

Parallels in Ukrainian and Jewish “National Styles” in Art in the First Third of the Twentieth Century

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Efforts undertaken in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to create “national styles” followed on processes that had taken place during most of the nineteenth century—in particular, the penchant for historicism and eclecticism and the painstaking search for a new style. One of the first such efforts was the Arts and Crafts movement initiated by William Morris (1834-1896). The fact that Morris opened a factory, mastered different kinds of crafts on his own, and tried to emulate medieval English patterns shows that his work was based on a certain program and a conscious attempt to create a new artistic style. Many European countries saw the successful realization of similar artistic projects, which came to be known as the Modern style, Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, or the Secession.

For peoples who had their own state—the French, the Germans, the English—this quest was primarily about responding to aesthetic and artistic needs. In comparison, many peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, who did not have a nation-state of their own (because they had either lost it or had just begun striving for it) faced the problem of not just finding a style, but a distinctive national style of their own. For Poles, this objective was served by the activities of the *Młoda Polska* (“Young Poland”) association and the creators of Zakopane style. It was also a concern for the Finns and Hungarians, as was evident at the World Exhibition of 1900 in Paris.

In this context, the developments in Ukrainian and Jewish art unfolded nearly simultaneously, on parallel tracks. In the Ukrainian case, efforts aimed at creating a national style produced the “Boichukism” school for the revival of Byzantine art, led by Mykhailo Boichuk (1882-1937), and spurred the exploration of different graphic styles by Hryhorii Narbut (1886-1920). In Jewish art, Ephraim Lilien (1874-1925) worked on developing a formal Jewish style in graphics. Like Boichuk, Lilien hailed from Galicia. The next steps were the founding of the Bezalel school of arts and crafts in Jerusalem in 1906 by Boris Schatz (1867-1932), the initial publication of an arts journal in Paris by the “Makhmadim” group (1911-1912), and finally the activities of the artistic section of the Kultur-Lige in Kyiv (1918-1924).

These programmatic Ukrainian and Jewish art projects occurred within the first third of the twentieth century and in the same general area—the territory of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. The difference was that the revival of Ukrainian culture was consciously implemented on the Ukrainians' *own* territory, where they had yet to attain statehood. In the Jewish case, the Promised Land was far away in the Middle East, though the movement towards Mount Zion was gaining momentum. It was the lack of their own territory that caused Martin Buber to doubt the possibility of creating a Jewish national art.¹ In the context of the distinctively Jewish experience of this period, however, the philosopher's doubts were answered by two specific developments. The first was the return to the Land of Israel and the founding of the Bezalel School in 1906. The second was the rise of the ideology of Yiddishism, based on the conviction that Yiddish was a valid

national language and that the development of modern Jewish culture was possible in the Diaspora. The Yiddishist Jewish intelligentsia did not plan to leave Europe. Instead they attached importance to elaborating a strategy for creating national art, inspired by new trends and explorations in European art. This challenge was taken up by the artistic section of the Kultur-Lige.

Paris was another geographic location of immense significance for the acceleration of these artistic processes in Eastern Europe. The artistic capital of the world at that time exerted a profound influence on the ideological evolution of both Boris Schatz, who studied in Paris in 1889-1895 (under M. Antokolsky) and Joseph Chaikov, one of the members of the Makhmadim group who studied in Paris in 1910-13 (under Nahum Aronson).² It was also in Paris that the theoretical tenets of Boichukism were formulated. Boichuk lived in Paris in 1907-1910 and attended the class of Paul Sérusier at the Academie Ranson together with like-minded friends.³

The formation of the Jewish and Ukrainian “national styles” also happened under similar socio-historical conditions. From the outset, an important component was the resistance to oppression and restrictions imposed by empires and dominant nations. In the Ukrainian case, the quest for originality was a response to natural assimilation processes, which became even more pronounced as assimilation became forced. In the Jewish case, the list of “stimulants” were augmented by deprivations experienced in the Pale of Settlement and pogroms.

The pinnacle of development for both the Ukrainian and Jewish “national” cultural projects occurred within several years after the end of First World War and the revolutionary events in Kyiv (1918-1922). Paradoxically, the years that were harshest politically and economically also witnessed a remarkable surge in creative energy in the arts and the realm of ideas. The Soviet authorities began reining in the Jewish revival already in the early 1920s. The Ukrainian revival was allowed to continue a little longer, but the payback for “nationalism” under the totalitarian system was inevitable. Boichuk and his students were executed in 1937.

With regard to their stylistic categorization, both projects were launched within the framework of the Modern style—a likewise deliberately created European style. As a result, national sentiments were no longer exclusively focused on detailed illustration of the past. Among the Ukrainian artists, the stylistics of Modernism (Secession) influenced the creative works of Mykhailo Zhuk, Modest Sosenko, Mykola Burachek and others. Vivid examples of the same trend in Jewish art can be found in the work of Lilien, which bore the distinctive marks of the German Jugendstil (for example, in his famous illustrations to the Bible). One should note that in both cases the Modern style was accompanied by national elements, such as ornamental motifs and details of clothing. **(fig. 1, 2)**

In the early twentieth century, representatives of the different cultures embarked on a quest for sources to mark their originality and distinctive features. This quest led the artists to look into the past and to embrace their own popular folk arts. The approach was common to all, but the details of orientation naturally differed. For Jews these were “lions, candleholders, signs of the Zodiac, Torahs, *tallits* [prayer shawls], deer, *Mogen Dovid*s [Stars of David], the symbolic hands...and other items characteristic of the Jewish environment and attributes of everyday life.”⁴ Importantly, it was at this time also that the systematic study and documentation of the artifacts of Jewish culture began. A well-known example was

the 1916 ethnographic expedition of El Lissitzky and Isakhar Rybak, commissioned by the Jewish historical-ethnographic society, during which they documented the wooden synagogues along the banks of the Dnieper River.

Ukrainian art of this period took a similar turn towards popular folk themes, such as *pysankas* (painted Easter eggs), *rushnyks* (embroidered cloths/towels), carpets, toys, candlesticks, and depictions of the archetypal figure of the Cossack Mamai. They also discovered the artistic value of icons, accompanied by a re-evaluation of the Byzantine heritage and the heritage of Old Rus'.

This trend coincides with the beginning of the systematic scholarly exploration of the Ukrainian cultural heritage, its restoration, and the creation of the first collections. In 1905, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky founded what was later to become the National Museum in Lviv and began collecting Ukrainian icons. Sheptytsky, who had the financial means, may be credited for his distinctive contribution to the formation of the Ukrainian style by deliberately guiding and stimulating the cultural process. Although he was a clergyman, he enabled the development of secular Ukrainian art. Not only did he collect traces of the past, but he also gave stipends to talented young artists, enabling them to study abroad. It is doubtful if the School for the Revival of Byzantine Art, which became a notable phenomenon at the Salon des Indépendants in 1910, would have come to fruition without Sheptytsky's three-year-long sponsorship of Boichuk's stay in Paris. As the art critic Mykola Holubets later observed: "It is impossible to imagine what the art of Galicia would have looked like today if one man with the ambitions of a Medici and ready to support those who needed it had not graced St. George's hill at the right time."⁵ (St. George's Cathedral on the hill of the same name in Lviv was the Metropolitan's seat.) Following his return from Paris, Boichuk worked at restoring icons at the National Museum in Lviv. He had a deep knowledge of the icons and assembled his own collection of popular art works.

Once attention focused on the people's own cultural heritage as the basis for a new national art style, there was the question of how to deal with it and what exactly to emphasize. One can compare the theoretical principles posited by I. Rybak and B. Aronson in their programmatic article "The Paths of the Jewish Painting: Musings of an Artist" (1919) with Boichuk's views as expressed in a letter he sent from Paris to Metropolitan Sheptytsky in 1910. The Jewish artists wrote:

"The task of art is to reveal plastic forms—that which is universal and all-encompassing—even though different peoples implement these forms in different ways."⁶

"The essence of the national in art consists in identifying abstract artistic sensations by means of a peculiar material of perception. When we analyze the 'how,' it turns out that the French gravitate towards light tones and picturesqueness; German art is characterized by dryness and definitive lines of the drawing, and at times a nearly complete lack of painting; the Jews prefer the analytical-synthetic grey colouring and dark half tones; the Italians lean towards fresco painting, and Byzantians are distinguished by intensity, simplicity of lines, exhilaration and religious motifs in painting."⁷

Boichuk wrote to Sheptytsky in a similar vein:

“I became convinced...that it is not enough to observe natural phenomena; these also need to be captured in a (summarized) synthetic form and grounded in generations-long observations and the traditional heritage....We can find an example of an impeccable use of form by the Byzantines who lived alongside the Ukrainian people and for centuries exerted a direct influence on Ukrainian culture.”⁸

In both the Ukrainian and the Jewish cases, ideologues for the creation of national styles were convinced that the focus had to be on form rather than on themes, and that the form should be based on the national heritage while reflecting contemporary reality.

Understandably, the Ukrainian and Jewish plastic languages differed. The descriptors that come to mind for Boichukism include monumentality, generalization, statuesque stances (stasis), and hierarchical shapes. Neo-byzantianism typically embodies frozen forms and a hierarchy of figures. Boichuk aimed to create a unified Ukrainian style that would encompass all applications, “from architecture to pysanky,” though he himself continued to give priority to monumental painting. As an example of Boichuk's style, rather than portraying a specific girl, Boichuk tried to produce a synthesized image of a Ukrainian woman by depicting not only the emotions on her face, but also the overall pose of the body expressing the state of her soul. (**fig. 3, 4**)

For the art of the “People of the Book,” a vital source for creating form was found in the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. As stated by B. Aronson: “not the meaning of a letter or the sound that it transmitted, but its independent signification! The Hebrew letter on its own is a bud from which an ornamental tapestry can be developed....Unlike a letter of the Latin alphabet, which does not possess plasticity, the Hebrew letter is extremely soft and flexible.”⁹ (**fig. 5**) Aronson's remarks are a key to understanding the graphic designs of the Kultur-Lige.

Since the Boichukists were also actively producing graphic art and created an entire school that included such artists as Sofiia Nalepinska-Boichuk, Ivan Padalka, and Vasyl Sedliar, one can compare the two approaches as reflected in two book covers: one created by Padalka and T. Boichuk for the book of children's stories *Barvinok* (1919); the other created by El Lissitzky for a book by Mani Leib entitled *Daredevil Boy* (1919). (**fig. 6, 7**) Double dimensions and ornamentality characterize the art of this period and are evident in each of these graphic works. In comparison, however, the Boichukist cover looks more static than the dynamic composition of El Lissitzky—which attests to the peculiarities of Ukrainian and Jewish art styles described above.

Naturally, the range of artistic experimentation was much broader in both cases. The graphic design of the Kultur-Lige could also be compared to the works of another artist—Hryhorhii Narbut—who was developing a characteristically Ukrainian style, taking his inspiration not from the Byzantine tradition but from the Baroque. It is also worth taking into account the influence of the revolutionary ideologies of the period and the discoveries of the European avant-garde, both of

which left a much stronger mark on the Jewish artists and the works of Narbut than on the Boichukists.

The cover of the journal *Zori* (Stars) created by Narbut in 1919 and the cover of the magazine *Ridne* (Our Own) by Rybak (1920) demonstrate the importance of folk ornaments as a source of inspiration for both the Ukrainian and Jewish artists. **(fig. 8, 9)** Both cultures made wide use of traditional national forms and images. Another example is the design of the cover of the catalogue for the “Jewish Exhibition Organized by the Artistic Section of the Kultur-Lige” (Kyiv, 1920), in which Joseph Chaikov composed the image of the *soifer* (scribe) embedded within a Torah shield. **(il. 10)** Narbut, while working on the cover of a book by B. Narbut entitled *Hallelujah*, chose the silhouette of a Cossack Mamai as a symbol of Ukrainian culture, placing it against the background of multi-storey buildings. **(fig. 11)**

As revolutionary upheavals were unfolding, artists began to depict new heroes. Narbut's composition painted for the cover of *The Sun of Labour* magazine (1919) features the figure of a worker holding a hammer but styled as a saint, with a slightly tilted “halo” in the form of a star above his head. **(fig. 12)** Nisn Shifrin presents the form of a lumberjack for the cover of the *Molodniak* (Youth) magazine (1923) in a likewise hyperbolized manner, although without the religious associations. **(fig. 13)** These parallels are consistent with the development of both Ukrainian and Jewish art in a common cultural and temporal context.

The architects of both “national projects” developed an organizational framework for their activities. In the case of Boichukism, it was the workshop endowed to the artist together with a position as professor at the Kyiv Arts Academy in 1918. While still in Paris, Boichuk dreamed about “gathering talented guys and working together with them, decorating churches and other buildings... about how they will make frescos and mosaics; carve from wood and stone; make clay pottery and crystal vases; cover things with fine gold, and paint portraits with tempera paint....And girls will make embroidered shirts, towels, gobelins. And with the money thus earned they will keep the school and educate younger generations of artists.”¹⁰ In reality they ended up “decorating” workers’ clubs and rural sanatoria rather than churches. However, the very possibility of implementing these dreams was of significance to Boichuk. His workshop was founded on principles similar to those that inspired the Bezalel School. As stated in B. Schatz’s history of the creation of Bezalel: “I dreamt about a group of inspired artists, far and free from the world of business....We earn our living by the work of our hands, but our creative freedom is not for sale. We live as a family and we share one goal: to show people how beautiful is the world created by God.”¹¹

The Kultur-Lige was an independent non-governmental organization whose structure included more than one hundred affiliates in various cities and towns of Ukraine. Its artistic section consisted of people who were already established artists, fulfilling orders commissioned by the Kultur-Lige's other sections. Mark Epstein led its artistic studio (reorganized and renamed in 1924 as the Artistic Industrial school) in which new cadres of artists were trained. The idea of serving the people and popularizing national art was at the heart of the activities of all the affiliates.

The early twentieth century atmosphere of emancipation made possible

things that were unthinkable beforehand. In the summer of 1909, the twelve-year old Isakhar Rybak worked in the painters' artel [cooperative association] that painted murals in village churches in the Kherson region. Subcontractors hired him readily because no one could paint ornaments—and even saints with Jesus Christ—from memory as well as he could.¹² Zygmunt Menkes from Galicia also began his artistic career by restoring paintings in both Catholic and Orthodox churches.¹³

Coexistence inspired mutual borrowings. Boichuk's early works demonstrate discernible influences of Jewish culture, which was an integral part of the Galician poly-cultural landscape. For example, in 1913, at the request of Mykhailo Hrushevsky, he created the cover for the Ukrainian edition of Alfonse Daudet's book *Tartarin of Tarascon* (a collection of satirical stories about the African adventures of the hunter Tartarin). Using the woodcut technique, the cover depicts a stylized lion surrounded by floral ornamentation. (fig. 14, 15) As this depiction echoed the traditional Jewish portrayals of lions, it elicited the following critique in the Kyiv newspaper *Rada* (Council): "The picture nicely captures Tartarin's famous adventures and makes a positive impression, but it is a pity that the artist chose to employ a non-Ukrainian motif."¹⁴ It is clear that in the context of the specificity and ambivalence of the artistic quest in the early twentieth century, even while trying to forge the "national style," real masters also borrowed from the artistic traditions of other peoples.

In the 1920s, several Jewish artists studied under Boichuk at the Kyiv Art Academy and worked in his workshop. Boichuk encouraged them to look at the history and culture of their own people. Manuil Shekhtman (1900-1941), in his diploma work, *Victims of a Pogrom*, translated the silent despair of a Jewish family into the language of monumental art—not by mitigating the emotions but rather converting them into the rhythms of the subjects' silhouettes and gestures. (fig. 16) Boichuk's ideas also influenced the works of the Kharkiv graphic artists Ber Blank (1897-1957), Moisei Fradkin (1904-1974), and Mykhailo Shtayerman (1904-1983). They were students of Ivan Padalka and utilized principles of Boichukism in the graphics and illustrations produced for the Jewish classics (including for the works of Mendele Moykher-Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and David Hofshtein).¹⁵

Contemporary attitudes toward the architects of "national projects" were ambivalent. The avant-gardists subjected them to harsh criticism. Boichuk's views, for example, were not shared by Kazimir Malevich. Alexander Archipenko perceived Boichuk's work as no more than a superficial imitation of the Byzantine tradition. Criticizing Boichuk and the "Byzantinists" who exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants in 1910, the sculptor wrote that they "put out their icons in the mistaken belief that it is enough to preserve the aesthetic forms of the works from the preceding epochs, completely ignoring the inner content that made them immortal in the first place."¹⁶

Boris Aronson, despite his energetic involvement in the Kultur-Lige's activities, came to the conclusion, while in Berlin, that the contemporary Jewish artists failed to produce their national style and that "any national style would run counter to the surrounding atmosphere and all the dynamism, mechanics, and disjointedness of our era."¹⁷ Aronson identified three stages which, in his view, characterized Jewish art of the early twentieth century: (1) the "Narodnik" or populist stage of coming close to the people; (2) imitation, stylization, and individualization; and (3) the mind and intuition stage. In Aronson's view, the

artistic output of the Kultur-Lige remained at the stage of stylization; only the work of Nathan Altman and Marc Chagall reached the third stage

Whether the “national projects” (which eventually were artificially halted or physically destroyed) were a success or a failure remains a subject for further discussion. We can affirm, however, that these phenomena in both Ukrainian and Jewish art of the early twentieth century found their place in history. A comparison of these phenomena shows specific parallels and similarities as well as differences and allows us to acknowledge a certain synchronicity of the processes in Ukrainian and Jewish art in the context of the twentieth century—the century in which both peoples attained statehood.

¹ M. Buber, *Jüdische Künstler* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1903); A. Kampf, *Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century* (Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey, 1984), 15.

² L. Kenig, (with comments by G. Kazovsky), “Istoria ‘Makhmadim’ i la Ruche,” *Zerkalo* 11-12 (Tel Aviv, 1999):160-85.

³ V. Susak, *Ukrainian Artists in Paris. 1900-1939* (Kyiv: Rodovid, 2010), 35-46.

⁴ B. Aronson, *Sovremennaia evreiskaia grafika* [Modern Jewish graphic art], (Berlin: Petropolis, 1924), 76.

⁵ M. Holubets, “Mystetstvo i krytyka v nas,” [Our art and criticism] *Nedilia* 8 (Lviv, 1933): 6-7.

⁶ I. Rybak and B. Aronson, “Shliakhy ievreis'kogo zhyvopysu,” [Paths in Jewish painting] in *Kul'tur-Liga. Khudozhnii avangard 1910-1920-kh rr. Katalog vystavky* [Kultur-Lige. Avant-garde art of the 1910s-1920s. Exposition catalogue] (Kyiv: Dukh i litera, 2007), 66.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸ The letter of M. Boichuk to Metropolitan Sheptytsky (no date, 1910), publication by L. Voloshyn, *Obrazotvorche mystetstvo* [Figurative art], (Kyiv, 1990), 6: 22-23.

⁹ B. Aronson, 76.

¹⁰ Ye. D-sky, “Vystava ‘nezalezhnykh’ i ukrainski maliari,” [The exposition of the ‘Independents’ and Ukrainian painters] *Dilo* (Lviv), 13 July 1910.

¹¹ B. Schatz, *Bezalel: Ego proshloe, nastoyashee, budushee* [Bezalel: Its past, present, and future], (Odessa: Palestina, 1910), 11.

¹² L. Latt, “Isakhar Ber Rybak,” in *Russkoe evreistvo v zarubezh'e* [Russian Jewry abroad], ed. M. Parkhomovskii, vol. 1(6) (Jerusalem, 1998), 287-307.

¹³ W. Jaworska, “Zygmunt Menkes malarz École de Paris,” [Zygmunt Menkes, School of Paris Painters] *Biuletyn historii sztuki* (Warszawa, 1996), 1-2: 17.

¹⁴ N. K-s'ky, review of *The Adventures of Tartarin from Tarascon*, by A. Daudet, *Rada* (Kyiv, 22 March 1913), 4.

¹⁵ L. Sokoliuk, *Grafika boichukistiv* [Graphic art of the Boichukists] (Kharkiv-New York: Vydavnytstvo M. Kotz, 2002) 77-156.

¹⁶ *Parizhskii vestnik*, no. 24 (1911), cited in V. Marcadé, *Art d'Ukraine* (Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1990), 180.

¹⁷ B. Aronson, *op.cit.*, 102-103, 67, 80.