

# Maurycy Gottlieb. In Search of Identity

modus

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*How deeply I wish to eradicate all prejudices against my people!  
How avidly I desire to uproot the hatred enveloping the oppressed  
and tormented nation and to bring peace between the Poles and the Jews,  
for the history of both people is a chronicle of grief and anguish!*  
— Maurycy Gottlieb, Rome 1879<sup>1</sup>

One wonders what purpose there can be for an exhibition catalog in the second decade of the 21st century of a well-known artist, whose first retrospective one-man exhibition took place almost a century earlier.

In 1932 a commemorative exhibition on Maurycy Gottlieb (1856–1879) organized in the midst of anti-Semitic events was initiated by Jewish artists and intellectuals living in Krakow motivated by a desire to show and educate the public about a great Jewish artist. At the time Leo Schönker, a Jewish painter wrote: “We believe that Gottlieb’s exhibit and spirit will help into brotherhood coexistence and bright future”.<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Beres was the driving force behind that exhibit.<sup>3</sup> One of the very innovative approaches to exhibitions of the time was creating an accompanying publication with a comprehensive artist’s biography and a catalog of the artworks with details including media, size and history of ownership; private and institutional. The exhibition was comprised of ninety-two artworks by Gottlieb including several works located in Poland, however a few large canvases from Austria, Germany and Russia were missing. Only some of these are included in the “Maurycy Gottlieb. In the Search of Identity” exhibition catalog under review here.

Subsequently in 1991 Nehama Guralnik took on the enormous challenge of organizing “In the Flower of Youth. Maurycy Gottlieb 1856–1879” a travelling exhibition that was shown at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (May 16 – July 20, 1991), the National Museum in Warsaw (Aug. 19 – Oct. 20, 1991) and at the Jüdisches Museum, Frankfurt am Main (Nov. 27, 1991 – Feb. 23, 1992). Guralnik, a curator at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, traveled all over the world to gather Gottlieb’s artworks

1 M. Waldman, *Maurycy Gottlieb. Biografia Artystyczna*, Kraków 1932, p. 67.

2 L. Schönker, *Maurycy Gottlieb, jako Żyd i Polak. Na marginesie projektowanej wystawy pamiątkowej*, “Nowy Dziennik”, 1931, no 295, p. 8.

3 For more information on Rudolf Beres: A. Yass-Alston, *Rebuilding a Destroyed World: Rudolf Beres – A Jewish Art Collector in Interwar Krakow*, “Scripta Judaica Cracoviensis”, 2015, vol. 13, s. XXX.

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which had been dispersed by World War II and the post-War Communist regime in Poland. She succeeded in bringing together seventy-nine paintings and drawings; moreover she collected an enormous amount of information about them and those that had been lost. The essays included in the catalog are scholarly and presented with a considered analysis incorporating various aspects of Maurycy's life and work. The final sections of the publication titled: *Catalog, Exhibitions, and Bibliography* demonstrate a thorough, professional and exhaustive endeavor. The *Catalog* not only provides a physical description of the artworks, including information about their exhibitions and analysis within the catalog text but also, for the first time, establishes the history of ownership with a confirmed trail of provenance of Maurycy Gottlieb's exhibited paintings and drawings.<sup>4</sup>

The exhibition "Maurycy Gottlieb. In Search of Identity", opened in the Herbst Palace Museum, a branch of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (Oct. 10, 2014 – Jan. 2 2015) and was exhibited in the Feliks Jasieński Szolayski House of the National Museum in Krakow (Feb. 13, 2015 – May 3, 2105).<sup>5</sup> The exhibition included forty-six artworks, including two copies of Maurycy's paintings by his brother, Marcin: *Shylock and Jessica*, 1887<sup>6</sup> (a copy of painting of 1876) and *Self-Portrait in Bedouin Attire*, 1887 (the original was painted in 1877)<sup>7</sup>; in addition to two paintings with highly questionable attribution. One, included in the catalog as a work of Maurycy Gottlieb titled *King Casimir the Great and His Jewish Mistress*, which is commonly only attributed to Maurycy, and another new arrival in his oeuvre *Historical Scene*.<sup>8</sup> The inclusion in a serious catalog published by reputable cultural institutions of misattributed artworks can easily confuse future research and may also lead to an erroneous and unethical misrepresentation in the marketplace.

In the foreword to the catalog written by museums directors: Jarosław Suchan and Zofia Gołubiew, the reasons for the undertaking of this new presentation of Maurycy Gottlieb's artworks is as follows: "what lay behind this exhibition was a strong conviction that art of such renown deserves not only to be constantly recalled, but also reinterpreted yet again, and by placing this art in different context, we should be able to revive the meaning contained in it".<sup>9</sup>

Thus the reader is led to expect new revelations that have been gleaned from the current interpretation about Gottlieb's oeuvre presented in the writing and exhibition. Writer Rafał Żebrowski directs his *Jewish Identity and Fate* to readers, who do not possess knowledge of the history of Jews in Polish territory. He proceeds to tell the story "about a great artist, whose fate was a symbol of the creation and emancipation of Jewish art, but also about a man of passion dynamically seeking his

4 The only postwar catalog on Maurycy Gottlieb's artworks with information on provenance of the paintings was: *Maurycy Gottlieb, 1856–1879. Commemorative Exhibition on the Occasion of the Centennial of his Birth*, ed. M. Narkiss, Jerusalem 1956.

5 *Maurycy Gottlieb. In Search of Identity*, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi 2014, p. 190 informs about exhibit in Krakow "March – May 2015".

6 *Maurycy Gottlieb. In the Search of Identity*, p. 174, provides wrong date 1877.

7 Nehama Guralnki uses different title *Self-Portrait in Arab attire*, following the title of 1932 exhibit, and if the organizers of this exhibit intended to focus on identity, they should be very sensitive in order not to confuse a Bedouin identity with an Arab one, *In the Flower of Youth. Maurycy Gottlieb 1856–1879*, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art 1991, p. 70; *Katalog Wystawy Pamiątkowej Dzieł Maurycego Gottlieba*, Muzeum Narodowe, Kraków 1932: "Kopia autoportretu artysty w stroju Araba", p. 12.

8 *Maurycy Gottlieb. In Search of Identity* respectively; pp. 161, 169.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 9.

place in the world undergoing major transformation".<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, Żebrowski's three-page contribution of an abbreviated lesson on the history of Jews from the 16th through 19th century does not connect much to Gottlieb's identity status in the society of Eastern Galicia, moreover he fails to set Gottlieb within the context of the Jewish art community of the time. The author also describes how Gottlieb's subject-matter reflected associative cultural preferences of the time through such works as *Self-Portrait in Polish Gentry Attire*<sup>11</sup>, without any reference to an art-historical or societal analysis. Moreover, he follows with an erroneous and stereotypical sentence: "Judaism strictly forbade artists to paint images of living creatures".<sup>12</sup> In a book by Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York, 1992), he explains that the second commandment was directed against figuration used for idol worship, not other types of artistic expression; it is well known that figurative representation has been present in Jewish art since antiquity. Regrettably Żebrowski's essay does not shed any new light on Gottlieb within the contemporary discourse of Jewish identity in the 19th century nor does his foray into stylistic analysis provide any in-depth examination of Jewish fate in this context.

Next, there is a biographical essay titled: *Maurycy Gottlieb – In Search of Identity. The Artist's Biographical Outline* by Maria Milanowska, the curator of the exhibition. Maurycy's biographies have existed since 1888<sup>13</sup> yet this narrative seems to be addressed to readers not familiar with the subject of modern Polish, Jewish or even European art without a continuum from prior interpretations. Biographical information is required in any monograph, however no new data or interpretation is offered here. The bibliography to this essay does not include Larry Silver's *Jewish Identity in Art and History: Maurycy Gottlieb as Early Jewish Artist* (1999)<sup>14</sup> which provides an excellent identity interpretation; Milanowska apparently did not familiarize herself with the work. Silver smoothly connects the artist's life and work events resulting in a richly woven and satisfactory biography through the prism of Jewish identity.

In contrast, the essay by Monika Czekanowska-Gutman: *Drawing Inspiration from History, Literature and the Bible. Reflection on Selected Figures in the Works of Maurycy Gottlieb* illuminates the development in Gottlieb's oeuvre through three aspects. The first is titled, *Common History*, where she demonstrates Gottlieb as a painter of historical themes. Listing his artworks, Czekanowska-Gutman discusses

10 R. Żebrowski, *Jewish Identity and Fate*, in: *Maurycy Gottlieb. In Search of Identity*, p. 21.

11 The picture was painted in 1874, present whereabouts unknown; Wiesenberg provided initial ownership's history (J. Wiesenberg, *Maurycy Gottlieb (1856–1879), Szkic biograficzny*, Złoczów 1888, p. 16).

12 Ibidem, p. 25; for further reading on this subject please see: K.P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmation and Denials of the Visual*, University of Princeton Press 2000; M. Olin, *The Nation without Art: Examining Modern Discourse on Jewish Art*, University of Nebraska Press 2007.

13 Jonasz Wiesenberg (1888), Henryk Struve (1903), Jean Topas (1930), Mojżesz Waldman, Aurelia Gottlieb, Władysław Terlecki (1932), Karol Winkler (1949), Józef Sandel (1953), Zofia Sołtysowa (1977), Jerzy Malinowski, Nehama Guralnik (1991), Reanta Piątkowska (1991), Jerzy Malinowski (1997), Larry Silver (1999), Ezra Mendelsohn (2002) – only to mention few, for the best bibliography on biographical works about Maurycy Gottlieb see publications by: N. Guralnik, *In the Flower of Youth* and E. Mendelsohn, *Painting a People: Maurycy Gottlieb and Jewish Art*, Brandeis 2002.

14 L. Silver, *Jewish Identity in Art History: Maurycy Gottlieb as Early Jewish Artist*, in: *Jewish Identities in Modern Art History*, ed. C. Soussloff, University of California Press 1999, pp. 87–113.

the sources of Gottlieb's inspiration by pointing out his teachers' works in Vienna and in Krakow. The author shows that while in Munich, Gottlieb availed himself of *The History of Jews* by Henry Graetz which resulted in his depictions of Jewish history and traditions. The second source of inspiration for Gottlieb is found in: *Between the Jewish and Christian Worlds: Literary Themes*. Here Czekanowska-Gutman provides an outstanding analysis of the artist's selection of literal motifs, specifically to his particular interpretation of the subject and transformation into his visual interpretation. Lastly in, *Breaking Established Conventions: Biblical Figures*, the author exhaustively examines Gottlieb's interpretation of biblical scenes from the Old and New Testament. Within this narrative she provides excellent interpretation of Maurycy's *Self-portrait as an Ahaswer*. Czekanowska-Gutman presents paintings of Biblical heroines explaining with fluent interpretation how Gottlieb's visual representation functions *vis-à-vis* the personages he paints. The author also discusses the influence of Orientalism on Gottlieb which, although not new to the interpretation of Gottlieb's works, is important in the context of European Art History at this time and in the contemporary discourse of Jewish identity.

Czekanowska-Gutman ends her exposé with an analysis of *Christ Preaching at Capernaum* (1878–1879) and *Christ before His Judges* (1877–1879) pointing to the influence of Graetz's representation of Christ as a Jew. The author remarks that prior to Gottlieb it was Marek Antokolski<sup>15</sup> who first rendered Christ with Jewish characteristics. Czekanowska-Gutman has a profound knowledge of Gottlieb's work and includes information about the location (known or unknown) for each of the works she discusses.

The last entry, *Maurycy Gottlieb: a Jewish Artist?* by Ezra Mendelsohn, is an enlightening essay for a Polish reader who is not familiar with Mendelsohn's book: *Painting a People: Maurycy Gottlieb and Jewish Art* (Brandeis, 2002). Mendelsohn starts answering the question by discussing the definition of Jewish art and Jewish identity within an art historical context.<sup>16</sup> He emphasizes that Gottlieb's Jewish identity evidenced by his chosen subjects, was caused by the anti-Semitic attitudes of Polish colleagues. The author explains Gottlieb's status in the community of European Jewish artists, his predecessors and contemporaries, however this discourse needs more elaboration.<sup>17</sup> Important information about the artist's Jewish benefactors and Jewish reception by the art critics, specifically in Jewish press is covered in this essay. However, for a deeper understanding of the artist's Jewish identity, an explanation of the nuances of Gottlieb's first name with its variation in languages used in Eastern Galicia would have been helpful.

After these essays the authors of *Maurycy Gottlieb. In the Search of Identity* include a section titled: *Works* where all the exhibited paintings and drawings are

15 Z. Amishai-Maisels, *Origins of Jewish Jesus*, in: *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, eds. M. Baigell, M. Heyd, Rutgers 2001.

16 On defining Jewish art see: J. Gutman, *Is There a Jewish Art*, in: *The Visual Dimension: Aspects of Jewish Art*, Westview Press 1993; F. Landsberger, *The Problem of Jewish Art*, in: *A History of Jewish Art*, Cincinnati 1946; H. Rosenberg, *Is there a Jewish Art?*, in: *Jewish Text in the Visual Arts*, ed. V. Mann, Cambridge 2000.

17 Publications undertaking this subject: *Jewish Identities in Modern Art History*, ed. C. Soussloff, University of California Press 1999; *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteen Century Europe*, ed. S. Tumarkin Goodman, Merrell and the Jewish Museum 2001; *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art; Jewish Art: A Modern History*, eds. S. Baskind, L. Silver, Reaktion Books 2011.

reproduced. It is a limited catalog providing known information such as title, date, medium and present location. What is missing is a continuation of the research done on the detailed provenance information that Nehama Guralnik started. It has been almost twenty years since the Washington Principles (1998) were signed and called for signatories, including Poland, to identify Nazi looted cultural property and retribute it to its rightful owners.<sup>18</sup> Of the exhibited artworks more than half have questionable provenance, were either traded or collected by controversial individuals or have uncomfortable ownership gaps. With Poland's dramatic history and convoluted Polish-Jewish relations, the lack of proper provenance research for the presented works within this catalog is a lost opportunity and an abandonment of the fate of Gottlieb's artworks, of his patrons and his collectors.

There was a tacit expectation that the museum authorities writing in this catalog would re-interpret, review and revise the history and trajectory of the oeuvre of Maurycy Gottlieb through this. Unfortunately the exhibition and accompanying publication, *Maurycy Gottlieb In Search of Identity* did not meet the expectation of scholars and researchers.

18 <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rt/hlcst/122038.htm> (31.01.2017).