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Paula J. Birnbaum, *Sculpting a Life: Chana Orloff between Paris and Tel Aviv*. Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2022. B & W illustrations, 16 color plates, notes, bibliography, and index. 411 pp. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781684581139; \$44.95 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9781684581146; \$44.95 U.S. (epub). ISBN 9781684581146.

Review by Richard Sonn, University of Arkansas.

Hundreds of young Jews arrived in Paris in the first third of the twentieth century, enrolling in the official art academies and the proliferating unofficial art schools that sprang up to satisfy the demand for artistic training. Following the rise of impressionism, neo-impressionism, and other painting and sculpture styles now included under the rubric of modernism but then usually termed independent, Paris became the center of the art world. The era of modernism roughly coincides with the Third Republic. At the same time, the Western world witnessed a huge increase in immigration, especially out of southern and eastern Europe. Millions fled poverty and oppression, including over two million Ashkenazi Jews leaving the Russian and Habsburg Empires. Chana Orloff (1888-1968) was one of these Jews. Her family left Ukraine for Palestine in 1905, then controlled by the Ottoman Empire. This was the first of many displacements in her peripatetic life. Already celebrated in British Mandatory Palestine, she became a founding figure in the art scene of the new state of Israel. Though she acquired an apartment in Tel Aviv in 1949, and despite finding her Left Bank home trashed by the Germans and occupied by collaborators at the end of World War II, she never left Paris behind.

Chana Orloff was fortunate in a number of respects. Her Zionist family fled the wave of pogroms afflicting Tsarist Russia, thereby avoiding the mass murder of Ukrainian Jews in 1919-1920 during the civil war following the Bolshevik Revolution. The Orloffs were part of the second Aliyah, and so became founding Zionists. Teenaged Chana attended the first Jewish high school in Jaffa and learned Hebrew. She was fortunate again in her timing when she came to Paris in 1910. She enrolled in a fashion academy intending to teach dressmaking back in Palestine, but became disenchanted with seamstress work and soon applied to the Ecole Nationale des Arts Décoratifs. She studied there in the years just before World War I, when the art scene was exploding with new movements such as cubism and futurism. Many more would-be artists would arrive in Paris in the interwar years, but those who arrived in the decade before World War I had an enormous advantage in finding artistic success in the 1920s. All the Jewish artists later identified with the Ecole de Paris arrived in these years: Amedeo Modigliani, Jules Pascin, Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine, Sonia Delaunay-Terk, Emmanuel Mané-Katz, Ossip Zadkine and Jacques Lipchitz.[1] Chana Orloff reached Paris knowing no French, just as she arrived in Palestine not speaking Hebrew (she would tour America in the 1920s and 1930s initially not

speaking English). Her success was due in part to good timing, but much more to her tenacious determination to flourish in the competitive Paris art world. Succeed she did; by 1926 she was able to commission a home/studio from the prominent architect Auguste Perret. Around the same time, she became a French citizen and a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. Two monographs about her appeared in 1927; one she carried with her in 1942 into neutral Switzerland to prove she was a recognized artist, not just a desperate refugee.

Paula J. Birnbaum's biography follows Orloff's life chronologically. While she was still studying at Arts Décos, Orloff had two sculptures accepted at the eleventh annual Salon d'Automne at the end of 1913. When war broke out, opportunities for showing and selling art dried up, and many French artists went to the front. If you were foreign-born from either an allied country (like Russia) or a neutral one like Spain, you could remain in your studio; if you were a woman, there was no opprobrium attached to your continued civilian presence. Due to her official art degree, Orloff qualified for a small government stipend and two meals a day even though she was not a French citizen; she remembered the war years as liberating. During the war, she met and married a Warsaw-born Jewish poet named Ary Justman; their child was born in 1918. Sadly, Justman died early in 1919 in the influenza pandemic, and the baby boy contracted polio, leaving him partially paralyzed. None of these setbacks deterred Orloff from pursuing her career.

Birnbaum places Orloff in the left-bank artists' colony of Montparnasse, where nearly all of the Jewish immigrant artists gathered. There she became friends with other young artists, in particular with Modigliani, who Birnbaum claims was a close friend of Justman. How the two young men communicated is unclear, since Justman wrote in Polish and knew little French, and Modigliani, as a Sephardic Jew from Italy, likely did not speak Yiddish. If Orloff met Justman through Modigliani, it seems she returned the favor. She had befriended her fellow Arts Décos student Jeanne Hébuterne, though Jeanne was eleven years younger than Orloff, and may have introduced her to Modigliani. When Modigliani died of tuberculosis in January 1920, Orloff visited Jeanne to comfort her, but the young mother of Modigliani's child was inconsolable and, 8½ months pregnant, threw herself from her parents' fifth floor window shortly thereafter. Several minor errors occur in these pages: Chagall is reported as arriving in Paris in 1910; it was actually May 1911 [2]; Jules Pascin could not have attended Orloff's 1916 wedding because he had fled to the US when war broke out and only returned in 1920; Orloff could not have met Picasso and others at La Coupole, because it did not open until 1927 (she may be confusing it with Le Dôme, a popular cafe on the boulevard Montparnasse along with the famous La Rotonde).

The chapter on the postwar era is titled "Portraitist of Montparnasse." In the six years from 1919 to 1925 Orloff established her reputation as the outstanding female sculptor of her generation. A significant number of her works were portraits of her fellow Jews, including the artist Reuven Reubin, poet Hayim Bialik, writer Edmond Fleg, and even Marc Chagall's seven-year-old daughter Ida. In this era when lesbian identity became integral to bohemian Paris ("Paris was a woman"), Orloff did portraits of Natalie Clifford Barney, Romaine Brooks and Claude Cahun. Yet she was not markedly bohemian herself and worked diligently to establish her reputation and support her disabled son. She sculpted the head of her friend Louise Weiss, an influential Jewish feminist and pacifist, but was not active politically. When she was not making portraits, Orloff's favorite subjects were women, children, and the two together. Birnbaum does not hesitate to call Orloff an essentialist feminist, who argued that women who gave birth had a distinct perspective compared with male artists. In the era of *La Garçonne*, Victor Margueritte's 1922 novel of gender

fluidity, there is little androgyny in Orloff's work (except perhaps for the portrait of the close-cropped Cahun); at a time when some artists were experimenting with abstraction, her work remained figurative. It is worth noting that female Jewish artists of Orloff's generation were more likely than male artists to be entrepreneurial. Sonia Delaunay-Terk had a workshop full of seamstresses producing her cubist-inspired fashions for women such as Nancy Cunard; one-time cubist Alice Halicka painted iconic Paris scenes as publicity for Helena Rubinstein; and Mela Muter also supported herself painting portraits.^[3] The boundary between fine and decorative art was fluid, especially in the hard times of the 1930s.

The second half of the book foregrounds Orloff's increasing connections with cultural life in Mandatory Palestine in the 1930s and in Israel after statehood in 1948. As a celebrity French artist who spoke fluent Hebrew and came from a politically involved Zionist family, Orloff found that Jews of the *Yishuv* were eager to enlist her support. She helped create the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, which featured her work in a 1935 show. Yet she resisted leaving France to escape the growing menace of fascism, and the most affecting section of the book describes Orloff and her son separately hiding from the Gestapo in Paris in 1942. They stayed with gentile friends, as their well-known names had landed them on a list of Jews to be arrested in the infamous Vel d'Hiv Roundup of July 1942. That fall they took a train to the unoccupied zone (using false papers), and in December trudged across the snowy border into Switzerland. Orloff was 54 and her son walked with a metal brace, but they made it, and remained there for the rest of the war. She had obtained a US visa (she had toured and shown in the US and had well-placed friends), but the US State Department rejected her son's application because of his disability.

In the new state of Israel, Orloff was not only a survivor but a respected insider. She did a bronze of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, and a photo shows her standing next to him. Large-scale public commissions followed, including the thirty-foot high Mother and Son monument at Kibbutz Ein Gev. Birnbaum juxtaposes this work with a photo of Hanna Alderstein holding up her young son at the same kibbutz, before she died defending her home in the 1948 war at the age of 31. Birnbaum writes, "Orloff's chosen iconography was unique in that it focused on memorializing a female soldier in the form of a maternal figure as the symbol of hope and nationhood" (p. 297; photo of Alderstein on p. 296). This triumph of Zionist nationalism was followed by another sculpture of a working woman carrying a basket, designed for the entry to the Histadrut Labor Movement Building in Tel Aviv. However, this particular project ran into problems. Her old friend Reuven Rubin wrote her requesting that she slim down the sculpture. Even though this was not a nude, some of the religious Jews on the committee protested the representation of the female body, and the commission was withdrawn. In 2017, an exhibition in Haifa called *Chana Orloff: Feminist Sculpture in Israel* featured the artist as "an early proponent of a personal, revolutionary approach to the female body" (p. 320). Birnbaum cites one Israeli art critic who characterized her work as conservative and defends Orloff for promoting a vital presentation of Jewish female identity. Yet it is possible to see Orloff's work as relatively conservative and still maintain that "Orloff's imagery of the female body stands as a testament of her lived experience" (p. 320). Birnbaum connects Orloff to "a wide range of representations and critical attitudes about gender, Jewish identity, migration and nationalism throughout her career" (p.320).

Sculpting a Life is a thoroughly researched, scrupulous biography that will undoubtedly stand as the definitive study of Chana Orloff. It includes plenty of illustrations and period photographs, and even maps of the escape route from France to Switzerland. Birnbaum draws on unpublished

interviews undertaken by an Israeli journalist in 1957, when Orloff was 69 years old. They cover her life from her early years in Ukraine through World War I. The subtitle “From Paris to Tel Aviv” underscores the cosmopolitan character of the Ecole de Paris, the most international group of artists that the world had ever seen. Occasionally, as when Birnbaum mentions that Orloff was friends with her fellow Jewish sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, one wishes one could listen in on their conversations about sculpture and art. In terms of gender roles, one might inquire why the supremely skilled Orloff was more willing than her male colleagues to commercialize her art. One doubts whether she had any misgivings about becoming the successful “Israeli Artist of the Ecole de Paris,” as the last chapter calls her. At the end of this admirable biography, we’re left with the sense that Chana Orloff’s greatest creation was herself. She mastered the diasporic art world of the interwar era, fashioning a transnational and uniquely Jewish identity.

NOTES

[1] I make this claim in *Modernist Diaspora: Immigrant Jewish Artists in Paris, 1900-1945*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), p. 64. All of these artists were born in the decade from 1884 (Modigliani) to 1894 (Mané-Katz).

[2] Chagall himself created this confusion, because in his autobiography *My Life*, he says he got to Paris in 1910. For the correction, see Jackie Wullschlager, *Chagall: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2008), pp. 125-148.

[3] See Sonn, “Marketing Art” in *Modernist Diaspora*, pp. 223-254.

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