

VISUAL ARTS


**ARY STILLMAN: FROM
IMPRESSIONISM
TO ABSTRACT
EXPRESSIONISM**

James Wechsler, ed.

Merrell Publishers, 2008. 176 pp. \$59.95
ISBN: 978-1-8589-4433-3

The turbulent, displacing history of the Jewish people throughout the centuries due to religious, political, and socio-economic upheavals has changed the destiny of millions of individuals and the underappreciated abstract artist Ary Stillman was one such person.

The large, coffee table book entitled, *Ary Stillman: From Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism*, is a collection of essays from various art historians, curators, and art critics which follows the development of a young man searching for a means to express his heritage and identity. The visually impressive book, including large color plates depicting the various artistic movements which Stillman explored, tells the story of a curious, philosophically-minded native Minsk man born Hyman Aron Stelmach in the small predominantly Jewish village of Hresk in 1891. While Stillman was raised in an Orthodox environment, the family moved to the United States to escape violent pogroms. He was influenced by his Americanized family in Sioux City, Iowa, travels to Europe—particularly Paris—the center of emerging Avant Garde genres where he studied with renowned artistic talents, and got involved with the New York School where Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and others were among his peers, and later a return to the U.S. in the early 1930's to escape the escalating persecution of the Nazi regime.

Having to redirect the course of his career so often due to impending danger or restrictions placed on Jewish artists caused friction in Stillman's life and many of the contributing essayists believe that this constant disruption robbed Stillman of his rightful place among influential artists of the 20th century. While the lengthy book, including an impressively detailed overview of the styles, movements, and individuals of the 1900's could be used as an effective text for art history college courses, the compilation stands out in terms of addressing Jewish identity through artistic expression. Primarily known as an abstract artist, Stillman grappled with how to express the weighty, turbulent struggle

of the Jewish people through abstraction. He never lost sight of where he came from—the underpinnings of some of his most complex canvases remain nostalgically imbued with the traditions of Jewish symbolism. MBD


**CHAGALL AND
THE ARTISTS
OF THE RUSSIAN
JEWISH THEATER**

Susan Tumarkin Goodman, ed.

Yale University Press/The Jewish Museum, 2008.
226 pp. \$65.00
ISBN: 978-0-300-11155-2

Russian Jewish theater is a time honored tradition which pre-dates the early days of the Russian Revolution and began growing seeds in the early 1900's. The book, *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, was assembled and published in conjunction with an exhibit curated by the Jewish Museum of New York.

Senior Curator, Susan Tumarkin Goodman, has explored the topic of Russian Jewish theater in several previous exhibitions, but never before has the topic been so intricately dissected. Amid a constantly changing political landscape, this artistic movement emerged as a stage, literally and metaphorically, for depicting the disparate voices of the splintered Russian population. Contributing writers discuss the flux of secular Jewish society and the environment in which Jewish theater—artists, actors, and directors—played significant roles in influencing the general public, both Jewish and non Jewish.

The fractured sects of the time are best represented in this book by the descriptions and missions of the two most historically noted Russian Jewish theaters, the Hebrew language, *Habima* (the stage), and the Yiddish language *Goset* which represented the large general populace of Jewish culture and identity in the Soviet Union of the early 1900's. That artists like Marc Chagall were approached by the latter to create surreal, *shtetl* themed backdrops for their productions was a natural extension of the philosophy that the troupe was espousing. Key figures in Russian Jewish theater such as Aleksei Granovsky and Solomon Mikoels felt that Chagall's work, steeped in "old world" Jewish tradition, captured the imagination and language of everyday Jewish workers while founders of *Habima* such as Natan Altman and its supporters viewed their productions as Zionist in approach.

This historical compilation includes

Marc Chagall,
Dance, 1920,
tempera,
gouache, and
opaque white
on canvas.



(State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.)

intriguing illustrations of stage sets, costumes, and characters which address the unflattering, persisting stereotypes of Jewish people, the changing of policy under Stalin as well as the struggle against the extinguishment of creative expression in favor of freedom. MBD


**DANIEL LIBESKIND
AND THE
CONTEMPORARY
JEWISH MUSEUM:
NEW JEWISH
ARCHITECTURE
FROM BERLIN
TO SAN FRANCISCO**

Edited by Connie Wolf with contributions
by Daniel Libeskind, Mitchell Schwarzer
and James E. Young

Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., Skira Editore
S.p.A., and Contemporary Jewish Museum, 2008.
128 pp. \$45.00
ISBN: 978-0-8473-3165-4

This beautiful volume showcases four dramatic Jewish museum projects designed by Daniel Libeskind. Published in conjunction with the opening of his most recent project, the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, this book also features the Jewish Museum Berlin, the Felix-Nussbaum Haus in Osnabruck, Germany, and the Danish Jewish Museum in Copenhagen. The accompanying essays, by an art historian, a Judaic studies professor, and Libeskind himself, effectively explore the symbolic potential of Jewish architecture through abstract and spiritual dimensions in the European museums and in a more celebratory context in San Francisco.

The text successfully describes these four significant Libeskind buildings, and the large and arresting photographs effectively draw us into the architect's vision, including his integration of older existing buildings into the new museums. The book is less clear in defining the meaning of "Jewish architecture" in the case of the San Francisco museum. The three Euro-