Epstein eventually became successful—Bernard Gussow, Samuel Kalish, and Nathaniel Loewenberg have all sunk into oblivion. Haggood was not the only unprejudiced Gentile to encourage a gifted "ghetto boy." William Gropper was discovered by Frank A. Parsons, president of the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts. Young Gropper, employed by a men's wear shop, would occasionally decorate post cards to customers with little drawings of scenes and personalities. One such caricature caught the eye of a customer who happened to be Parsons. Through him, Gropper got a scholarship. In Boston, Denman Waldo Ross (1853-1935), founder of Harvard's Art Department, took under his wing three impecunious Jewish youngsters from the slums—Harold Zimmerman, Hyman Bloom, and Jack Levine. Zimmerman died young, and little of his work seems to have survived, but Bloom and Levine made great names for themselves. Ross cared so much for Levine's drawings that he arranged an exhibition of them at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum when the artist was still in his early high school years!

If one speaks from an *aesthetic* rather than a sociological viewpoint, is it permissible to claim that all these artists from the ghetto ever constituted a "Jewish School," with noticeable features or idiosyncrasies which kept them separate from the mainstream? Nothing of the sort can be demonstrated with any degree of certainty, but it is a curious fact that Expressionism rather than any other trend was what attracted Jews in the period under review, from Walkowitz and Weber to David Aronson and Leonard Baskin.



Gandhi by Ben Shahn

Courtesy, Alfred Werner

As for Social Realism, Jews were so prominent within the movement that writers on American art have tended to describe it as a "Jewish affair"—which it certainly was not. In any event, Social Realism is an even looser term than Expressionism. A product of the era of the Great Depression, it could be applied to the work of those who concentrated on such searing themes as lynchings or police brutality to workers. But also included in the movement were the three Soyer brothers, who painted the unemployed with more sadness than anger, more pity than rage.

There is no doubt, in any event, that some of these artists from the ghetto added to the American art scene what is called the "Jewish motif." Many a picture took the form of a stern-looking, big-nosed, heavily bearded old man—more often the likeness of a grandfather than a father, for the latter usually was, or became, a manual worker who shaved off beard and earlocks, bought ready-made clothes on Delancey Street, and retained little Jewishness beyond the reading of Yiddish papers, an occasional visit to the synagogue, and a faithful adherence to Jewish-style delicatessen. Many of these pictures are rather static and dull; others are very dynamic, very exciting, for in the swarming Lower East Side of Manhattan the best of these artists saw beauty where others had failed to see it. Walkowitz and Weber, Bloom and Levine, but also Ben-Zion, Jacques Zucker, and Marvin Cherney found it on each street corner, in sweatshops, in kosher restaurants and in Yiddish theaters—an endless variety of fascinating types that would have thrilled Rembrandt. In their pictures of immigrant Jews, they recorded the frenzy of facial expressions, the exultation of uninhibited gestures. There were complaints that Weber's pictures were "ugly caricatures" and that he made the Jewish types look highly unattractive. But the non-Jewish critic, Henry McBride, rallied to his defense: "What was wonderful in [Weber's Lower East Side figures] was the fact that they echoed the racial anguish of mind without recourse to brutal facts or prosaic arguments. They did it musically, symbolically, eloquently, and, though so modern, still bore accents that seemed to reach back to the beginnings of time."

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