

## **Jewish Visual Heritage: The Importance of Documentation**

by Prof. Aliza Cohen-Mushlin

The Science of Judaism, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, was started by a group of Jewish intellectuals during the 1810s and 1820s in Germany. Leopold Zunz (1794-1886) was the first to outline the programme and scientific methods of this new discipline; it was to include the study of Judaism in all its manifestations: theology, religious worship, Jewish law, Hebrew literature, history and Jewish ethics.

This had a twofold purpose—to view Judaism against the backdrop of the surrounding culture, and to raise the consciousness of Jewish identity through education.

Zunz did not include the arts. The study of Jewish visual art began at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but only in the 1960s was it established by Prof. Bezalel Narkiss as a separately recognized discipline at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The Index of Jewish Art was then founded to define what is meant by Jewish visual culture; and the establishment of the Center for Jewish Art twenty-five years ago started a systematic gathering of first-hand data on visual material in five fields: ancient and modern Jewish art; Hebrew illuminated manuscripts; ritual and ceremonial objects and the customs of their usage in different Jewish communities; and finally, architecture of synagogues and other ritual buildings.

In other words, 'the Science of Judaism' that Zunz instigated was extended 150 years later to include the visual heritage, thus adding to Jewish culture a new and significant dimension.

The historic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century destroyed a very large part of the Jewish visual heritage. However, when in 1990 the Center for Jewish Art started a systematic documentation in the former Soviet Union, we were astounded to find the remnants of a great culture of bygone days: silver ritual objects of exquisite workmanship hidden in crates in a former monastery in Kiev; ruined edifices of synagogues from the 16<sup>th</sup> century on, standing silent in memory of annihilated communities; richly decorated tombstones from the same time, with poetic verses exalting the dead; and high quality paintings and sculptures by Jewish artists hidden in private houses, about to be sold to private collectors and dispersed throughout the world.

This culture, developed by Jewish communities within the regions they lived throughout centuries, is in great danger of being lost forever: many synagogue buildings are collapsing or being reconstructed and changed; abandoned cemeteries are being destroyed by natural forces and vandalism; ritual and fine art objects are being stolen or sold in bazaars and auction houses, torn from their cultural fabric.

It is impossible to physically renovate and guard what is left of this rich culture. A painful choice has to be made subject to numerous criteria and involving high costs. However, an economically viable solution is carried out by the Center for Jewish Art: the systematic, region by region documentation of synagogue buildings, ritual and fine art objects, tombstones and manuscripts, in relation to the indigenous culture.

This documentation has a two-fold purpose:

1. To save, by documentation, the endangered Jewish visual heritage worldwide, and to make the computerised data available to everybody via the Internet.
2. To strengthen Jewish identity through the study and dissemination of the visual material connected to literary sources of the Science of Judaism.

This connection of the database of visual culture to literary sources is done through the computerised Index of Jewish Art, the main educational tool of the Center for Jewish Art, in addition to numerous publications in digital and book form, scores of courses, symposia and international conferences. The Center for Jewish Art has amassed documentation data on approximately a quarter of a million objects and over one thousand synagogue buildings, ready to be shared on the Internet once a suitable computer programme is installed. Research and computerisation are carried out by M.A. and Ph.D. students at the Center, its four architects, and by its partners in several countries.

Had the Jewish visual heritage been safe, we could have taken time to document it. Unfortunately, Jewish visual heritage is one of the most endangered in the world, and more is being lost now than during World War II.

The Center is currently mapping the endangered synagogues, cemetery chapels, and *mikvaot* built throughout the world before 1950. An endangered building means that it is in private hands, in secondary use, abandoned, dilapidated, or nearly in ruins, about to be reconstructed and changed, without a Jewish community to care for it.

The numbers are a rough estimate, because each documentation expedition brings surprises for better or worse. In Europe we estimate about 3,600 extant buildings, and

throughout the world—about 5,500. Of these the Center has documented 1,038 buildings in 39 countries.

Documentation includes measured architectural drawings, detailed description and photographs. This data is entered into the computerised Index of Jewish Art, which has specially designed templates with common fields linked to other objects. For some buildings our architects build three-dimensional computer models, showing all various reconstruction stages. We have about ninety such computerised models.

Despite these achievements, in order to win the battle against time, more institutions should join us. One institution, the Institute of Baugeschichte at the University of Braunschweig, has been working with us since 1994. Under the supervision of Prof. Harmen Thies and with the help of three Ph.D. students acting as instructors, more than 150 extant synagogues and other buildings have been documented in five German states. Some of these, destroyed in 1938, were reconstructed as wooden models. The minimal costs are due to a programme which was integrated into the curriculum of more than 200 students, some joining from the Universities of Dresden and Weimar.

In order to continue the mutual work between the two institutions, there are plans to establish a research unit called Beit Tfila (House of Prayer) dedicated to the documentation and research of Jewish architecture. Through this programme many non-Jewish students will become familiar with Jewish culture as part of their own heritage. Similar programmes are being carried out in Slovakia and England, with much success.

Since funding is scarce, and time is short, duplication of work should be avoided and all documentation should be shared.

I would like to suggest that the research unit Beit Tfila will become an information pool regarding:

- a) supplying and receiving information where documentation is being carried out and by whom;
- b) information about existing plans in archives of various countries;
- c) information on universities which would like to integrate the programme into their curriculum;
- d) architects who would like to help in documentation;
- e) knowledgeable contact people in the region to be documented.

I propose that the documentation material from different countries be entered into the database of the Index of Jewish Art, which is already a vast computerized archive of Jewish visual culture, and that the entire database could be shared by all interested parties.

Why is documentation important? When examining the architectural heritage, documentation is the first step taken towards the selection of buildings to be physically maintained and reconstructed. Additionally, documenting buildings, ritual objects, manuscripts, and fine art which belonged to Jewish communities that are no more enables a glimpse at their rich cultural life. It should be known how these communities lived and thrived spiritually, not only how they perished.

The documentation data of visual art, like that of the Science of Judaism is the raw material which for centuries to come will enable researchers to gain insight into the values of the rich and multifaceted Jewish culture. Through education, they will pass on

knowledge and memory from generation to generation. Leopold Zunz would have appreciated it.