

tion to that theme in western art through the centuries? Do we minimize the impact of the camp victim's reportage if we relate his art to the art of those who experienced horrors in other ages?

I am also interested in studying the concept of Holocaust art and its relationship to the art of suffering in all ages (though I do not doubt the importance of asserting the uniqueness of the Holocaust as an historical event). I believe that we can increase our understanding and appreciation of the spiritual values which remained strong among so many of its victims if we better understand the context of Holocaust art— its art-historical sources and its relationship to those sources. There is no reason to fear that somehow we will diminish our sense of the Holocaust in all its terrible uniqueness if we gradually learn to deal with some of its aspects in context. And hopefully, those of us who are trying to confront and sort out the difficult questions which arise in the process of this pursuit will not be too gravely criticized for being outsiders. I am not pretending to any insights that can come only from those who are survivors. But I also don't want to be rejected for those other insights that I might be able to provide precisely because I *am* that outsider. ●

Holocaust art is testimony, not art

Marilyn Kushner

We know that the Jews in concentration camps drew images of the unthinkable conditions they endured so that the darkness encompassing the Nazi-occupied countries might be known throughout the world. The purpose of these works was communication of the truth, *not* the creation of an aesthetic expression. The audience was world opinion, not wealthy patrons. Because a group of Theresienstadt artists smuggled drawings to the International Red Cross, officials from that organization visited the camp in 1943, confronting the Nazis with these pictures of suffering. Of course, the Nazis denied the existence of such conditions and subsequently shipped the artists involved to Auschwitz. Nevertheless, the work continued. "I want them to be a living and shocking document of a world of horror and torment," said Karol Konieczny of his drawings. He did not want his work to be judged aesthetically. (Janet Blatter & Sybil Milton, *Art of the Holocaust*, New York, 1981, 142.)

Other images, rather than reporting a horrifying reality to the outside world, recorded the events

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for history. To this end drawings on scraps of paper (or any other material that could be used) were found tucked away in hidden places in the camps, waiting to be discovered after the war. Clearly, these were not cries for rescue but first-hand documentary accounts of history. Do we place newsreels from the 1930's and the 1940's within the genre of creative film making or are we more likely to consider them visual history? Similarly, these images, whose purpose was to depict the events, should be considered as visual source materials for the historian.

Painting To Survive

We also are aware that there were instances when the artist wanted neither to report events nor to record history. Rather, the motives for this art were intrinsic; the work was done for psychological reasons. When a person in the camps at the risk of death drew an image of truth, he exercised power over something, his art. Indeed, that small act of self-choice denied the Nazis complete success. They never had full autonomy over that human being. One sees intense suffering in these pictures yet it is accompanied by a determined resolve to survive. Josef Szajna, who was interned at Auschwitz, said, "The idea of painting or drawing was to leave a trace of yourself behind you" (Blatter, 34). Indeed, while the Nazis possessed total authority over the bodies of these Jews, they could not always control their spirits; and when the spirit endured, one could transcend Nazi barbarism. Alfred Kantor, an eighteen-year-old art student who was at Theresienstadt and then Auschwitz, wrote that he secretly sketched out of a "deep instinct of self-preservation [which] undoubtedly helped me to deny the unimaginable horrors of that time. By taking on the role of an "observer" I could at least for a few moments detach myself from what was going on at Auschwitz and was therefore better able to hold together the threads of sanity. In Auschwitz I felt obsessed... I began to observe everything with an eye towards capturing it on paper." (Mary Costanza, *The Living Witness*, New York, 1982, XIII).

These images are primary sources for psychologists who can study them as visual documents of humanity striving to survive under the harshest of imaginable conditions.

It would be remiss for the primary interpretation of these images to be in formal art-historical terms. Their message is not art. Art is the by-product of the extrinsic or intrinsic motives of the works. These images beg to be interpreted within the scope of the Holocaust, European history, or

the science of human behavior, but not within the stylistic context of twentieth-century European art. Holocaust imagery is more than art. We need to listen to the words of those artists in the black days of Nazi Europe. "The written word was not enough," said Avraham Golub, a member of the underground and the Jewish Council of the Kovno ghetto. "Without graphic representations, the true sorrow of life struggling under the Nazi domination could not be fully documented." (Costanza, 1) They struggled to tell the world and they struggled to endure. We must not allow the medium of their message to be misunderstood. ●

Reflections of a survivor/artist

Frederick Terna

Three and a half years in German concentration camps, the continued effort to set my experience on paper and canvas and over forty years of work that is frequently painful, occasionally soothing, and, at all times, unavoidable, are my only claims to expertise on Holocaust art.

In earlier years I would paint landscapes or abstractions avoiding my wartime experience, only to have the past suddenly assert itself in groups of violent paintings and drawings. Today, looking back at some of the landscapes, I notice the many walls, the enclosures, the hidden watchtowers. Eventually I came to understand that my work would reflect my past, like it or not.

I paint feelings, states of heart, mind, and soul, using some of the imagery of the past. It is not a record of past events. It is both questioning and answering my experience during the Holocaust.

Making Art: An Act of Defiance

I see two distinct categories of Holocaust art: work made in ghettos and concentration camps before liberation, and work made after that date. As for the first category, the fact that so few works made in ghettos and concentration camps have survived, and the very fact that they were made at all, give these works significance that should place them outside the usual concern of art criticism. Whether made as a deliberate visual record, a witness for posterity, or out of an inner need to set on paper what was before the eyes, whatever the reason, each drawing required difficult tasks, many of them frequently quite dangerous. Finding art material, or acquiring it in exchange for food, making one's own inks or

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colors, hiding finished work, etc., were conscious acts of defiance, and, regardless of artistic merit, actions vastly different from creating art after liberation.

Works in the second category, Holocaust art made after liberation, should be scrutinized like all other art. It includes the good and the bad, the kitsch, the sensational, the naive and the theatrical... . The validity of any work in this category rests on its ability to convey feelings, attitudes, and knowledge about those years, and to convey them to a large number of people for a long time.

Tradition has given us some models to approach this subject, e.g., the Akedah, Job, Tishah b'Av. I, as well as other artists, have filled sketchbooks and painted many versions of the Akedah, sketched and painted around the subject of the destroyed Temple, creating a visual counterpart to the liturgy of destruction and rebuilding. Yet I feel that these ancient models are wanting, that we need a new visual vocabulary, that we have to start painting parts of the *piyutim* (liturgical poetry) of our own era.

Art As The Survivor's Testimony

As a survivor and an artist I don't have the freedom of other artists. I cannot walk away from the subject. Even when ignoring it I'm quite aware of the deliberate exclusion. Yet I consider myself fortunate to have this form of catharsis available, and to be able to paint myself out of emotional straits. On the other hand: how can I show more than just a small fraction of what I know when there is so much to be observed and remembered? I know what it feels like to stand in a selection line in Auschwitz. I know how the fire of a crematorium chimney casts flickering light on a barrack wall. How does one paint the near certainty of violent personal annihilation? How does one paint it, and then make a viewer want to stop, to look at a canvas, react to it? I have no answers to these questions. In order to understand, to find answers, we must formulate the right questions. I would like my paintings to be seen as such questions.

Today Holocaust art is a part of the art world, a part of the merchandise on a complex art market. It is subject to the forces and powers of publicity, fashion, the hoopla and circus atmosphere of auction house strategies, the dealers' inside agreements. What will be accepted will run the entire gamut from excellence to the easy and the tawdry. In many communities it has become fashionable to erect memorials, symbolically or explicitly saying "Six Million." Many of these