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Richard D. Sonn, *Modernist Diaspora: Immigrant Jewish Artists in Paris, 1900-1945*. New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022. xi + 378 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. $117.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781350185319; $35.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781350286610; $28.76 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781350185333.

Review by Toby Norris, Assumption University.

"Once upon a time, when I first entered the road of art, I was almost alone," wrote the painter Marc Chagall in late 1930 to the then-mayor of Tel Aviv, Meir Dizengoff, "now I am surrounded by a whole army of Jewish artists" (p. 288). In *Modernist Diaspora: Immigrant Jewish Artists in Paris, 1900-1945*, Richard D. Sonn, Professor of History at the University of Arkansas, examines the explosion in the numbers of Jewish visual artists in the first decades of the twentieth century to which Chagall was referring. As the subtitle of his book indicates, Sonn focuses on figures who spent significant portions of their careers in Paris--and particularly in Montparnasse between 1910 and 1940, when a diverse international community of artists thrived there. In the process, several interconnected themes are developed: the author questions why so many Jewish artists emerged in the course of a single generation when there had been few Jewish visual artists before 1900; he asks what drew so many of these individuals to Paris in general and to Montparnasse in particular; he reflects on whether their Jewishness is visible in any consistent way in their work; and he details their responses to the momentous historical events of the First World War, the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism, the Second World War, and the Holocaust.

Modernist Diaspora is clearly a project driven by personal enthusiasm. Sonn mentions that the book took him ten years to write. At one point he introduces his own family story to illustrate a point he is making and he affectionately describes the antics of the quirkier members of the Jewish artists' community in Montparnasse. A genuine, individual passion for the material emerges. Nonetheless, Sonn is dependent enough on existing scholarship throughout the book--more so than on archival research--that a review of the relevant literature in the introduction would have been helpful. All sources are credited in their relevant places in the footnotes, but at no point is *Modernist Diaspora* clearly situated in relation to the already-substantial body of work on this topic. It would have been appropriate to acknowledge Kenneth Silver and Romy Golan's groundbreaking 1985 exhibition catalog *The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris, 1905-1945*, which first mapped the territory that Sonn explores here.[1]

Nonetheless, by aggregating a great deal of information that was previously scattered amongst a large number of sources--artists' autobiographies, monographs, exhibition catalogs, and works in

the author's own discipline of history--Sonn offers a fascinating overview of the tremendous international mobility demonstrated by many of the artists on which he focuses. At a time when much scholarly attention is being paid to de-centering the account of modernism by studying artists and networks outside Western Europe, it is useful to be reminded that huge numbers of artists gravitated towards Paris in the first half of the twentieth century precisely because of its reputation as the center. As Sonn details, though, many of those same artists were impelled by historical circumstances to leave France later in their careers, often more than once, and in many cases, they ended their lives neither in their native land nor in their adoptive country.

Modernist Diaspora is mostly organized chronologically. Five of the eight chapters are sequential, dealing with the periods 1905-1914 (when the first wave of Jewish artists arrived in Paris), the First World War, the *années folles* of the 1920s, the Depression and the rise of Fascism, and the Second World War and the Holocaust. Three chapters, however, are thematically organized, that is, chapters one, four, and five. In fact, the book opens with Sonn wrestling in the first chapter with the question of whether there is Jewish art--in the sense of asking whether there was anything distinctly Jewish about the art produced by the artists whose stories he is telling. Having concluded that the majority of the artists under discussion "were not trying to produce an explicitly Jewish style of art out of the traditions of their childhood," (p. 20) so that we should not generally look for their Jewishness in the iconography of their works, Sonn quickly expands his enquiry. He observes that many of the most adventurous thinkers of the time (most notably Albert Einstein, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud) were Jewish, and proposes that the most salient theme to emerge from their work was "the way they redefined the relationship between space and time" (p. 34). From this, he derives the central thesis of this chapter: that "consciousness of time" was "particularly resonant for Jews" (p. 44). He then seeks to trace this consciousness in the works of Chagall and Chaim Soutine in particular, with briefer references to Jacques Lipchitz, Amedeo Modigliani, and Grégoire Michonze.

This chapter gives an excellent feel for the strengths and weaknesses of the book as a whole. Its reach is impressive: alongside discussions of Einstein's and Freud's thought, there is a section devoted to the "scopic regime"—the "dominance of the visual over the other senses (p. 37)—that had arguably shaped Western Europe until the late nineteenth century. This leads into an examination of Bergson's denigration of vision as central to Western European experience, and his elevation of *durée*, the flow of time, in its place. This is later connected to the historically-determined nature of the most important Jewish festivals, which Sonn uses to establish the idea that Jewish identity was rooted in a sense of historical time rather than in a feeling of connection to the land, ownership of which was denied to Jews in Tsarist Russia. There is a price to be paid for this breadth, however. It is often distinctly hard work following Sonn's train of thought, and this is not helped by the occasionally stream-of-consciousness feel of his writing. For example, in a paragraph in which he sets out to investigate what drew so many young Jewish artists to Paris in the opening years of the twentieth century, he writes: "The Russian Empire still confined Jews to the Pale of Settlement, and Jews could only reside in Moscow or St. Petersburg with special dispensation. Paris was the home not only of the art displayed in the Louvre but also of the newest aesthetic currents. Art teachers told their young Jewish art students that they must go to Paris to become real artists. Young Jews who emigrated to America would blaze new ground in other cultural fields, creating Tin Pan Alley in New York, and Hollywood in Los Angeles. Marginality and the experience of liberation in the West predisposed Jews born in the last quarter

of the nineteenth century to occupy new cultural spaces. The question to pose is not what drove young Jews liberated from the restrictions of the shtetls (villages) of Eastern Europe to become artists, but rather what distinguished their creations from those of the many other young artists from France and elsewhere. Was there anything distinctly Jewish about their art that reflected their religious or ethnic identity?" (pp. 24-25). As here, Sonn is often at his least clear when he is trying to draw the strings of an important part of his argument together. In this sense, the book's imposing scope and its sometimes-confusing style are two sides of the same coin.

The main chronological sequence of the book begins in the second chapter. Sonn focuses on the core of Jewish artists who arrived in Paris before World War One--Chagall, Jules Pascin, Alice Halicka, Mela Muter, and Ossip Zadkine among others--and describes the moment around 1910 when the center of gravity of cutting-edge artistic production moved from Montmartre in the north of Paris to Montparnasse in the south, setting the scene for the boom years of Montparnasse in the 1920s. He introduces here an argument that will be reinforced as the book proceeds: that the international artists who achieved the most visible success during the *années folles* had all arrived in the city and begun building their reputations before the First World War.

Chapter three then traces what became of these same artists during World War One. This is an area where Sonn's work of synthesizing existing sources proves especially rewarding because information on artists' fates during wartime has hitherto often been confined to specialist historical works or to individual artists' biographies. Sonn's synoptic approach draws out, for example, how many foreign-born Jewish artists in Paris joined, or tried to join, the French Foreign Legion, showing the extent of their identification with their adopted country. Several of these, like Otto Gutfreund and František Kupka, would otherwise have had to return to Germany or the Austro-Hungarian Empire and thus have been expected to enlist in the armies facing the Allies.

Chapter four, in many ways the centerpiece of the book, treats the heyday of Montparnasse between 1920 and 1930, with Modigliani's death in 1920 and Pascin's 1930 suicide book-ending the district's cultural flowering. Short sections deal with the activities of key Jewish artists during this period (Pascin, Soutine, Moïse Kisling, Mané-Katz), but these are interspersed with thematic segments reflecting on broader topics like the role of hedonism and sexuality in defining Montparnasse's ethos, and male Jewish artists' place within it. The resulting fissures in the material are then highlighted by the fact that Sonn clearly likes the work of some of his artists more than others. He is an admirer of Soutine but considers Pascin's work to be "facile and repetitive" (p. 158) and writes of Kisling's "generic, vaguely modern style" (p. 163). As a result, the various artists get comparable biographical treatments, but detailed visual analysis is reserved for the author's favorites.

The next two chapters are thematically organized. Chapter five deals with the relationship between the visual arts and music in Paris between the wars. Some of its constituent parts are intriguing--for example, a description of the Orphist painter Daniel Baranoff-Rossiné's invention of an optical piano that generated color combinations rather than sounds--but it is difficult to identify a common argumentative thread that ties the chapter together. Similarly, the sixth chapter principally discusses the key Jewish dealers and art critics working in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, but in the middle it unexpectedly returns to the theme of explicitly Jewish subject

matter in works by Jewish artists. This is also where Sonn examines in greatest detail the backlash that took shape in the mid-1920s as it became clear how many of Montparnasse's international modern artists were Jewish. Thus, some hostile critics sought to rename the École de Paris, the term recently coined to describe foreign-born artists working in Paris, as the École Juive (the Jewish School).

Two final chapters complete the chronological element of the book's composition. Chapter seven treats the 1930s, opening with the observation that earlier accounts of the Montparnasse art scene have often ended in 1930, when in fact many of the key artists of the École de Paris continued to live and work in Paris during the Great Depression, and they were joined later in the decade by a new wave of immigrant artists driven out of Germany by Nazi attacks both on Jews and on modern artists. Sonn notes that the collapse of the art market as a result of the Depression pushed many of these artists towards public forms of art-making, while the political turmoil of the decade drove them to engage with politics; he rightly observes that both these tendencies fed into the 1937 Paris Exposition, although the scope of the available literature on that topic makes it all-but impossible for him to do justice to this topic in a few pages.

Chapter eight traces the lives during World War Two of many of the artists who have formed the backbone of the book. The most celebrated and successful among these (Chagall and Lipchitz, for example) were able to obtain visas and emigrate to the United States. Others, including several of the women artists Sonn has attended to in his discussion (Halicka, Muter, Sonia Delaunay), remained in France but avoided detection. Hardest to read about, of course, are the numerous Jewish artists who were arrested and, in most cases, deported to their deaths. The chapter therefore forms a somber coda to a story that has for the most part celebrated the excitement of this first great flowering of Jewish achievement in the visual arts.

Perhaps it is unfair to demand an overarching argument from a book whose main function is to synthesize information from existing sources, but it is nonetheless disconcerting to find that the various threads that have run through *Modernist Diaspora* are drawn together in less than a page at the end of the last chapter. The author notes that versions of three of the chapters presented here have appeared in earlier publications, and I think the issue is that as these have been stitched into the fabric of the book, the seams have remained visible. As a result, the text presents a great deal of information about artists and a series of propositions about the significance of their Jewish identity, but not a coherent overall account. That said, it offers a wealth of details about the lives of Jewish artists from the well-known to the truly obscure, all working at a moment when the visual arts were coming into their own in Jewish culture, and accompanies these with reproductions (the majority high-quality color ones) of over fifty works of art. Some of these are familiar, others are a revelation; taken together, they contribute powerfully to the book's appeal.

NOTE

[1] Kenneth E. Silver and Romy Golan, *The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris, 1905-1945* (New York: Universe Books/The Jewish Museum, 1985).

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