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Genre and Nationalism: Boris Schatz and his School

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Identity, that sense of who we are and where we fit into the world around us, is obviously important to each person as an individual but also interests those who wish to influence us. The sources and the very nature of personal and group identity are the province of psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists, but the *consequences* of group identity excite the attention of less academic operatives - politicians, religious leaders, businessmen and, yes, artists, at least those who wish to sell their art. Art, as a form of communication, is by definition interpersonal so artists who aspire to a public are positioned at the critical interface between their own personal sense-of-self and the interests, tastes, judgements that help define the identity of that audience they wish to reach. Medallion art especially, since it is replicated and published, tends to come, sooner or later, even if unpredictably, into the intimate grasp and private contemplation of many different individuals.

Nationalism was a particularly well established form of collective identity in the 19th and 20th Centuries, and thus a theme by means of which many medallion artists have sought to reach and influence their expected audience. *Genre*, the depiction of so-called "types", as opposed to specific individuals or even more culturally established mythological or symbolic figures, privileges what we might call "representative anonymity". The use of types and *genre* from the mid 19th Century onward, however, has connoted two overlapping but somewhat different ideal categories: The first suggests that the figure is typical, representative of a group such as a nation, or a class, for example a farmer, a mother or a child. Such tropes evoke community, even an ordinariness, with which any member of the same community, the viewer included, may readily identify. The other category is what we usually call ideal, whether in the positive sense of a hero, someone to serve as a role model, or to project an opposite, negative model; here the typology is hierarchical and judgmental. Such idealized *typoi* were popular during the heyday of nationalism but have become somewhat devalued in postmodern eyes because of their overuse and abuse by totalitarian propagandists. But it is well to reflect that this category, the representative *genre* figure, has long been in use in communitarian propaganda, albeit of a more subtle, perhaps more benign, sort.

The present essay focuses on the career of Boris Schatz (1866-1932), an academic sculptor of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries who, somewhat unusually, worked on three continents, and who

devoted the later decades of his life to teaching and the creation of a school of art which he passionately believed could and should advance a nationalistic program. Schatz wrote a good deal about his own aspirations and ambitions and was also a public figure memorialized by colleagues and students. Thus a review of his life and work allows us insight not only into his aesthetics and technique but also into the intended and actual impact of his art and ideals on others, during his own life and after his death.



1. Signed photograph of Boris Schatz, age 57, 1923

Schatz was born in 1866 in Varno, a tiny village in what today is Lithuania but was then located in that limited part of the Russian Empire where Jews were permitted to live, the so-called Pale of Settlement. In his later biographical monograph he recalled that his "entire town was so poor that it did not possess a single drawing, lithograph or photograph". His parents wished him to become a rabbi and initially sent him to traditional schools, but his grandfather, who was a rabbi, filled his head with such fantastic invented tales that as a child Schatz was given to graphic visions. Thus his childhood memories were personal and vivid, direct, from life and not particularly influenced by contemporary illustrative conventions. At 15 he escaped his early ghetto life and moved to Vilna, turning to the study first of science and later of art. He came under the influence of Haskalists, a circle of anti-religious, so-called "enlightened", friends and teachers. No artwork remains identifiable from his earliest periods in Vilna and, later, in Warsaw, but by 1890 he was recently married and had moved to Paris where he studied sculpture under Mark Antokolsky a Jewish artist who had succeeded in attaining reputation while still in Russia..

Schatz also studied painting at Corman's Academy, a conservative school which was, parenthetically, also attended by Van Gogh. While in Paris in 1893 Schatz made cast portrait medallions (of Karl Marx, Louis Pasteur and Jean Charcot) in the style then fashionable. His free standing statuary, including biblical subjects such as Yochebed (1892), the nurse of Moses, and Mattathias (1894), the Hasmonean rebel against the ancient Syrian Greek rulership in Israel, were romanticized academic productions which won Schatz, among other prizes, a silver medal at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. On the other hand, despite such activity and modest recognition, Schatz was unable to support his family by sculpture and during the fifteen years he remained in Paris was forced to work in ceramic tile design, and even boxed and wrestled professionally.



2. Louis Pasteur (1893) cast bronze, 153 mm



3. Mark Antokolski (1894) plaster, size approximately 450 mm

In 1895 Schatz was called to Sofia where he became the Sculptor to the Royal Bulgarian Court, a position he was to hold for ten years but, just before he left Paris an event occurred which was to have a decisive effect on his thematic focus as an artist, indeed of the goals he was to set for himself for the rest of his life. Beginning in 1894 the Dreyfus Affair had resulted in overt antisemitism in France on a

scale hitherto unprecedented. Jews such as Schatz, who had hitherto believed that their integration within Western Europe was a reasonable option for the masses of Jews then being economically and politically oppressed in the Russian Empire, now became concerned about the future of the Jews *as a people*. Theodor Herzl, a journalist who, like Schatz was in Paris at the time of the Dreyfus trials, became likewise suddenly alarmed about the prospects for Jewish survival in the cosmopolitan West, and proceeded from 1894 onward to devote all his energies to Zionism, a movement for Jewish nationality, as distinct from religiosity.

At the Bulgarian court Boris Schatz was primarily called upon to execute public statuary, but also designed decorative art for the royal court, for example, silver book-bindings as royal gifts for the Russian Czar and others. He also now began to work privately and more consistently in the medium of medallion cast plaques. Starting with Bulgarian peasants and gypsy figures (1897-99) Schatz also commenced what was to become a series of some



4. Sad Thoughts [Bulgarian Peasant] (1897) plaster, size unknown (left)

5. A Jewish Mother (1904) reduction c. 1910, cast bronze, 160 x 102 mm (right)



20-30 studies of Jewish types, mostly sentimental *genre* portraits or scenes which were based on his earlier life in Jewish *shtetls*, the small towns in the Russian Pale of Settlement. These works, evoking Jewish life in Russia, though fashioned originally in Bulgaria, were later to be much reproduced and copied in Austria and Palestine, are presented in an academically realistic style, invariably project a

deliberate tenderness toward “the old country” and its ways. The ultimate utilitarian fate of Schatz’s *genre* works was to be replicated and sold, in many different sizes and formats, to Jewish emigres from Eastern Europe who moved to America and other western lands, as sentiment-bearing souvenirs. Exemplary of this, Schatz’ most characteristic personal style, is A Jewish Mother (1904) which depicts the mother, obviously herself poor, lifting her small child so that he may become accustomed at an early age to give charity to the poorer still or, in this specific case as evidenced by the inscription on the collection box (“the charity of Rabbi Meir”), to the elderly and usually destitute pious pilgrims and immigrants to Jerusalem. Blessing the Sabbath (1903), Studying the Talmud (c1904), The Matchmaker (1904) and One of the People of the Book (1904) likewise evoke personal recollection of, indeed a sense of ongoing responsibility to, those fellow Jews, members of one’s own people, left behind in the villages and towns of Russia.. In addition to such *genre* works, Schatz came soon to depict biblical personalities, but not for religious inspiration as was more typical of much contemporary Christian medallion art. Rather his selection of subjects, and the use to which they were put in his medals, reflected his own growing



8. Theodore Herzl, Memorial (1904) reduction c. 1925, struck bronze, silvered, 57 x 70 mm

preoccupation with and commitment to the Jews as a nation, to a people which had historically been and was again immersed in conflict, and which required flesh and blood, even muscular heroes as models. Jeremiah (1911) records his prophecies of the tragedy that would befall the Jewish as a people, that would lead to their exile from the Land of Israel, and looks out at the viewer whose present day political circumstances is thus comprehended in his concern. Judith (c.1905) is also an overtly activist heroine of the biblical age. Arrayed in her finery but appropriately looking very determined, she is shown departing on a mission to first seduce and then to assassinate and behead the general of the Assyrian invaders, Holofernes.



6. The Matchmaker (1904) reduction, cast bronze c. 1910, silvered, 76 x 41 mm. In a Bezalel School, Jerusalem (left)



9. Judith (1905) reduction c. 1925, cast bronze, 85 x 52

7. One of the People of the Book (1904) reduction c. 1925, struck bronze, silvered, 70 x 45 mm (right)



Reaching further, beyond his art per se, Schatz met in 1903 with Herzl, who was by then the undoubted leader of an international zionistic effort to re-establish Jewish settlement and statehood in the historical land of Israel, then Ottoman Palestine. He proposed to Herzl his vision of an artistic enterprise which he believed would be invaluable in strengthening the necessary Jewish *national* identity, an identity with roots in the Bible but which had been much attenuated during nearly two thousand years of exilic dispersion. His plan, above all, centered on the creation and development of a specifically Jewish art, since previous artists who happened to be Jewish had typically worked only within the cultural milieu and in the styles of the nations among whom they had dwelt. This goal would also necessitate the foundation both of a school for Jewish Art, and of a Museum, to train artists and to display their work, preferably in the bosom of the new Jewish settlement. Herzl died soon afterward of tuberculosis, in 1904, relatively unexpectedly. His death deeply affected Schatz who was moved to make several commemorative plaques soon afterward. Herzl (1904), displays a profile bust of the fallen leader flanked by a pictorial reference to Moses, an earlier leader of the Jews who like Herzl was unable to personally lead his people in their return to their promised land. Requiem (1904) depicts a mixed group of those grieving for Herzl, the religious mingling with the secular, the oriental Jews and the occidental, the old with the young, even a woman can be seen among the assemblage of traditionally male mourners.

Herzl's death, and his own plan for a school and museum now clinched Schatz' determination to abandon his position as Court Sculptor and emigrate to Palestine; but in truth there was another incentive to leave Bulgaria. In Sofia, Schatz had been at the center of an artistic and literary circle in which he tried to maintain the quasi-bohemian salon life he had but tasted in Paris. It was within the very circle he had created that one of his own students seduced his wife who thereafter ran off with the student, taking with her their young daughter, Schatz' only child from this first marriage, a girl named Angele. At once personally discouraged but politically energized Schatz now left for Jerusalem at the end of 1905 where he was to be based for the remaining quarter century of his life

He named the newly formed school of art *Bezalel* after the biblical artist who had been named by Moses to construct and decorate the sanctuary used for worship during the Hebrews' wandering in the Sinai desert even before they entered the land of Israel. Exodus 31 explains: "I have called by name Bezalel...of the tribe of Judah, and have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship to devise skillful works in gold, in silver and in brass." The frontispiece of Schatz' emotional and futuristic



10. Frontispiece of Jerusalem Rebuilt 1924, depicting Boris Schatz, right, speaking with Bezalel

opus, Yerushalayim Habenuyah (Jerusalem Rebuilt, 1924) graphically emphasizes the ambition of the enterprise, showing Bezalel, the biblical designer of the menorah, the seven branched candelabrum symbolic of the Temple and of the Jewish people, in direct conversation with Schatz on the restored crenellated walls of Jerusalem (ironically, a 16th Century Ottoman construction). In fact, many of the creations, publications and emblems of the Bezalel School took similar anachronistic liberties in an effort to link the past, present and future of the Jewish people, liberties with respect to the history and particularly to the artistic trajectory of the Jews in order to insist upon the presumption of continuity so basic to their collective identity. Thus, for example, the art nouveau then current in Central Europe became the preferred graphic mode at Bezalel, at least partly because it's a historical posture was capable of embodying a dreamy even futuristic romanticism even as it pictured an entirely imaginary "oriental" past. E.M.Lilien (1874-1925), one of the instructors inspired and imported to Jerusalem by Schatz to teach in the school, brought the art nouveau style with him from Vienna where it had already become established in zionist publications.

The lofty artistic goals closest to Schatz' heart were however to be almost immediately beset by a series of rather harsh social and economic realities. Late Ottoman Palestine was a backwater of a failing empire and Jerusalem in particular, historical associations and futuristic fantasy aside, had a high unemployment rate and little industry or trade. Furthermore, the Jewish immigration

promoted by the modern zionist movement consisted mostly of poor and relatively unskilled Jews from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. On the other hand, the individuals whom Schatz admired and identified as suitable teachers and creative artists were, like himself, acculturated cosmopolitans, accustomed to Western European ways and tastes. So too were all the principal financial supporters of the new zionism and of its art school, wealthy bankers, merchants and professionals from Germany, France, England and America. One consequence of these forces was that the school, conceived originally by Schatz as an academy for the generation of a new *Art* was soon reconceptualized by its powerful fiscal backers as a more suitably a school for *Crafts*. Painting and sculpture were to be de-emphasized as subjects, in favor of carpet-weaving, jewelry manufacture and other decorative arts deemed potentially profitable exports. Many of the distinguished artists (such as Lilien) who had been attracted by Schatz's concept of a future for Jewish artistic creativity were soon discouraged by the climate and backwardness of Jerusalem, by the economic hardship, by the unsophisticated students, and by the downgrading of the artistic vision; such individuals soon decamped back to Europe. A third setback resulted from World War I which separated the once unified European supporters of zionism into opposing national camps, destroyed much of the market for luxury exports and tourist items, and caused the Jerusalem area itself soon to become a battleground, its inhabitants and students now draftable as soldiers. These unforeseen events meant that the Bezalel School after a few exciting and creative years between 1906 and 1914, was shut down entirely for most of the war and, even when it reopened in 1919, was deprived of the financial support of its former principally German backers, and of the artistic and economic optimism that had characterized the Belle Epoque. For Schatz this was a harsh blow, but he was unwilling to relinquish his vision and for the remainder of his life struggled selflessly to preserve and advance the project which he continued to conceive as a national necessity.

Actually, Schatz had almost from the beginning of 1906 assigned himself the task of chief fundraiser for Bezalel and it was a rare year in which he did not make one or more trips abroad to those cities of the world where Jews were concentrated. His mission was complex. He was himself the best-known artist associated with the Bezalel enterprise and so his own artworks were promoted for sale at the traveling exhibitions of arts and crafts. These were mainly in the form of aftercast copies of his original medallion plaques, often in full size, typically rectangles of about 12 by 24 inches. However, as these large and very fine castings, made mainly in Vienna, were quite costly, smaller casts were also made and further mechanical reductions of about fifteen of the works were produced as uniface

striking in bronze and silvered bronze, also in Austria. In 1930, for example, these smaller struck works, 55 x 70 mm., were sold by Henry Seligmann, a dealer in Hanover, at 20 marks apiece, while medium sized castings, 135 x 165 mm. cost 50 marks. Less fine reductions of Schatz' signature works were also produced locally in the Jerusalem workshops of Bezalel as casts, in copper repousee, or as wood carvings; such items were sold in the Museum shop, but principally at the traveling international exhibitions. Schatz was also a painter and originals of his work were also offered, often set in decorative hammered brass frames which were designed by other instructors in the decorative arts an often executed by students under their supervision. Professor Boris Schatz, as he was invariably called in the publicity of the school and in its sales catalogs, also of course promoted the appreciation and sales of the wide variety of decorative arts which were the main products of Bezalel: ritual objects, jewelry of semiprecious stones and filigree work, book covers, ceramics, lithographs, ivory and stone carvings etc. Above all, however, Schatz was on the lookout for wealthy donors who might be inspired to support the school and its long term artistic goals. Paris, London, Berlin and New York were on his itinerary to be sure, but also Odessa, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Cincinnati, Pittsburg and Denver.

Such administrative, public relations and sales work were to preoccupy Schatz in the post World War I years, while he resided in Jerusalem and during his trips abroad, greatly reducing his personal artistic productivity. However, before the war he continued his production of *genre* types of the European ghettos, eg. Torah Scribe (1912) and

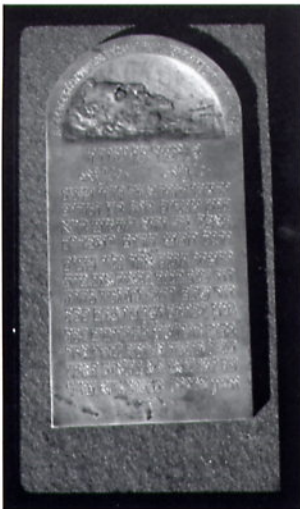


11. Torah Scribe (1912)
plaster, approximately 450
x 300 mm (left)

12. Joseph Trumpeldor (1922)
reduction c. 1925, struck
bronze, silvered, 70 x 43 mm
(right)



Blowing the Shofar (1914), and immediately after the war he undertook to commemorate several heroes of the nascent Zionist movement. Joseph Trumpeldor (1922) is perhaps the most popular medal Schatz ever made, honoring a soldier who had lost an arm as an officer in the Russo-Japanese War, became an organizer of Jewish defense units in Palestine, and was killed along with seven others in a skirmish with Arabs in 1921. The plaque, an idealized portrait framed monumentally and also bearing the lion which was to appear on the hero's actual stone memorial, was widely reproduced becoming an icon of the newly muscular Jewish presence in Palestine, suitable for private display in the homes of patriotic settlers and their supporters worldwide. Another iconic figure memorialized by Schatz was Eliezer ben Yehudah (1922), the man who almost single-handedly adapted the ancient Hebrew language for modern usage, who compiled a massive dictionary and raised his daughter in Palestine as the first exclusively Hebrew speaking child in two thousand years. Schatz's tombstone shaped plaque which,



13. Eliezer Ben Yehuda (1922) reduction c. 1925, cast bronze, silvered, 164 x 83 mm

appropriately enough, features more text than iconography, shows the scholar on his deathbed, was based on a portrait sketched by Schatz in Ben Yehudah's own home on the very night of his death. I learned this bit of history in 1972, directly from the son of Schatz's second marriage, whom he named Bezael and who was also an artist in Jerusalem.

Schatz did many other portrait plaques, especially in his later years, often of other supporters of the Zionist cause, typically academics, artists and commercial or banking giants: e.g. Solomon Schechter (1913), President of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, Nathan Straus (c.1922), owner of the Macy's department store chain and a philanthropist. A

substantial number of these portraits were taken while Schatz was on tour and his signature on the resulting plaques usually specifies, in Hebrew, the name of the place where the sitting occurred, whether it was New York, as in the two cases above, or Cincinnati, or Jerusalem. His signature on plaques varied over the years, starting as B or Boris Chatz in Paris, then changing to the equivalent in Cyrillic in Bulgaria, and later to Boris Schatz, again in Latin letters during his very early Palestinian period. Schatz thereafter signed his work in Hebrew, normally as a monogram involving various arrangements of three letters: B, Sh and Tz, the latter two taken together actually comprising the entirety of his name in its Hebrew form. Parenthetically, though the word "Schatz" means "treasure" in German and might appear to signify the same in its cognate, Yiddish, as a Jewish name it is actually an acronym for a phrase indicating a cantor, a leader of the synagogue service.

The hyperinflation of the early 1920's in Germany and the worldwide depression a few years later continued to erode the fiscal underpinnings of the Bezalel School which had never really regained its balance after the First World War, fitfully closed



14. Nathan Straus (c.1923) reduction, c.1925, cast bronze, 94 x 70 mm

and re-opened on a shoestring late in the decade, and finally closed its doors in 1931, the victim of bankruptcy. Schatz himself never gave up hope of resurrecting his beloved enterprise. He continued wandering the globe in search of funds and died at 66, on one of his typical journeys, in March 1932, in America, at Denver, Colorado.

What may be said of his legacy, of his personal artworks, and of his ambition to found a "School of Jewish Art", both literally and figuratively? Schatz's attempt to found a "School of Art" was largely a failure. Some elements of the decorative arts promoted in the Bezalel School, metalworking skills and the use of elegant lettering, for example, significantly influenced later Israeli design values in medallic and other arts. But the notion of developing a specific national "Jewish Art", so dear to Schatz's imagination, was never realized, nor did the school

he founded survive him. To be sure, the name "Bezalel" was later revived and reapplied to an art school which survives in Israel today, but Schatz's emphases on academic realism, romanticism, historical traditions and nationhood have not been maintained in this new Bezalel; indeed they are conspicuous by their absence, their subordination to those abstract international values that have come to dominate the world of art for the past half century.

Of his own work, both as a sculptor in bas relief and as a painter, Schatz was very much a man of his times, not a man of the future; throughout his life as an artist he remained an academic realist who imitated and virtually never transcended the models he encountered in his youth in late 19th Century Vilna and Warsaw. His conventional and sentimental approach to portraiture, to traditional and heroic types, is easily dismissed by modernists as characterized by bathos and irrelevant to what art needed to accomplish and to become in the 20th century. At the same time, the accessibility of

Schatz's approach to persons of backgrounds similar to his, largely raised in artistically underprivileged circumstances, cannot be denied, nor should the pleasure of recognition and empathy which viewers of this type seem to have derived from such works be doubted. Thus it is fair to observe that, in common with many other popular pictorial traditions, his unsophisticated approach met with a degree of success in the marketplace, even if it was generally derided by professional artists, including many of his own trainees and successors in Israel. Furthermore, his work did have some degree of influence in an area where Schatz declared that he wished to be influential: the embodiment and projection of a Jewish identity. Immigrants to Palestine, refugees from Eastern Europe, related both to his representation of a world they themselves had abandoned and which was subsequently eradicated by the mid 20th Century, and to some of the images of biblical and modern heroes which were to be part of the heritage upon which Israel was to be founded.



15. Bezalel Exhibition Catalog 1926, catalog cover

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