

A Survey of the First Century of Jewish Women Artists:  
The Impact of Four Upheavals

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**Introduction**

The international conference, "Art, Religion and Identity," held on September 23-24, 2008 in Glasgow, was scheduled to coincide with the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Scottish Jewish female artist, Hannah Frank. Using the framework of Frank's century-long life, this chapter offers a survey of her fellow artists - Jewish women from each decade of the past 100 years beginning with teens of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and ending with the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>. By considering these Jewish women artists in succession, decade-by-decade, it becomes clear that major social trends - Zionism, immigration, the Holocaust and feminism - affected their ability to be artists and the nature of their work. The particular artists I have chosen for this overview reflect my own sense of who was significant. These artists have established reputations and their work is exhibited in museums or owned by private collectors throughout the world. In the later decades in particular, there were many other Jewish women artists from which a choice could be made.

Not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century did Jewish women artists emerge in large numbers and garner solid standing in the art world. Although Jewish women artists surely did artistic work *before* the 20<sup>th</sup> century, few of them are well known. Some may have done work that went unrecognized, and some art created by Jewish women may even have been attributed to men.<sup>1</sup> The important point is that a rich background of Jewish women's art did not exist for women who began to create art at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Those who began to work as artists in the early 1900s were pioneers. For the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish women artists dealt directly with their environment - the personages that Chana Orloff sculpted, the urban and rural scenes that Siona Tagger saw around her, and the soft hills of Jerusalem that captivated Ana Ticho. Their work was neither informed nor mediated by art history. Their role models and collegial influences were men. They were a

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<sup>1</sup> This was the case, for example, with the work of non-Jewish Italian artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, 1593-1652.

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minority (as women) within a minority (as Jews). By the *end* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all of this had changed, and Jewish women artists referenced the work of Jewish and non-Jewish women and men who preceded them in subject matter, form and medium.

Prior to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish women's desire to create art had been hampered by the twin factors of being Jewish and being female. By "being Jewish," I am not referring to the problems they may have incurred as a consequence of anti-Semitism, although that prejudice might have been at play. Instead, I refer to the Jewish religion itself, whose basic ideas influenced even those Jews who distanced themselves from Judaism and thought of themselves as secular. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Judaism's attitude toward the creative arts was ambivalent at best.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, since Judaism defines God as the sole creator of life and considers Judaism the religion of the "Chosen People," it followed that the second of the Ten Commandments that defined the Jewish people forbade the creation of representative art or anything that imitates the religious cultures of the people surrounding the ancient Jews.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Jews did not reject aestheticism entirely, as is sometimes falsely argued. The Bible recounts that after the Ten Commandments were issued, for example, the artist Bezalel was commanded to create a beautiful structure, some of whose elements were animal forms (Exodus, xxxv: 30). In fact, goodness and beauty were often equated in the Bible, with regard both to men and women. The beauty of the ancient matriarch, Sarah, for example, is mentioned several times in the Bible<sup>4</sup>; and Queen Esther of the Purim story is also depicted as beautiful.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Chaim Potok's two famous novels on this theme: *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972) and *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990).

<sup>3</sup> For dissenting views, see Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Eliane Strosberg, *The Human Figure and Jewish Culture* (New York: Abbeville, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Abram says to Sarai (their names had not yet been changed to Abraham and Sarah): "Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon...And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair." (Genesis xii, 11, 14).

<sup>5</sup> See Shulamit Reinharz, "Contemporary Reflection," pp. 743-744 in Tamara Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2008).

Even so, over the centuries, Jewish art was meager, at best, and a focus on the beauty of the body was rejected as reflecting Hellenistic, rather than Jewish, values. There is no parallel between the relatively minor artistic achievements of Jews, such as the illumination of manuscripts, on the one hand, and the magnificent cathedrals and paintings endorsed and supported by the Catholic Church during the Renaissance. At the time, beautiful ritual objects used by Jews were most likely made by Christians. Later, in the early modern period, the poverty among Eastern European Jews – where the majority of Jews lived – and the idea that women should stay close to home, have large families and also function as businesswomen while their husbands studied holy texts, kept Jewish women from exploring their artistic abilities in any but the most rudimentary way. While urban, secular Jewish women in Western and Central Europe, were less likely confined by religious tenets, they had their own restrictions both as Jews and as women, as is well known.<sup>6</sup>

Four major transformative phenomena of the 20<sup>th</sup> century upended these former conditions militating against Jewish women's participation in the arts. It took significant social revolutions to enable Jewish women to work and succeed as artists. These 20<sup>th</sup> century upheavals for Jews built on the earlier seismic shifts, particularly the Emancipation declarations (allowing Jews to become citizens with full rights) offered by European governments beginning with France in 1791, followed by Britain and Holland in 1796, with Germany a half century later. Moreover, the development of new forms of Judaism such as Reform<sup>7</sup> and secular,<sup>8</sup> which held that Jewish religious practices should be altered in line with modernity,<sup>9</sup> shaped artists' relation to Judaism, perhaps inadvertently. In other words, in the modern age, a person could identify with and be identified strongly as a Jew without engaging in traditional or even *any* Jewish ritual practices. For Hitler, Jewish practices and self-identify were irrelevant in defining a Jew. All that mattered was lineage.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the writings of Bertha Pappenheim (1859-1936).

<sup>7</sup> Reform/Liberal/Progressive Judaism emerged in Germany between 1810 and 1820. Mixed gender seating in the sanctuary, the use of the German language in services, single-day observance of festivals, and use of a cantor/choir were the hallmark changes.

<sup>8</sup> Secular or humanistic Judaism focuses on Jewish culture rather than on the Jewish religion.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Susan Tumarkin Goodman (ed.), The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth Century Europe (London: Merrell, 2001).

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As mentioned above, the first revolutionary transformation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the emergence of *Zionism*,<sup>10</sup> a force in the work of artists Chana Orloff,<sup>11</sup> Siona Tagger and Anna Ticho, all of whom lived in Eretz Yisrael<sup>12</sup> at some point. *Mass immigration* to the United States (1881-1917), specifically to New York City, and the Jewish encounter with emergent radical cultures was the second upheaval, which included liberation from the restrictions and poverty of the "Old World" (to be discussed in light of Lee Krasner). *The Holocaust* – the third major factor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – extinguished the lives of countless Jewish artists,<sup>13</sup> male and female, but also produced its own artistic responses,<sup>14</sup> represented in this paper by Charlotte Salomon and Louise Nevelson. And the final world change discussed in this paper - feminism - is here described in the work of Judy Chicago, Nancy Spero and Helene Aylon. The tenth and last individual Jewish woman artist I have chosen as the representative of a decade in the life of the late Hanna Frank is Sigalit Landau, a young Jewish Israeli artist who incorporates Jewish, feminist and Zionist themes with echoes of the Holocaust as well.

### **Jewish women artists of the 1910's, 1920's and 1930's:**

#### **The Influence of Zionism: Chana Orloff**

The first three Jewish women artists I will discuss are Chana Orloff representing the nineteen-teens, Siona Tagger representing the 1920's and Anna Ticho representing the 1930's. Nowadays all three are referred to as *Israeli* Jewish women artists although when they were born, Israel did not yet exist.<sup>15</sup> Chana Orloff lived from

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<sup>10</sup> Although social movements emerge gradually rather than beginning on a particular date, the year 1897 is a reasonable starting date for Zionism, as it was the year of the first international Zionist Congress.

<sup>11</sup> I recognize that no artist can be confined to a single label. Chana Orloff, for example, also dealt with the Holocaust in her work.

<sup>12</sup> The area now called Israel was called Palestine or Eretz Yisrael in the century before 1948, when Israel was established. Jews used the term Eretz Yisrael to refer to the physical area and the term Yishuv to refer to the Jewish population within Eretz Yisrael. The adjective is Eretz Yisraeli.

<sup>13</sup> An example is Felix Nussbaum (1904-1944).

<sup>14</sup> See Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (New York: Pergamon, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Elias Newman does not include Chana Orloff in his overview, *Art in Palestine* (New York: Siebel Company, 1939) because she lived primarily in France.

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1888-1968. She and her family emigrated<sup>16</sup> from the Ukraine to Eretz Yisrael in 1904 in response to an outbreak of government sponsored deadly pogroms against the Jews. The family's uprooting of themselves and subsequently moving to a remote, underdeveloped area of the world reflected a new consciousness about the relation between Jews and their homeland that translated into the socio-political movement called Zionism. The Jewish residents of Eretz Yisrael worked hard to create a new society. 16-year old Chana took a job as a seamstress in the port city of Jaffa, joined "Hapoel Hatzair" ("The Young Worker") youth movement, and mentored young immigrant girls. At the same time, Bulgarian immigrant and sculptor Boris Schatz was establishing a school of art in Jerusalem – the Bezalel Arts and Crafts School<sup>17</sup> - essentially the first art school in Jewish history.<sup>18</sup>

In this period – the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - very few artists worked in Eretz Yisrael. Artist immigrants were not understood by existing residents who disparaged art in favor of the kind of physical and agricultural labor they believed necessary to build up the state. Jewish artists leaving their homes in Eastern Europe were much better served by moving to Paris, even if they felt deeply connected to Eretz Yisrael. Chana Orloff exemplified this pattern. Six years after arriving in Eretz Yisrael, she left for Paris,<sup>19</sup> returning regularly but briefly to the Middle East for years to follow. Although Zionism argued that Jews should move to and remain in Eretz Yisrael, the movement relied on moral persuasion rather than legal restrictions. People were free to come and go. Despite her periodic visits, Orloff lived primarily in Paris her entire adult life and eventually was granted French citizenship.

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<sup>16</sup> Four of the ten women in this paper were immigrants: Chana Orloff, Ana Ticho, Charlotte Salomon (refugee), and Louise Nevelson. A fifth, Lee Krasner, were second-generation immigrants. Judy Chicago, Nancy Spero and Helene Aylon were born and live in the United States; and Siona Tagger and Sigalit Landau were born in Israel and live(d) there.

<sup>17</sup> Later the Bezalel Academy of Art, Design and Architecture.

<sup>18</sup> See Gilya Gerda Schmidt, The Art and Artists of the Fifth Zionist Congress. Heralds of a New Age (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003) for a discussion of how the representatives who gathered in 1901 debated whether to promote art in Eretz Yisrael and thereby begin to develop cultural Zionism.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to recognize the large number of artists who emigrated first from Eastern Europe to Eretz Yisrael and then moved to Paris to study art. Most of these artists returned to live in Eretz Yisrael, but Chana Orloff did not, despite the fact that her parents lived there.

In the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a mixed artistic identity emerged that Orloff represented: Eretz Yisraeli *and* Jewish-international.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, biographers emphasize that "Chana Orloff's life does *not* display the standard biography of the Jewish artists of the 'Ecole de Paris': between her flight from Russia with its ghettos and pogroms and her arrival in Paris, there was a period of finding her roots in the Land of Israel. One could, therefore, say that Chana Orloff is an Israeli artist of the "Ecole de Paris."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, artists, students, art lovers and Zionist leaders from Eretz Yisrael all visited her Parisian home. It is no surprise, that when Jewish national poet, Haim Nachman Bialik, traveled to the United States in 1926, he stopped in Paris, where Orloff sculpted a figure of him. In the catalogue of a show he curated in 1990, Gideon Ofrat writes that "... exhibitions of Orloff's work ... served as a bridge between Paris and Tel Aviv."<sup>22</sup>

Chana studied sculpture at the Russian Academy in Montparnasse where she became part of the circle of young Jewish (male) artists that included Marc Chagall,<sup>23</sup> Jacques Lipchitz,<sup>24</sup> Chaim Soutine,<sup>25</sup> Amedeo Clemente Modigliani<sup>26</sup> (who painted her portrait), Jules Pascin,<sup>27</sup> and Ossip Zadkine.<sup>28</sup> From 1913 on, she participated in significant exhibitions and became well known as the portraitist of the Parisian elite, according to her biographer, E. Des Couriers.<sup>29</sup> Sadly, tragedy dominated the next period of her life: her husband of only two years, Polish Jewish poet Ary Justman,

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<sup>20</sup> Eretz Yisraeli artists who left for Paris included Reuben Rubin, Yitzhak Frenkel, Israel Paldi, Moshe Castel, Moshe Mokady, Shimshon Holzman, Eliahu Sigard, Siona Tagger, Yosef Pressman, Batia Lishansky, Ze'ev Ben-Zvi and Nahum Gutman in the 1920s. This trend intensified during the '30s with the move of Aharon Avni, Avigdor Stematsky, Zilla Neyman, Arie Arokh, Albert Abramovitz, Moshe Sternschuss, Haya Schwarz, Calman Shemi, Eli Mohar, Chaim Attar, Moshe Ziffer, and others. Their departure signaled the fact that they were not content to become part of the Bezalel School.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Cassou, pamphlet, Chana Orloff, Spring 1961. Emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Ofrat, Gideon, curator. Origins of Eretz-Israeli Sculpture, 1906-1939 (Hebrew and English), Herzliya Museum, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Russian-French Jewish painter, 1887-1985.

<sup>24</sup> Lithuanian-born French Cubist sculptor, 1891-1973.

<sup>25</sup> Lithuanian-born French Expressionist painter, 1893-1943.

<sup>26</sup> Italian Jewish artist, 1884-1920.

<sup>27</sup> Bulgarian Jewish Expressionist painter, 1885-1930

<sup>28</sup> Russian artist and sculptor, 1890-1967. His best-known work is "The Destroyed City" (1953), a sculpted memorial to the Germans' destruction of the center of Rotterdam in 1940.

<sup>29</sup> Des Courières, E., Chana Orloff. Paris: 1927.

died of Spanish influenza, leaving her with Didi,<sup>30</sup> her one-year-old physically disabled son.<sup>31</sup> Approximately two decades later when Hitler invaded Paris, Orloff fled to Switzerland with Didi and Czech Jewish painter Georges Kars who committed suicide in 1945 upon learning of the horrific dimensions of the Holocaust.<sup>32</sup> Upon her return to Paris, Orloff found her home ransacked and her accumulated work destroyed. That year, she produced the sculpture, "The Return," and made dozens of drawings depicting a person who has come back "from there".

Working prolifically in stone, marble, wood, and bronze, Orloff focused almost obsessively on the themes of maternity, women, and children. Her fame growing, she received orders for monuments in Europe, the United States and Israel. Her reputation in Israel and France swelled as she sculpted successful portraits of Israeli leaders Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and future Prime Minister Levi Eshkol; architects Pierre Chareau and Auguste Perret; painters Henri Matisse, Amedeo Modigliani, Pablo Picasso, and Per Krohg;<sup>33</sup> the Jewish poet Haim Nahman Bialik; and the French (non-Jewish) songwriter, Pierre Mac Orlan.

Back in Eretz Yisrael, Orloff produced the sculptural portrait of "The Hero," the anonymous man who holds his head high, expressing the spirit of national resurgence. Orloff prepared a monument to the defenders of Kibbutz Ein-Gev, located vulnerably on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. In memory of Chana Tuchman-Alderstein who died in the War of Independence (1948), Orloff created the now famous "Motherhood" monument as a universal symbol of the woman as mother. She sculpted the figure of Yitzhak Sade (1951),<sup>34</sup> and in 1952, Orloff created a commissioned monument memorializing Dov Gruner (1912-1947) and the

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<sup>30</sup> His full name was Elie Alexandre "Didi" Justman (1918 - 1985).

<sup>31</sup> The Diary of Anaïs Nin: 1931-1934, volume 1, by Anaïs Nin, Gunther Stuhlmann. On page 334 Nin mentions that Orloff's son was confined to a wheelchair. Orloff sculpted her son's head in 1919 and her son with her, in 1927. For images see Eliane Strosberg, The Human Figure and Jewish Culture (New York: Abbeville, 2008), p. 47.

<sup>32</sup> In 1942 they moved to his sister's home in Switzerland. In 1945, he committed suicide by throwing himself out of a fifth-floor hotel room window.

<sup>33</sup> Norwegian artist Per Lasson Krohg (1889-1965) created the murals for the United Nations Security Council Chamber in New York.

<sup>34</sup> Israeli military commander (1890-1952).

other men hanged by the British as their Mandate over Palestine was coming to an end. Orloff had access to and sculpted the Israeli elite - Moshe Castel<sup>35</sup> in 1953, Ayala Zachs<sup>36</sup> in 1954, Nachum Gutman<sup>37</sup> in 1957, David Lanbar<sup>38</sup> in 1959, and others. Having taken ill on yet another trip to Israel, Chana Orloff died while preparing a large exhibition of her work for the Tel Aviv Museum. She was buried in Israel in 1968. It is probably fair to say that had Orloff been confined to the Ukraine, she would not have had the chance to become the fine artist she grew to be. Her family's Zionist motivation to emigrate to Eretz Yisrael was the first crucial step in her artistic development, as was the opportunity to move to Paris, study in an academy, and become part of a circle of prolific Jewish artists.

### **The Influence of Zionism: Siona Tagger<sup>39</sup>**

I have selected Siona Tagger (1900-1988), born to a Bulgarian Jewish family twelve years after Chana Orloff's birth, to represent the 1920's in the history of Jewish women's artistic output. Siona was born in Jaffa and has earned the title of the first woman artist born in Eretz Yisrael. Her parents had a special status given that they arrived in the country in 1880, and thus were among the first immigrants. In addition, they played a role in establishing the nascent city of Tel Aviv in 1909. Like Chana Orloff, she traveled to Paris to study art. But unlike Chana, she began her studies under Boris Schatz at the Bezalel Art Academy in Jerusalem and she returned to Eretz Yisrael after a year. In 1925 she became the only woman in a group of male artists, including the Modernist Eretz Yisraeli painters Israel Paldi,<sup>40</sup> Reuven Rubin,<sup>41</sup> Arie Lubin,<sup>42</sup> and Joseph Zaritsky<sup>43</sup> among others

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<sup>35</sup> Influential Israeli artist (1909-1992).

<sup>36</sup> Ayala Zachs (or Sachs), Israeli philanthropist and patron of the arts.

<sup>37</sup> Nahum Gutman (1898-1980), famous Russian-born Israeli painter, sculptor and author.

<sup>38</sup> David (Lanberg) Lan-Bar, Israeli artist, 1912-1987.

<sup>39</sup> Also spelled Sionah or Ziona Tajar and other variations. See also, "Sionah Tagger," in Elias Newman, Art in Palestine (New York: Siebel, 1939), p. 110.

<sup>40</sup> 1892-1979.

<sup>41</sup> Prominent Romanian Israeli painter, 1873-1974 and Israel's first ambassador to Romania (1948-1950).

<sup>42</sup> 1897-1980.

<sup>43</sup> I include some details about Joseph Zaritsky since his life exemplifies the themes evident in the lives of Chana Orloff and Siona Tagger. Born in 1891, Ukraine, he immigrated to Eretz Yisrael in 1923. He began his study of art in 1914 at the Art Academy, Kiev. From 1916-19, he served in the Russian Army. Upon immigration to Eretz Yisrael, he opened a studio in the cellar of his home in Tel Aviv. In 1927 he visited Paris, returning in 1929.

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with whom she exhibited her work and participated in the Hebrew Artists Association. Tagger founded or contributed to many organizations and exhibitions, including the Painters' and Sculptures' Association's pavilion in Tel Aviv. In World War II she volunteered for the British Army serving in the Middle East, and in 1942 she joined the Haganah, the forerunner of the Israel Defense Force. In 1948 Tagger represented Israel in the Venice Biennale. In 1977 she was awarded the title 'honored citizen of Tel Aviv'.<sup>44</sup>

Siona Tagger has earned the reputation of the most important female Israeli artist of the early decades of the 20th century.<sup>45</sup> Like so many others, she is a product of the new Jewish encounter with the Holy Land. As Brandeis graduate student, Shirly Behar, noted, "These women (Chana Orloff, Anna Ticho and Siona Tagger) arrived in the *Yishuv* during periods of *Aliya*<sup>46</sup>...They experienced the struggle of immigration, but were also enchanted by the new place they encountered...Tagger depicted the town of Tel-Aviv (then it was still only a town) as a lively and exciting place."<sup>47</sup> Attention to the land and to the new cities "reflected the Zionist ideas of settling and exploring the land of Israel, leaving behind the negatively perceived notions of the 'Diaspora Jew' and even the Diaspora landscape." According to Behar, Siona Tagger was a feminist woman by virtue of her lifestyle. "Choosing art as a profession against the will of her parents, she lived an independent life. In addition, she was the only woman among a group of male artists."

Tagger's watercolors and oil on canvas depict Eretz Yisraeli towns and kibbutzim. Her human figures have few details and are seemingly anonymous members in the more important scenery, depicting the value that the individual is less significant than the

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Zaritsky was the champion of new Israeli painting. In 1948 he became a founder of New Horizons Group, together with Israeli artists Moshe Castel, Avigdor Stematsky and Yehezkel Streichman. In 1954 he lived in Paris, Amsterdam and Brussels. In 1963 he returned to Israel, living in Tel Aviv and on Kibbutz Tzova. He died in 1985.

<sup>44</sup> Sionah Tagger 1900-1988, Retrospective, Catalogue of exhibition of the Open Museum in Tefen, Israel. April 1990

<sup>45</sup> See Gideon Ofrat, One Hundred Years of Art in Israel (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Zionist project of immigration and settlement of Jews in Eretz Yisrael and later in Israel.

<sup>47</sup> Shirley Behar, Unpublished manuscript, Brandeis University, 2008.

concept of building the State. In "The Kibbutz," both men and women are guards, but neither shows her/his face. The people, Arabs and Jews, are part of the landscape. In "Figures in an Encampment," the individuals seem to be women, but it is difficult to discern if the images are actually people or rather, desert stones. The new space in which Jews now lived served to free, but also provoke, women to be artists, just as it did men. In the spring of 1988 after a career of more than 60 years, Siona Tagger passed away, having earned a permanent place in the history of Israeli art.

### **Anna Ticho: The Influence of Zionism**

Born in the town of Brunn in Moravia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (today the Czech Republic), Anna Ticho (1894–1980) later became famous for her drawings of the hills surrounding Jerusalem,<sup>48</sup> called the Judean Mountains. At the age of 10 she moved with her family to Vienna; at age 15 she began to study drawing there; and in 1912, at age 18, she immigrated to Eretz Yisrael with her cousin, the highly regarded ophthalmologist Avraham Albert Ticho (1883-1960) whom she later married. The couple settled in Jerusalem, where Anna worked as physician's assistant in her husband's successful eye clinic, eye diseases being severe and rampant in the city at the time. In 1924, the couple purchased a large house of Jerusalem stone surrounded by gardens where she began to host government officials, artists, writers, academics and intellectuals, many of whom were connected with the newly opened Hebrew University of Jerusalem whose cornerstone had been laid in 1918. Anna's husband also established an ophthalmic hospital on the ground floor of their home.<sup>49</sup> Nowadays, the house itself – with its charming café and patios - has become almost as famous as Anna Ticho herself. Toward the end of her life, Anna willed the house, her art collection, including many of her own works, and her husband's extensive Judaica collection to the city of Jerusalem, which then incorporated the gift into the Israel Museum, established in 1965.

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<sup>48</sup> As early as the nineteen-teens, a tension and competition had developed between Tel Aviv (representing the new, the secular, and the future) and Jerusalem (representing the ancient, the religious, and the past), particularly the Bezalel School of Art in Jerusalem, which the artists of Tel Aviv derided. It is likely that if Anna Ticho had lived in Tel Aviv as did Siona Tagger, she would have produced a different oeuvre altogether.

<sup>49</sup> "Israel & Art: 60 Years through the Eyes of Teddy Kollek," catalogue, Ben Uri: The London Jewish Museum of Art, 2008, p. 42.

In the 1930's Anna Ticho found time to draw and paint, focusing on two themes: the hills and people of Jerusalem. The soft lines and repeated paint, colored pencil or charcoal strokes make both the hills and the people of her drawings seem caressed by her hand. Many viewers have found an almost erotic connection to the land in her drawings. Although the subject matter is evident, her drawings make the hills seem like something else – a woman's body, a gigantic wave, a mound of hair. The scenery of and around Jerusalem has inspired artists throughout the ages for reasons of its connection with Biblical events and its natural beauty and extraordinary light. This strange, piercing light and the relative barrenness of the hills that allow one to see the underlying shapes of the stones have captivated many an artist. In fact, Anna claimed that at first in Jerusalem, the light intimidated her and prevented her from drawing. The partnership between Anna Ticho and her husband seems to have lent her the psychological and financial support she needed to do her work and enabled her to live productively after his death in 1960. Anna Ticho was awarded the Israel Prize, the State of Israel's highest honor, in 1980 shortly before she died. Her signature work is immediately recognizable and highly valued. She remains an individual artist, however, and not a member of a school of painting, nor a mentor to future generations of artists.

### **Artistic response to the Holocaust: Charlotte Salomon**

While Chana Orloff was sculpting monuments of the heroes of Eretz Yisrael, Anna Ticho was articulating her love of her physical surroundings in Jerusalem, and Siona Tagger was exploring the contours of the new Jewish city, Tel Aviv, Berlin-born (1927) German-Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon was struggling simply to remain alive after Hitler's rise to power in 1933 when she was sixteen years old. Charlotte Salomon came from a prosperous family burdened with mental illness: her mother committed suicide when Charlotte was nine years old, a fact hidden from Charlotte until she was twenty-two when her grandmother told her in the midst of an argument. The grandmother's bitterness and depression deepened after the outbreak of war in September 1939, until she also committed suicide.

It is extraordinary that given German universities' restriction of Jews to 1.5% of the student body, Charlotte was able to gain admission to the Berlin Academy of Fine Art in 1936. She studied painting there for two years, even winning a prize on one

occasion until it was withdrawn "on racial grounds". In the summer of 1938, her enrollment in the academy was annulled. For a short while Salomon evaded her Nazi pursuers by fleeing to live with her grandparents (Grunwald) in the south of France, where they had recently arrived. But Charlotte did not find true refuge there. Instead, shortly after her grandmother's suicide, the French authorities interned Charlotte with her grandfather in the Gurs concentration camp at the foot of the Pyrenees. Miraculously released on account of her grandfather's infirmity, the two of them returned to Nice and there – at the beginning of 1941 – Charlotte Salomon undertook the great work that would outlive her short life. Two years later, in 1943, as the Nazis intensified their search for Jews living in the South of France, Charlotte handed the work to Dr. Moridis, a trusted friend and village doctor who had treated her grandmother's depression, saying "Keep this safe, it is my whole life."<sup>50</sup> Ultimately on October 12, 1943, Charlotte – along with her unborn child – was murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz at the age of 26.<sup>51</sup>

Salomon's most famous artistic creation<sup>52</sup> is a unique series of autobiographical paintings assembled as the book, Leben? oder Theater?: Ein Singspiel (Life? or Theatre?: A Singspiel),<sup>53</sup> consisting of 769 individual works she produced between 1941 and 1943 while living in the France. In Leben?..., a brightly colored mix of images and dialogue, Charlotte portrays her inner turmoil concerning the meaning of

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<sup>50</sup> Charlotte Salomon, Leben? Oder Theater? Joode Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, no date), p. 162.

<sup>51</sup> In May 1943, In the Town Hall in Nice, Charlotte married Alexander Nagler, a Jewish Viennese businessman who took care of child refugees in a large estate in which Charlotte also lived.

<sup>52</sup> "Little of her work has been preserved apart from this. At any rate we don't know what it is now to be found. Nothing has surfaced, despite the reputation that Charlotte's name has by now acquired." Ad Peterson, "The Work, Life? Or Theater?" In Salomon, Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> Singspiel means "songplay," a German musical dramatic form similar to operetta that contains spoken dialogue, songs, ballads, and arias. In the Singspiel, actors' parts are often spoken over rather than sung with the music. Music provides the backdrop. The content is typically comical rather than tragic. Romantic interest nearly always plays a prominent part. Singspiel was considered less elevated than opera proper, often being written in the vernacular (German or French). Salomon's spelling, "Singespiel," is off by an 'e', probably intentionally as she was a native German speaker and knew better. Singspiel often introduced folksongs, marches and narrative songs into its repertoire. The plays were performed most often by traveling troupes rather than by established companies within metropolitan centers. By the early twentieth century, at the time of Salomon's appropriation of the form into her work, the Singspiel was not performed anywhere.

life and of her relationships. Like the prose diaries of Jewish women murder victims Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum<sup>54</sup> in Holland, Salomon's visual diary has bridged the decades since it was produced, speaking to a multitude of audiences.

Salomon opens Life? or Theatre? stating that she was driven by "the question: whether to commit suicide or undertake something wildly eccentric."<sup>55</sup> Fortunately, she chose the latter and in a two-year period painted over a thousand gouaches, working with feverish intensity. She edited the paintings, re-arranged them, and added texts, captions, and overlays. The entire work was a slightly fantastic autobiography preserving the main events of her life – her mother's death, studying art in the shadow of the Third Reich, her relationship with her grandparents. Charlotte also added instructions about appropriate music to increase the dramatic effect. This unique series of gouaches tells the story of Salomon's family and friends, her own internal life, the political disaster unfolding around her, and an obsessive love affair. The story she tells is full of tragedy, but the telling also reveals Salomon's sly humor and wit. The series starts with highly detailed and multi-layered images of the life and relationship between her mother and father. As the story unfolds, the style becomes broader and more expressionistic. The last 'chapters' are almost violent in their expression, as if Salomon is aware of her impending fate. A large part of Life? or Theater? concerns her obsession with 'Amadeus Daberlohn', a voice teacher she met through her stepmother 'Paulinka Bimbam',<sup>56</sup> and her passionate relationship with Alfred Wolfsohn - the one person who took her artistic work seriously. It is not possible to know if Salomon's version of her romance with Wolfsohn is accurate, but he undoubtedly was her first love.

Life? or Theater? is intended as a Gesamtkunstwerk, a Wagnerian 'total work of art' within the nineteenth century German idea to fuse poetry, music and the visual arts. Yet Salomon overturns the traditional lighthearted form by creating a deeply moving and personal masterpiece. Salomon sarcastically refers to herself as a "young woman who belonged to a supposedly alien race and who was therefore held not to

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<sup>54</sup> See Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943. These documents survived because they were thrown from the train in which she was imprisoned and sent to the Dutch concentration camp, Westerbork.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>56</sup> Salomon gives all her characters humorous, often punning, pseudonyms.

even have a right to exist, let alone a place in society."<sup>57</sup> Life? or Theater? specified music that should accompany the paintings, music that ranged from Nazi marching songs to Schubert lieder and extracts from the music of Mozart and Mahler. By September 1943, Charlotte Salomon had married German Jewish refugee, Alexander Nagler. When she was five months pregnant, the two of them were dragged from their house and transported to the Nazi 'processing centre' at Drancy near Paris. This was the beginning of the end.

**Immigration to America: Lee Krasner** (nee Lena Krasner).

The parents of American Expressionist painter, Lee Krasner (1908-1984), came from a community of Hasidim<sup>58</sup> in Russia. Traditional family life among the Hasidim dictated that the *woman* be the breadwinner as well as care for the children, while the husband led a life of mystical spiritual pursuit. The Krasners fled Bessarabia (today modern Moldavia) at the turn of the century in response to the Kishinev Pogrom,<sup>59</sup> as did Chana (also Hanna) Orloff's family, discussed earlier. But unlike the Orloffs who immigrated to Eretz Yisrael, the Krasners, like the overwhelming majority of Jews, sought refuge in America where their children abandoned Hasidism for radical politics and social justice activism. Lee, the first member of her family to be born in the U.S., had four older siblings born abroad. The family lived in Brownsville, Brooklyn, an Eastern European Jewish enclave where Yiddish was the lingua franca. Her father, a grocer, sold fish, vegetables and fruit, supervising his five children as they worked in the store. Apparently, Lee's artistic imagination was fired by fashion advertisements in magazines and Grimm's Fairy Tales illustrations.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>58</sup> Hasidim adhere to a branch of Orthodox Judaism that promotes spirituality and joy and asserts that mysticism is the cornerstone of the Jewish faith. Hasidim was founded in 18th century Eastern Europe by Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov as a reaction against the rigid and legalistic form of Judaism.

<sup>59</sup> The New York Times reported the incident as "a mob led by Priests where Jews were slaughtered like sheep and babes were torn to pieces by the blood-thirsty mobs," the story was accompanied by gruesome photographs of the murdered. At the time, the ruler of Russia, Nicholas II, had ordered that Jews, students, and intellectuals be killed, and that their houses and businesses be destroyed. In response, the Jews became Radical Socialists, and turned more and more to social justice and political reform by becoming strike leaders and political organizers.

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The only art that hung in the Krasner home was an illustration of Christopher Columbus receiving an award from the Queen of Spain.<sup>60</sup>

When she was a young child, a period of intense political activism began to emerge in the various Brooklyn Jewish communities. Schools espousing anarchist, socialist and Zionist perspectives were established, many of which included women's equality among their tenets. As an 8-year old, she witnessed Margaret Sanger's opening of the first birth control clinic and her subsequent arrest. She saw Yiddish cinema, listened to the recordings of Enrico Caruso and read Russian literature and German philosophy. As a result, to her mind, God was dead, replaced by art. In her late teens, Lee was already living the life of an independent woman, attending Cooper Union, a woman's art school and living in New York with her sister and brother-in-law. Later when President Roosevelt announced the New Deal, she participated in the WPA (Works Progress Administration), a relief organization that employed artists. In 1932 she studied with sculptor Alexander Archipenko (1887-1964) and by 1933 she began apprenticing with Abstract Expressionist and cubist painter Hans Hofmann (1880-1966) who had emigrated from Germany only one year earlier and with whom she had an affair. Lee claims that Hoffmann's highest compliment of her work was to say, "This is so good, it looks as if it had been done by a man."<sup>61</sup> Her circle of close friends included critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg.

In December 1941, Krasner was invited to exhibit with the Abstract Expressionists even though she was a woman. There she met fellow artist, Jackson Pollack (1912-1956). In 1942 Lee moved in with him, and in 1945, they married, starting off a tumultuous decade together until his death in a drunken single-car traffic accident. As is well known, Pollock was a reclusive manic-depressive, prone to frightening rages - the caricature of an abusive husband. In addition to their interpersonal difficulties, Krasner and Pollock gave each other assurance and support during a period when neither was understood. Nevertheless, while he was alive, Lee became known almost exclusively as Pollock's wife, not as an artist in her own right. Director of the documentary, "Lee Krasner: The

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<sup>60</sup> Nemser, Cindy. Art Talk: Conversations with Twelve Women Artists (New York, 1975), pp. 80-112.

<sup>61</sup> Dorothy Seckler, Oral history interview with Lee Krasner, 1964 Nov. 2-1968 Apr. 11, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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Long View," Barbara Rose once asked Lee why no one had heard about her. Her response was, 'If DeKooning was Pollock's wife, you wouldn't have heard about him either.'<sup>62</sup> But the truth is that Lee was a reputable abstract expressionist painter *before* she met Jackson. Her biographer and curator, Gail Levin, claims that Lee's "need for equality and recognition, coupled with her role as caretaker and the good wife who stepped aside, stemmed from a complex childhood steeped in the beliefs of Jewish Orthodoxy and social justice."<sup>63</sup> Krasner had an ambivalent relation to her own work: she would often cut up her drawings and paintings to create collages and sometimes revised or discarded whole series. As a result, her surviving oeuvre is relatively small. Her catalogue raisonné, published in 1995 by Abrams, lists only 599 known pieces. Krasner was also rigorously self-critical, and her discerning eye is believed to have been important to Pollock's work. Krasner struggled with the public's reception of her as both a woman and the wife of a great artist. She often signed her works with the genderless initials "L.K." instead of her more recognizable full name.<sup>64</sup> In her will, Lee Krasner left all the money from the sale of Pollock's art to a foundation that would help struggling artists. Six months after Krasner's death in 1984 at the age of 75, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City held a retrospective of her work. In its review, the New York Times said that it "clearly defines Krasner's place in the New York School" and that she "is a major, independent artist of the pioneer Abstract Expressionist generation, whose stirring work ranks high among that produced here in the last half-century."<sup>65</sup> As of 2008, Krasner is only one of four women artists to enjoy a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City.<sup>66</sup>

### **Feminism: Judy Chicago – the 60s**

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<sup>62</sup> See J. Z. Holden, "The Art and Life of LEE KRASNER: Recollections, Cultural Context and New Perspectives," Lee Krasner: Recollections, Cultural Context and New Perspectives, catalogue for a conference sponsored by the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center and the department of Art, Art History and Art Criticism, Stony Brook University.

<sup>63</sup> See Gail Levin, Lee Krasner: A Cultural Biography (New York: William Morrow, forthcoming).

<sup>64</sup> Wagner, Anne. "Lee Krasner as L.K." The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History (New York, 1992) p. 427.

<sup>65</sup> Grace Glueck, "ART: Lee Krasner finds her place in retrospective at Modern," New York Times December 21, 1984.

<sup>66</sup> The others are Louise Bourgeois (1982), Helen Frankenthaler (1989) and Elizabeth Murray (2004).

A Jewish woman – Judy Chicago – is typically credited with creating the artwork that launched the feminist art movement. Chicago was not only among the earliest women artists to be recognized,<sup>67</sup> but arguably the first deliberately feminist artist. In 1971, art historian Linda Nochlin published her landmark article, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”. Her response to her own question was not that women were incapable of being great artists, but rather that social practices have kept women artists out of the limelight. She put the blame primarily on curators and the value system in art history both of which relegated women artists’ work to crafts and amateurism. Judy Chicago made a huge dent in this problem by identifying women in art history and history in general, elevating the importance of women’s traditional art activities (e.g. embroidery, painting on glass, weaving) to the level of fine art, and becoming the curator of her own show.

Chicago came from the right background for this sort of radical activity. Breaking the continuity of 23 successive generations of rabbis in the family, her father became instead a Marxist labor organizer. When Chicago decided to tackle the under-representation of women in the arts, she too became an organizer. In 1970, Judy Gerowitz (her original name) “placed a full-page advertisement in Artforum, appearing as a boxer in the ring and stating that, as the endemic male domination of the art world militated not only against the acceptance of her work but that of all other women artists, she would renounced the name given to her by her father and would henceforth be known after the city of her birth, as Judy Chicago.”<sup>68</sup> Because she believed that her names Judy Cohen and Judy Gerowitz mitigated against her being taken seriously as an artist, she named herself Judy Chicago. In the same year, she and colleague Miriam Schapiro co-founded the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute for the Arts, signaling that feminist art does exist and that women can and do work together, thus breaking the image of the solo, antisocial artist.

Canadian painter Miriam Schapiro (1923-) was a true “sister” who shared Chicago’s values. Feminism provoked Schapiro to put painting aside and embrace instead textile work with its rich symbolism of feminine labor. The movement she created, called Pattern and Decoration (or P & D) pushed traditional Western European art to the margins and fore-

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<sup>67</sup> For an overview of women artists in history, see <http://www.wendy.com/women/artists.html>

<sup>68</sup> Michael Archer, Art Since 1960 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997) p. 119

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grounded textiles from Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and Mexican cultures. Schapiro also coined the term "femmeage," which stands for the female laborer's hand-sewn work (such as embroidery, quilting, cross-stitching, etc.) that rivals and precedes the "high-art" collage. Like another path-breaking Jewish feminist - Betty Friedan who wrote<sup>69</sup> in order to free women - Schapiro said that she intended her art to raise a housewife's lowered consciousness. Her advocacy of consciousness-raising support groups for all women applied as much to women artists as it did to students and all women.

Judy Chicago is most famous for her monumental work, "The Dinner Party," the first major production of feminist art, now on permanent exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art designed and dedicated specifically for this work. "The Dinner Party" was produced by a team of hundreds of women volunteers from all over the world who worked in a large warehouse in California. In this work, seen for the first time at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, Chicago attempted to take extraordinary women out of the shadows and put them in the limelight. "The Dinner Party" grew out Chicago's belief that women's history has been ignored, obscured, distorted and ridiculed. The work names 1,038 historical women and features fanciful images of female genitalia incorporated into ceramic plates set around a triangular table.

In 1985 Judy Chicago embarked on an 8-year process that resulted in the Holocaust Project From Darkness, working with her husband, photographer Donald Woodman, and a group of craftspeople. According to her own website, the purpose of this project was "to explore the meaning of the Holocaust in a contemporary context." The work is sequential and begins with a gargantuan tapestry suggesting that the Holocaust grew out of the 'fabric' of Western Civilization. It concludes optimistically with a large stained glass construction: Rainbow Shabbat: A Vision for the Future. As is her custom, Judy Chicago produced a book about of Holocaust Project, which accompanied the exhibition on its tour to many venues. In contrast to "The Dinner Party," "The Holocaust Project" has garnered negative reviews because of its perceived simplification and cartoon-like imagery. Some even have questioned Chicago's sincerity, suspecting that she is

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<sup>69</sup> The Feminine Mystique (1963).

exploiting the topic. Others reject her treatment of the Holocaust within the context of "the universal experience of victimization" that is part of a hierarchical system of power, as her website asserts. The project emphasizes "the vulnerability of all human beings and, by extension, all species and our fragile planet as well," as manifest in child abuse, homophobia, genocide, slavery and environmental destruction.<sup>70</sup>

The "Holocaust Project" stems directly from Chicago's being a Jew. Ironically, although her parents rejected religion and taught her nothing about Jewish history or culture, they insisted that she take pride in her Jewish heritage, particularly in the family's long rabbinical history. Chicago's book, Beyond the Flower: The Autobiography of a Feminist Artist, discusses her Jewish upbringing, her return to the fold as well as the Holocaust. There she equates work on the "Holocaust Project" to the beginning of the women's movement in the early 1970s, when she started teaching feminist art education at Fresno State University. "People in the art community said to me, 'The Holocaust? That's a cliché.'"<sup>71</sup> But Chicago sees the Holocaust as the 20th century's major philosophical dilemma, a subject that cannot be ignored by mainstream artists. She describes her art as an attempt to transform the viewer's consciousness and to actualize "tikkun olam," the Jewish requirement that we all try to repair the world. "It was a real uphill battle," she said. The book ends on a sad note, with Chicago wondering why a critic at the New York alternative weekly The Village Voice felt the need to viciously condemn the "Holocaust Project." "I don't have any more fantasies that I'll be understood," she said.<sup>72</sup>

### **The Holocaust: Louise Nevelson. The 1970s.**

Louise Berliawsky Nevelson, a Ukrainian-born (Kiev) American artist born in 1899, emigrated to the United States in 1905 and lived until 1988. Louise had strong ties to her family, especially her father, a man who advocated equal rights for women. In fact, her father's work as a lumber merchant may have led to her fascination with wood, the major material with which she later worked. Louise knew at an early age that she wanted to be an artist. However, being a Jew with an interest in art led to isolation

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<sup>70</sup> <http://www.throughtheflower.org/page.php?p=13&n=2>

<sup>71</sup> Friday, June 14, 1996, Natalie Weinstein, "After 'Dinner Party,' Judy Chicago feasts on Judaism," [jweekly.com](http://jweekly.com)

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

and stigma as she grew up. An artist with a deep awareness of the anomaly of being a woman in a man's world, Nevelson nevertheless did not infuse her creations with blatant messages about feminism, as did Judy Chicago. During the 89 years of her life, Nevelson grappled with an ever-evolving identity, from the Jewish immigrant in America, to the subject of anti-Semitism in America, to the struggle to be a woman artist, and ultimately, a contributor to new forms of American modernism.

Like Helene Aylon whom I have chosen to represent the 1990s, Nevelson had a distinctive clothing and cosmetic style that formed her "look," which I find strikingly similar to that of Martha Graham, the icon of modern dance, as well as Karen Blixsen, the protector of wildlife in Kenya. Louise favored tightly pulled back jet-black hair frequently hidden under a scarf, an enormous amount of mascara, bold jewelry and even bolder clothing, using her body to become a walking piece of art. Some critics faulted this corporeal statement: they derided her "outsized public persona with its ethnographic garb, fanciful headgear, massive neckwear, and an imposing set of multilayered false eyelashes" as a publicity stunt that overshadowed her work as an artist.<sup>73</sup> Similar consideration of the appropriateness of a male artist's appearance is almost never heard, witness Dali's trademark outlandish moustache. Nevelson's appearance stated - I am from somewhere else, an immigrant from another world.

Her childhood as one of few Jews in a Maine town apparently was tinged with anti-Semitism although the town suited her father's work in lumber. Her marriage at 19 did not bring her much happiness either. Her husband expected her to end her studies of drawing, painting, dramatics and dance, and become, instead, a lady of leisure "playing mahjong and drinking tea."<sup>74</sup> After their divorce in 1931, she embarked on an independent life supporting herself entirely from her art. In 1937, after art studies in Munich, Louise taught at the Educational Alliance Art School on the Lower East Side of New York City as part of a WPA-funded program, as did Lee Krasner. Thirty years later she had a one woman's show at the Whitney Museum.

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<sup>73</sup> <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/7aa/7aa729.htm>

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/nevelson.html>

As a young woman, Nevelson studied at the Art Students League in New York<sup>75</sup> and briefly in Germany with Hans Hoffman. In 1935, she participated in the Young Sculptors exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>76</sup> Ignored at first, she is now one of the most important American sculptors of the twentieth century. Nevelson had a unique style: from cast-off material, primarily wood, she created abstract and expressionist "boxes" grouped together to form a new, frequently bleak, creation. Long before people became aware of the need to recycle, Nevelson used found objects and discard to produce immense 'assemblages' that today might be called installation art: "When you put together things that other people have thrown out, you're really bringing them to life – a spiritual life that surpasses the life for which they were originally created."<sup>77</sup> Her work begins with "trash" found in the streets of New York and moves into a rebuilding (of society?). She transforms these pieces with monochromatic white or black spray paint, erasing all the differences in class and race that could be deduced from the items. As a strong woman, Nevelson was not afraid to build very large structures, some as tall as three stories. In fact, her recognition in the 1950s came on the heels of her larger works. The monumental size of Nevelson's pieces contributed to the development of installation and public art.

Nevelson explored many themes in her work, but her most highly regarded sculpture is "Homage to Six Million" (1964), a memorial to the Jews killed during the Holocaust, "envelops the spectator in a phantom-like black structure created from stacked boxes that are filled with familiar objects – legs of chairs and tales, abstract shapes resembling discs, violins, organ pipes, all vestiges of former dwellings."<sup>78</sup> This black work exemplifies a Nevelson "wall" in which the artist filled stacked wooden crates with her signature medium – found objects. The crates can be interpreted variously as homes, towns, coffins, a library, or even months on a calendar, if not more. In some cases she assembled the various pieces, making entire rooms. Nevelson was about to donate "Homage..." a work worth about \$125,000 at the time, to the Centre Beaubourg in Paris," when the French government released a Palestinian

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<sup>75</sup> Artist-run school since 1875.

<sup>76</sup> Sculpture: A Group Exhibition by Young Sculptors, May 1-7, 1935.

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.answers.com/topic/louise-berliawsky-nevelson>

<sup>78</sup> Avram Kampf, Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1984), p. 134.

terrorist. Comparing this action to the "Hitler era," she protested by withdrawing her donation.<sup>79</sup>

Nevelson did not explain exactly why she chose to memorialize the Holocaust, but she did say, in poetic terms, that her intent was to create "a living presence of a people who have triumphed. They rose far and above the greatest harm that was inflicted upon them. I hear all over this earth a livingness and a presence of these peoples ... They have given us a livingness."<sup>80</sup> Although she called her works abstract creations that "transcended" religion, she bristled when Arnold B. Glimcher,<sup>81</sup> her promoter and the owner of Pace Gallery, claimed that her "Homage to 6,000,000" (1964) was *not* a Holocaust reference. In 2007, nearly twenty years after her death, The Jewish Museum (NY) presented "The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson: Constructing a Legend," billed as "the first major American survey of her work since 1980." Louise Nevelson was a secular Jewish woman with an independent mind who threw off all restrictions. Her works are a testimonial to an outstanding sculptor who was not intimidated by new ideas and was unafraid to develop a unique style.

### **Feminism and Anti-War Activism: Nancy Spero. 1970s.**

Nancy Spero (1926-1990) is an American-Jewish artist who worked in many media, both traditional and experimental. Harkening back to Chana Orloff's relocation in Paris, American-born (Cleveland) Spero received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1949 and continued her education at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, France, where she later lived from 1959 to 1964. Her first solo exhibit took place in Paris in 1962. Unlike Orloff, however, Spero decided not to remain in France. Upon returning to the United States in 1964, she was assaulted by nightly TV and daily newspaper images of the Vietnam War and the, to her, immoral behavior of the United States in that war. In response, she became radicalized both as to subject matter and medium. She rejected the traditional form of oil on canvas, and

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<sup>79</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/nevelson.html>

<sup>80</sup> [http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Art/History\\_and\\_Theory/Jewish\\_Art\\_History/Medieval\\_and\\_Modern/Modern\\_to\\_Postmodern/Louise\\_Nevelson.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Art/History_and_Theory/Jewish_Art_History/Medieval_and_Modern/Modern_to_Postmodern/Louise_Nevelson.shtml)

<sup>81</sup> Arnold B. Glimcher, Louise Nevelson (NY: Dutton Books, 1976).

instead created ancestral and mythological figures with the forms of gouache on paper, collage, and writing. Spero's work conveyed political and social outrage at the continuing human tragedy, suffering, and exploitation. Spero defined herself as breaking away from the dominant artistic currents, created by men, and drawing on her own individual expression. Her provocative style focused on individual freedoms including sexual freedom. Since 1974 on, her art focused exclusively on images of women, many of whom are Jewish.

Spero's commitment to the empowerment and greater acceptance of female artists made her a leading figure in the feminist movement of the 1990's. She was a member of the Women Artists Revolution (WAR) and a founding member of the A.I.R. Gallery, an all women's cooperative that opened in 1971. Spero was not a solitary artist. She often worked with her husband, Leon Golub (1922-2004), and joined with others in numerous projects and events that addressed political issues, including The Peace Tower, Los Angeles (1966), Artists and Writers Protest Against the War in Vietnam (1964-72) and Artists' Call Against US Intervention in Central American (1984). In 1996, Spero and her husband were jointly awarded the 3rd Hiroshima Art Prize. Spero's first New York exhibitions took place at the A.I.R. Gallery, followed by solo shows at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Her first retrospective was held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1987 and her first touring exhibition followed three years later. At the 66th Street/Lincoln Center subway station in New York, Spero embedded mosaics in the walls.<sup>82</sup>

Spero depicted wars and violence as male-driven events carried out by small people in vast open spaces, leaving this writer with the impression that, as frightening as these warriors might be, they ultimately signify an absurd nothingness. Spero also dwelled on the harnessing of machines for destruction, particularly in her images of helicopters dropping soldiers onto the battlefield and being shot at from below. Like Helene Aylon, to be discussed as a representative of the 1990s, as well as Judy Chicago of the 1960's, Spero dealt with

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<sup>82</sup> Spero's work can be found in the collections of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, the Jewish Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem and The Museum of Modern Art.

text, which she embedded into her works. And like others such as Charlotte Salomon, she composed an enormous work on paper that stretches across numerous walls of exhibition spaces. Similarly, like Salomon, her art seems to tell a story, a story of eternal war.

Spero's begins with a Kathe Kollwitz-like<sup>83</sup> generalized cry against war. In this way she echoes, in part, Louise Nevelson's intent with her "Homage," i.e. to depict the misery of the Holocaust. But she also explores the theme of the rebirth of the Jewish people. Spero offers visions of "ecstatic rebirth and the celebratory cycles of life."<sup>84</sup> To accomplish this, she portrays women from prehistory to the present in such paintings and collage on paper as "Torture of Women" (1976), "Notes in Time on Women" (1979) and "The First Language" (1981). These meditations on "the condition of women" became the focus of her work after 1974. For this piece, she integrated oral testimonies with a presentation of women throughout history. Using "Amnesty International" reports, she pointed her finger at Latin American dictatorships and their repression of women. Like Judy Chicago, Spero was fascinated with the histories of unknown women and cultural mythology. In 1988 she applied much of this material onto installations in which the images spilled onto the exhibition walls themselves.

After Spero read the poem of antiwar activist Bertolt Brecht, about Marie Sanders, a (non-Jewish) woman who slept with a Jew and was then murdered for this sin, she made several installations including "Ballad of Marie Sanders, The Jew's Whore" at Smith College Museum of Art (1990)<sup>85</sup> and "The Ballad of Marie Sanders/Voices: Jewish Women in Time" at New York's Jewish Museum (1993).<sup>86</sup> This installation contained

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<sup>83</sup> The motherhood imagery of German Expressionist Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945) presents poverty stricken, ailing women who are barely able to care for their children. Kollwitz continuously dealt with the subject of war and its devastating toll on human existence.

Nazis bombed Kollwitz's home in 1943. Her art classified as "degenerate," she was forbidden by exhibit. Despite these events, Kollwitz remained in Berlin.

<sup>84</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nancy\\_Spero](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nancy_Spero)

<sup>86</sup> "Ballad of Marie Sanders, the Jew's Whore"

In Nuremberg they made a law  
At which many a woman wept who'd

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photographs of women in the Warsaw Ghetto and concentration camps as well as powerful women such as female Israeli soldiers and female Israeli and Palestinian peace activists. By including these elements, Spero may have had in mind the challenge of preventing legitimate power to slide into brutality. Or she may have been proclaiming that women themselves can - at last - protect other women.

### **The 1990s: Feminism and Religion: Helene Aylon**

According to her own website description, New Yorker Helène Aylon is "a visual, conceptual, installation performance artist and eco-feminist whose art has often focused on 'rescuing': The Body in the 1970's, The Earth in the 1980's, and God (G-D) in the 1990's to the present." Born into an intensely observant family, recipient of a thorough yeshiva

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Lain in bed with the wrong man.  
The price is rising for butcher's meat.  
The drumming now is at its height.  
God alive, if they are coming down our street  
It'll be tonight

Marie Sanders, your lover's  
Hair is too black.  
Take our advice and don't you be to him  
What you were yesterday.  
The price is rising for butcher's meat.  
The drumming now is at its height.  
God alive, if they are coming down our street  
It'll be tonight

Mother give me the latchkey  
It can't be so bad  
The moon's the same as ever.  
The price is rising for butcher's meat.  
The drumming now is at its height.  
God alive, if they are coming down our street  
It'll be tonight

One morning, close on nine  
She was driven through the town  
In her slip, round her neck a sign  
Her hair all shaven  
The street was yelling. She coldly stared.  
The price is rising for butcher's meat.  
And Streicher's speaking tonight.  
God alive, if we'd an ear to hear his speech  
We would start to make sense of our plight.

Bertolt Brecht  
1934-36

education at the Shulamith School for Girls, and married in her teens to a rabbi, Helene was also thrust into widowhood on her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Helene Aylon (born in 1931 in Brooklyn's Borough Park) is deeply American in the sense that she celebrates freedom from and freedom to. She redefines Judaism from the standpoint of knowing what Judaism is. She shocks the viewer with installations that involve pink underlining done on translucent parchment of "offensive passages" in the Torah. All such passages should be noted, revised and excised: "words of misogyny and vengeance, cruelty and militarism, words attributed to G-d."<sup>87</sup> Aylon also highlights the "between the words," the empty spaces where a female presence is omitted. She implies (at least to me) that the earliest Torah scrolls and original Temples in Jerusalem were themselves an installation. Her installations are a revision and a re-vision.

Whereas Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" made people aware of the specific and anonymous women who have been ignored, making their actual presence felt, Helene Aylon focuses on the processes of exclusion and silencing. How did these processes work in traditional Judaism? Her project on these themes begun in 1990 and called "The G-D Project: Nine Houses without Women," has proceeded over the course of a decade and resulted in nine separate installations entitled "The Liberation of G-D," "The Women's Section," "My Notebooks," "Alone With My Mother," "My Bridal Chamber: My Marriage Contract," "My Bridal Chamber: My Marriage Bed/My Clean Days," "The Partition is in Place, but...", "Wrestlers," and "Finale: All Rise." Each piece is a different construction. For example, "Finale: All Rise," recently on view at the Jewish Museum in New York as part of the "Reinventing Ritual" show. This construction consists of a re-imagined Bet Din, or Jewish ritual court, where all the judges are women. Suffused with pink colors - there are two pink flags framing the court bench, and the documents the plaintiffs will use are all pink - there are also three chairs (for the traditional three judges) from which ritual fringes are hanging. Helene Aylon has appended a dedication: "For the judges whose judgments we will never know...If we had women judges on a Beit Din, that could be one solution to the plight of the Agunah (the chained woman unable to get a

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<sup>87</sup> <http://ancoraimparo.org/?p=21>

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divorce)." Among other things, Aylon is saying three women judges might proceed differently than three men in cases of these contested divorces.

Aylon began her decade long project by reconsidering the ubiquitous phrase in the Bible, "And the Lord said unto Moses." She wrote, "I looked long and hard because should we not be absolutely certain there is no misquote when someone (even Moses himself) quotes G-d? I called this action, "The Liberation of G-d." I spelled the word God with a G, a dash, and a D as I was taught in my religious upbringing, but the dash is now pink... And I asked: When will G-d be rescued from ungodly projections in order to be G-d? You see, I have come to believe The Five Books of Moses are indeed the Five Books of Moses, not the Five Books of G-d." A viewer who examines the strong messages in Aylon's work will not be able to read the Bible in the same way again.

Unlike her predecessors whose themes included personalities, the Eretz Yisrael cities and town, the hills around Jerusalem, the autobiography of a hunted woman, abstract shapes, the history of women, a protest against war, and a memorial to the Holocaust, Helene Aylon tackles Judaism itself directly. What is going on within the Orthodox set of practices and how do they specifically diminish women's lives? Helene Aylon's extraordinary accomplishment is the ability to take this enormous and contentious theme and translate it into aesthetically pleasing art.

### **The New Century: The International Contemporary Art Scene: Sigalit Landau**

By the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the possibility of Jewish women becoming artists was firmly in place, at least in some areas of the world. Although anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli attitudes are pervasive in modern society, Jewish women are not being singled out for exclusion from the art world by virtue of their being Jewish or women. All of the countries in which Jews live now produce Jewish artists, from South Africa to France, Argentina, the U.S., and more. Israel, a country that has dealt with an existential threat since its founding, has become a thoroughly modern multi-cultural society with large demographic pockets of cultural and religious traditionalism – a combination that is, perhaps, a fertile ground for artistic creativity.

The physical features of the land of Israel continue to inspire its artists. An example is Sigalit Landau, born in Israel in 1969 and a graduate of the Bezalel School in Jerusalem. As early as age 27, she was already exhibiting internationally (e.g. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin). Sigalit works in many media: she has dipped untwisted, reconfigured wire coat hangers into the Dead Sea and shaped their salt encrusted lines into stunning chandeliers. She has exaggerated and spoofed the Jewish religious custom of leaving a small area in any new home unfinished (in memory of the destruction of the Temple) with a video. She has swirled a barbed wire hula-hoop around her bleeding bare midriff on an Israeli swatch of seashore, filming the event as an art installation. And most famously, she has placed her naked body as a link among a very large number of watermelons that are strung together, coiled into a seashell shape, and then slowly unraveled. The Dead Sea and watermelons are immediately recognizable as symbols of Israel. This video, recently shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is mesmerizing.

Sigalit's work is deeply political while determinedly aesthetic. Her use of her own naked body in videos – as part of nature and of history – builds on feminist art's use of body parts, fluids and imprints.<sup>88</sup> It suggests that Eretz Yisrael and now Israel is like a woman's body with its gentle round shapes and its fecund fields. I believe that if Hanna Frank had lived long enough to engage with Sigalit's work, she would have enjoyed its boldness, versatility, and experimental attitude. Landau is still a young woman and thus it is impossible to know how her work will evolve. She is approximately the age of Charlotte Salomon when she died, but unlike Charlotte she has the chance to go on working. Sigalit seems fully immersed in the international contemporary art scene. Will she incorporate language into her future videos and installations, as did Helene Aylon, Nancy Spero and Judy Chicago in their works? Does she see her work and its identification with the Israeli landscape in relation to Chana Orloff, Siona Tagger and Ana Ticho? Will she explore the darkness, as did her predecessors Charlotte Salomon, Louise Nevelson and Nancy Spero? And who will come after Sigalit Landau, inspired by her work? Jewish women artists now have the opportunity to explore these possibilities as they have moved from margin to center,

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<sup>88</sup> Rosemary Betterton, An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body (London: Routledge, 1996).

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from danger to safety, from the old world to the new, from artists without a history to artists with a rich foundation.