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## The Art of Compromise: The Human Figure in Eastern European Synagogue Decoration<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the book *The Human Figure and Jewish Culture*<sup>2</sup> Eliane Strosberg examining the common context of the development of Jewish art, underlined that the Second Commandment prohibitions on creation of «graven images» had been observed during ages not so strictly, as it appears usually. Images of angels, cupids and even nudes were not rareness from the antiquity up to the Modern time, though it carried not fully legitimate character in the context of Judaism. Carving on sarcophaguses, illuminations of manuscripts and marriage contracts – *ktubbot*, ritual metal, textile, carved tombstones – *matzevot*, and synagogue decorations testify the significance of anthropomorphic motifs in the traditional art Judaica dictionary. In medieval Germany the allegorical language of the European art formed a new tradition of animal images representing the human images. Later animalistics has got the prevalence, as well as the various methods of anthropomorphic images visualization. Many of them were called to reconcile Art and the Torah, to develop a kind of consensus. It concerns not only the image of man but also God (Divine presence – the *Shekhinah*), on appearance and similarity which a man was created. In Sigmund Freud opinion the dichotomy established in Jewish visual culture led to the fact that the prohibition on the image of deity subdued the abstract idea of sensory perception and heaved up God image on more high spiritual level<sup>3</sup>. Accordingly, the image of God, represented by anthropomorphic or other forms was called to express this level, which is located beyond the visual motif. In this work we attempt to examine the phenomenon of the human images in the wall paintings of synagogues of Eastern Europe.

Two years ago while going through the archives of the Ukrainian ethnographer Fyodor Vovk<sup>4</sup> I came upon a curious photograph of wall paintings from the wooden synagogue in Noryńsk, a shtetl in former Kiev Region (Kiev *gubernya* in Russian empire). The photograph

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the paper presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, August 2-6, 2009. It is dedicated to my wife Galyna Stalinskaya.

<sup>2</sup> E. Strosberg, *The Human Figure and Jewish Culture*. New York – London 2009, p. 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> S. Freud, *Der Mann Moses und die Monotheistische Religion: Drei Abhandlungen*. Amsterdam 1939, quoted in E. Strosberg, *The Human Figure and Jewish Culture*, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Vovk (Volkov) Fyodor Kondratievich (1847–1918) – ethnographer, archaeologist, anthropologist. From 1907 to 1918 is an ethnographer-keeper of the Ethnographic Department of the Russian museum of Emperor Alexander III (now the Russian Ethnographic Museum, St. Petersburg), the counsel of South-West region of Russia and foreign Slavs; in the first years of the expeditions studied the lifestyle of the Jewish population, pawned basis of Ashkenazy collection REM, see: Л.Б. Урицкая, С.М. Якерсон. *Еврейские сокровища Петербурга. Ашкеназские коллекции Российского этнографического музея*, Санкт-Петербург 2009, с. 11-12.

shows a trumpeting elephant in the process of lighting a *menorah*<sup>5</sup> (fig.1). Apparently, the artist had a rather hazy notion of the looks of a real elephant. The animal depicted has enormous shapeless soles, human-shaped ears, and a curved trunk strangely attached to the head, or, rather, emerging from the mouth. The natural movement of the beast is endowed with a ritual and an anthropomorphic character. It conveys a certain unprecedented dynamic to the human hand gesture of lighting the *menorah*. By means of such a naïve and at the same time metaphoric interpretation the painter achieves an unexpected spiritualistic effect, which makes the viewer feel that the entire scene is governed by an invisible spiritual force.

The composition made me turn to the topic most vibrantly alive not only for Jewish art, but for Judaism as such: the question of the representation of the human being. Polemics about this issue has never seen a lull. On the one hand, the Second Commandment decreed “You shall not make for yourself a graven image” (Exod. 20:4) which prohibits the depiction of living creatures in order to protect the Jews from the risk of a return to idolatry, and eventually, from the temptation of assimilation. On the other hand, the well-known Talmudic principle of “*hiddur mitzvah*” (“enhancing of the commandment”)<sup>6</sup> prescribed observing the laws of tradition on the highest possible level of esthetic appeal, “worshipping the Lord in the splendor of Holiness.” (Ps. 29:2) Because the synagogue was key in the fulfillment of this imperative, Jews attempted to outfit it with the most resplendent decoration possible, and resorted to every available means in order to achieve a sense of fervent awe before the Most High<sup>7</sup>. Obviously images of human beings needed to play a significant role in this.

This tension between Judaism and artistic objectives led to a turning away from direct representation of human figures. In particular, this formed the beginning of the so-called tradition of the “concealment of the face,” which later led to remarkable developments in the Jewish artistic culture of medieval Europe, as discussed in the works of prof. Bezalel Narkiss<sup>8</sup>. Beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> and through the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, Ashkenazi manuscript illuminations show human beings with birds’ or animals’ heads, covered faces, or with smudged facial features. The same practice was transferred and then became the established norm in Eastern European synagogue wall paintings of the late 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and was preserved up until our own times.

Masters used a variety of schemes to avoid depicting human bodies and faces, often exhibiting outstanding resourcefulness in their search for the “*kosher*” form of representing

<sup>5</sup> Science Archives of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (further: SA IA NASU). The F.K. Vovk Fund, no 253, file. 1. *Noryńsk. Wooden synagogue. XIX c. Wall painting. Detail. Photo by F. Vovk, 1907.*

<sup>6</sup> Shabbat, 133b (quoted in: Levi, I. *The Synagogue. Its History and Function.* London 1963, p. 68, 75. Principle to serve God in the beauty and majesty also came from the interpretation of saying: “This is my God and I will glorify Him” (Exodus 15:2).

<sup>7</sup> Historical excursus of the synagogue decoration development, including human images in the context of the rabbis’ evaluations and rulings see: Sh. Sabar, *Synagogue Interior Decoration and the Halakhah*, «Synagogues without Jews and the Communities that Built and Used them». (Ed. by R. and B.-Z. Dorfman), Philadelphia 2000, p. 308-317.

<sup>8</sup> Б. Наркис, *О зоокефальном феномене в средневековых ашкеназских манускриптах, «Еврейское искусство в европейском контексте»* (под ред. И. Родова), Иерусалим – Москва 2002, с. 51-66.

the human being. The Ukrainian art historian Danylo Scherbakivsky<sup>9</sup> in 1926 visited a synagogue in Ożaryńce in Podolia and reflected in his diaries on these quests for a “compromise” in synagogue wall paintings as follows: “...The fear of representing the human face forced the artist to depict the watchers without heads, and instead of Virgo [to show] two hands with buckets.”<sup>10</sup> What the researcher has noted is nothing other than a variety of approaches to “solving the problem” of human representation in the Jewish artistic tradition.

To get a more adequate understanding of this tradition it is essential to consider the subject repertoire of the anthropomorphic motifs of the wall paintings, the diversity of their artistic interpretations, and the overall effect which they had upon the worshippers.

Among the various types of images which either presented as human or else correlated with human figures, we can try to identify specific typological categories: images of the *Shekhinah*, angels, the Moshiach, the *kohanim*, Biblical heroes, and simple Jews, as well as metaphorical personifications of the human virtues. The very nature of these representations shows an extensive iconographic collection at the artists’ disposal, a collection at times stable and universally accepted, and at others more local.

Numerous techniques for depicting human figures are especially clearly presented in the wall paintings of wooden synagogues. In many of these, for instance, in Podolia, the pristine artistic interpretations of the Torah and *midrashim*, replete with mystical feeling and artistic inspiration, fuse with local folklore.

In 1930, while studying the synagogue in Michałpol, Elisaveta Levitzkaya<sup>11</sup> focused particularly on the special quality of the renditions of the human subjects:

“Everywhere the master avoids depicting the human being. Occasionally, when human presence is a must, the human figure is in part replaced: for instance, Virgo, the sign of the Zodiac, is shown as two hands doing needle work on an embroidery frame; in the “Garden of Eden” composition the hand of Eve stretches forth from the edge of the painting to reach for the apple, while in the figure of Sagittarius the hands alone draw the bow. The drawing of these hands is everywhere very faint in contrast with the solid manner of the wall painting as a whole... Above the Torah Ark floats some shape in a *tallit*, the Tables of the Law in its hands. This is not even the representation of a human figure; this is a bare hint, an abstraction, the shadow of a person, which easily blends into the decorative background of the wall.”<sup>12</sup> (fig.2)

<sup>9</sup> Scherbakivsky Danylo Mychajlovych (1877-1927) – outstanding Ukrainian ethnographer, archaeologist, art historian, one of the founders of Ukrainian art historian studies. The SA IA NASU keeps his archive (Fund 9), including numerous photographs and manuscripts of the monuments of Jewish culture and art, which were collected by D. Scherbakivsky during his expeditions, see: Ю. Лифшиц, Две неизвестные коллекции по истории материальной культуры евреев восточной Европы, «История евреев на Украине и в Белоруссии: Экспедиции. Памятники. Находки». Вып. 2. (сост.: В. Лукин, Б. Хаймович, В. Дымшиц), Санкт-Петербург 1994, с. 152-158.

<sup>10</sup> SA IA NASU. The All-Ukrainian Archaeological Committing (further: AUAC) Fund. No. 86/8b. Danylo Scherbakivsky. II. Jewish Art (the manuscript), 3 pages, (p.17 (22) – 19 (24) [Ukrainian].

<sup>11</sup> Elisaveta Levitzkaya – archaeologist, art historian, a researcher of the All-Ukrainian Archaeological Committing

<sup>12</sup> SA IA NASU. (AUAC). No. 327/18. Левицька Л., Розписи культової єврейської пам’ятки на Поділлі, л. 5-7.

The same image attracted the attention of Pavlo Zholtovsky<sup>13</sup>, another art historian: “a dark bust-size representation of the *Shekhinah*, covered with a *tallit* from beneath which only the hands are visible, is a very bold attempt at an anthropomorphic representation of the Godhead, strictly forbidden by Rabbinic Orthodoxy.”<sup>14</sup>

In this last scene, the artist partially covers the figure’s face with a sheet, barely indicating the eyes and smudging the outlines of the face, which is crossed by a vertical wooden beam besides. This technique of “concealing the face” shows a connection to the medieval miniature from the *Shavuot* section of the Dresden “Double Machzor” (dating from 1290), where the scene of the Giving of the Law on Mount Sinai appears. The faces of all the figures involved in this event are concealed in different ways: a crown moved over the eyes of one, hands covering the faces of some of the others, views of figures from the back, figures depicted with closed eyes, and so on<sup>15</sup>.

In a different composition, “A Cart with a Team of Horses,” where the scene of the return to Eretz-Israel in Messianic times is shown, the image of the cart driver is, in fact, shown in full<sup>16</sup> (fig.3). But the human figure is displayed in a planar and schematic fashion, as opposed to the realistic rendition of the horses and the cart. Here the intention of the painter is obviously to distort the human features, to make them dissipate in order not to let the figure as a whole attract attention<sup>17</sup>.

Nearly a century-and-a-half later an analogous scene is reproduced on the walls of a Lithuanian synagogue in Pokroje (repainted in 1895)<sup>18</sup>. Here it is a train not a cart making the trek to the Holy Land, and it is driven by the same kind of barely discernible figure: the locomotive operator holding a railroad signal flag in his hand.

A different way of representing the human figure, which becomes accepted in practice in synagogue decoration, is the depiction of headless images. This was possibly the result of direct confrontation between the artists and the rabbis. In his book *Jewish Art in European Synagogues* Lukomsky points out that the painter David Friedlander attempted to introduce

<sup>13</sup> Zholtovsky Pavlo Mykolayovych (1904-1986) – Doctor of Art History, an outstanding Ukrainian art historian. His expedition pictures, including hundreds of pictures of synagogues and Jewish district of the shtetls are stored at the Institute of Manuscripts of the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, the S.A.Taranushenko archive (1889-1976), who used to be a director of the Museum of Ukrainian Art in Kharkiv, where Zholtovsky has worked until 1933 (S.A.Taranushenko Fund, No 273; see the above publication Yu. Lifshitz). Details about the contribution of the researcher in the field of art Judaica see: Е. Коляра, Иудаика Павла Жолтовского, «Егупець». Художньо-публіцистичний альманах, Київ 2011, № 20, с. 330-367.

<sup>14</sup> П.Н. Жолтовский, Памятники еврейского искусства, «Декоративное искусство СССР», Москва 1966, № 9, с. 30. These and other descriptions of synagogues paintings Zholtovsky made on the basis of his expeditions to the former Jewish town of Podolia and Volhyn at the turn of the 1920s – 1930s.; see the researcher’s memoirs: Павло Жолтовський. Вибрані праці : у 3 томах. Т.1. *Umbra vitae*: Спогади. Листування. Додатки (гол. ред. О.О. Савчук), Харків 2013, с. 23-24; 46-47.

<sup>15</sup> Б. Наркис, О зоокефальном феномене в средневековых ашкеназских манускриптах, с. 52-53.

<sup>16</sup> M. and K. Piechotka, *Heaven’s Gates. Wooden Synagogues in the Territories of the Former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*, Warsaw 2004, p. 145 (Photo: Institute of Manuscripts at the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, National Academy of Science of Ukraine (IM VNLU NASU). Fund 278, no 473, file 577 (a fragment of the synagogue wall painting in Michałpol. Photo by P. Zholtovsky, 1930)

<sup>17</sup> The researchers paid attention to the difference in the painting manners of whole decoration and the figure images separately, see: SA IA NASU (AUAC). No. 327/18. 327/18. Левицька Л. Розписи культової єврейської пам’ятки на Поділлі, л. 6, while M. and K. Piechotka saw only «a carter painted in silhouette wearing a characteristic hat» (M. and K. Piechotka, *Heaven’s Gates*, p.145.)

<sup>18</sup> M. Rupeikiene, *A Disappearing Heritage: The Synagogue Architecture of Lithuania*, Vilnius 2008, p. 86-89; M. and K. Piechotka, *Heaven’s Gates*, p.153-155.

human figures in the synagogues of Wyszogród, Żydaczów, and Kobryń, but later, upon the rabbis' insistence, the figures' heads were blotted out<sup>19</sup>.

This technique of depicting a human being headless was to be encountered principally in paintings of the signs of the Zodiac, for instance, in the wooden synagogue of Targowica<sup>20</sup> on the Volhyn (the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), and in a number of stone synagogues of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. A number of different techniques of "concealing the face" are in evidence in the wall paintings of the synagogue in Łańcut, dating from 1761. In the scene of the Binding of Isaac, Abraham's face is concealed by leaves<sup>21</sup>. Abraham himself, in turn, covers with his hand the face of Isaac lying bound upon the altar. Nor do we find human faces in the scene of the Fall of Adam and Eve (*fig.4*). Eve's leg appears along with the hand she stretches out, offering Adam the fruit just plucked from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The human bodies—as hinted at by the arms and the legs—are, presumably, naked, but we see neither faces nor body torsos with any indication of sex. Only the delicate hand and leg of Eve, in contrast to the more coarse and bulky limbs of Adam, indicate the male in contrast to the female person.

This last composition exemplifies the remarkable transition from full figure representations to a different type of anthropomorphic motif, the practice of depicting "a part as an image of the whole." This technique, a type of visual *synechdoche*, is thoroughly widespread, and in the overwhelming majority of cases is present in the image of the *kohanim* or priests: gestures of blessing with the middle and ring fingers of each hand typically joined together, a hand holding a pitcher, and the like.

These motifs were used in the decoration of many elements of the synagogues' interior: the Torah Ark, synagogue *hanukkiot* and lamps. They are also the favorite subject of wall paintings. A different widespread motif is the zodiacal belt, in which, along with full figure images, motifs of hands as humanized signs appear in the compositions<sup>22</sup>. For instance, in the synagogue in Chodorów Gemini became two hands with a flower and a goblet, Virgo turned into two hands doing needle work upon an embroidery frame, and Sagittarius was rendered as a pair of hands holding a bow. All these became part of one of the versions of a generally accepted iconographic formula.

The majority of these techniques were in evidence together in the composition decorating the dome of the synagogue in Smotrycz, which was painted in 1746 by Aleksandr Zeev, the son of Rabbi Itzhak Katz<sup>23</sup> (*fig.5*). Here the image of the hands is not individual, but rather general in character. The main segment of the eight-petaled dome showed the image of hands holding the Tables of the Law, above which a Crown hovered<sup>24</sup>. This was flanked

<sup>19</sup> G. K. Loukomski. *Jewish Art in European Synagogues*, London 1947, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> M. and K. Piechotka, *Heaven's Gates*, p. 364.

<sup>21</sup> M. and K. Piechotkowie, *Bramy Nieba. Bóźnie murowane na ziemiach dawnej Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa 1999, s. 312-314.

<sup>22</sup> I. Fishof, *Written in the Stars. Art and Symbolism of the Zodiac*, Jerusalem 2001, p. 66-69.

<sup>23</sup> Б. Хаймович. Подольское местечко: пространство и формы, «100 еврейских местечек Украины: Подолия», Исторический путеводитель (Сост. В. Лукин, Б. Хаймович), Иерусалим-СПб 1998, Изд. 2, Вып. 1, с. 75.

<sup>24</sup> Е. Котляр, Восточноевропейская традиция росписей синагог и ее региональные центры на исторических землях Украины. К постановке проблемы, «Вісник Харківської державної академії дизайну і мистецтв». Харків 2010, № 8

on both sides by symmetrically placed compositions with hands holding ritual objects: symbols of the Holiday of Sukkot, the citron and the palm branch (*etrog* and *lulav*), as well as musical instruments: the *shofar* horn and a trumpet. The composition was supposed to express the notion of human rejoicing before the Divine Law revealed and confirmed. Images of the past here come to stand in line with signs of the future to come.

Among Biblical narrative motifs we see a composition with the Tree of Knowledge twined with the Serpent, and Eve's hand plucking the forbidden fruit. Hands holding ritual objects on both sides of the Tables of the Law refer the viewer to the scene of the People of Israel standing before Mount Sinai. Finally, in the central section, the question does not even arise as to whose hypostasis it is that reveals the Ten Commandments to the Children of Israel through an open curtain. With the dexterity of a magician, the artist creates a visual aberration, a would-be *trompe l'oeil* in which all the details of the central motif are inscribed into the silhouette of a human body, thus spiritualizing it. The body itself is here as though covered by the Tables of the Law, while the head is blocked from view by a crown. The descending curtain underscores a human outline. The entire composition is, in effect, an instantiation of a grandiose multi-figure project where both visually and emotionally an unfolded subject is perceptible, while its participants remain invisible. This is a painting not for the eyes, but for the soul, not for external gazing, but rather for inner emotional uplifting and co-participation.

These instances represent yet another peculiarity: the representations of the *Shekhinah* via a barely discernible humanized image. This, now, is no longer simply a "compromise," but an artistic embodiment of the "Divine Presence."

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this tradition begins to develop qualities characteristic of professionalized art, and thus starts to lose its mystique and folklore medium. For instance, in a number of cases in the historical lands of Moldova (*fig.6*), in Kishinev and Bakay artists even turn to full figure human images with portrait features. Overall, however, this was not typical of synagogue art.

Echoes of Eastern European tradition were transferred across the Ocean together with the Jewish immigrants. Thus in the wall paintings of the Białystok Synagogue in New York (1930s), which became heir to the traditions of Eastern European décor, the same motifs are in evidence: pairs of hands in the zodiacal belt, or the figure of a Jew, with his back turned. Another curious scene is that of the «Lamentation upon the Rivers of Babylon,» (*fig.7*) rendered as a group of Jews in typical Eastern garb sitting on a river bank with their backs to the viewer.

The development of this tradition can be appreciated in the stained glass window thematizing *Sukkot* in the Wolfson Synagogue in Jerusalem (author – David Hillman, 1957). Here through a narrow crack in the doorway we see a human hand stretched out to the

(Сходознавчі студії. Вип. 3 «Єврейське мистецтво і український контекст. Обрії традиційної художньої культури»), с. 65.

setting on the table, and the shadows of a number of seated figures. This original, previously un-encountered technique of a “shadow instead of a human person” produces a powerful psychological effect. The artist intrigues the viewer, enticing his imagination into the space of a festive meal, which remains itself invisible, but which the viewer beholds from afar like a wanderer passing by along his way.

While human figures in general created a series of contradictions with religious traditions, animals became the principal focus of the wall paintings<sup>25</sup>. In the words of Lissitzky, [images would be] “...through the masks of animals and birds gazing with human eyes.”<sup>26</sup> The semantics of the Jewish bestiary forms a separate topic<sup>27</sup>; I will only bring it up to indicate its relationship to our chosen theme, and show some of the various equivalencies in the relationship between animal and human figures.

In some instances, animalistic subjects are the replacement for human figures. To this category belongs, for example, the composition type of “Bears Carrying a Cluster of Grapes”: the image of the Israelite spies bearing the proof of the fertility of the Land of Canaan<sup>28</sup>.

An original ploy of this type can be seen in the Northern Bukovina synagogues in Novoselitz (1918) and Czernowitz (dating from 1924)<sup>29</sup>. Here the artists depicted the arrival of the three angels in Abraham’s tent, representing the angels as three birds hovering above the set table (*fig. 8*).

In other cases, the animal scenes embody the human virtues in service of the Most High, such as in the illustration of the four beasts from the Pirke Avot cycle<sup>30</sup>. The outer aspect, type and character of the animals are a correlate of the corresponding human qualities required for religious piety.

Similarly, we see instances where an animal’s habits or behavior becomes the poetic metaphor for a variety of actions. For example, the motif of the stork with a snake in its beak is a reference to the image of the righteous person in combat with evil<sup>31</sup>. It is worth noting that the positioning of this scene in the synagogue in Jaryszew—in the intradoses above the arch abutments—corresponds to the bird’s place in the animal kingdom. This correlates

<sup>25</sup> On the legitimacy of the use of animalistic motifs in the synagogues paintings evidences rabbinic response from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, where Rabbi Minkis of Zhitomir replies to an inquiry from a member of the Jewish community concerning the origins and “kosher” of animal imagery in the synagogue mural, specified that these images are met in the previous centuries, and this tradition consecrated by authority of the previous generations, see: B. Khaimovich, *The Jewish Bestiary of the 18th Century in the Dome Mural of the Khodorow Synagogue*, «Jews and Slavs», Jerusalem – Kiev 2000, vol. 7, p. 130-186.

<sup>26</sup> Л. Лисицкий, Воспоминания о могиловской синагоге (Канцедикас А. Талант, обращенный в будущее: К 100-летию со дня рождения Э. Лисицкого), 1990, № 7, с. 9.

<sup>27</sup> See: I. Huberman, *Living Symbols. Symbols in Jewish Art and Tradition*. Tel Aviv 1996; B. Khaimovich, *The Jewish Bestiary of the 18th Century in the Dome Mural of the Khodorow Synagogue*, p. 130-186; I. Rodov, *The Eagle, its Twin Heads and Many Faces: Synagogue Chandeliers Surmounted by Double-Headed Eagles*, «Studia Rosenthaliana.» 2004, V. 37, p. 77-129.

<sup>28</sup> I. Huberman, *Living Symbols. Symbols in Jewish Art and Tradition*, Tel Aviv 1996, p. 55;

<sup>29</sup> See: Б. Хаймович, «Дело рук наших для прославления». Росписи синагоги Бейт Тфила Беньямин в Черновцах: изобразительный язык еврейского мастера, Киев 2008, p. 75-78, 170; Е. Котляр, *Росписи синагог Северной Буковины в контексте восточноевропейской традиции*, «Judaica Ukrainica». Peer-reviewed annual journal in Jewish Studies (ed.: V. Chernoiivanenko), Kiev 2012, Vol. 1, p. 247, 262.

<sup>30</sup> This refers to the famous dictum of Tractate Avot (Pirke Avot 5:23): «Yehuda ben Taima said, be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion to do the will of your Father in Heaven. »

<sup>31</sup> Б. Хаймович, *Еврейское народное искусство южной Подольи*, «100 еврейских местечек Украины: Подолья», Санкт-Петербург 2000, Вып. 2, с. 87-116.

with the role of the righteous as a mediator between the Heavenly abode of the Most High and the earthly home of humanity.

Even in the later stone synagogue Tzore Gilead in Lviv (wall paintings dating from 1936), storks were positioned practically in the dome, with wings spreading out before taking flight into the divine skies above<sup>32</sup>. Another composition scene belonging to the same series is that of "Bears Climbing a Tree in Search of Honey," an *haggadic* metaphor for Torah study which is supposed to resemble honey: Torah knowledge is hard to attain, but "sweet" to the palate<sup>33</sup>. This story takes on another connotation, because correlates with the motif of a tree (Tree of Life) as a symbol of the Torah itself<sup>34</sup>. Here already the animals (bears) come forward not as allegories or metaphors, but by direct replacement of human images (*fig.9*).

Among bestiary subjects there are also motifs illustrating utterances of the Sages and *midrashim*. For instance, in the Jaryszew synagogue, a white horse with no rider stands before the locked-up Temple as a reference to the anticipation of the coming of the Messiah<sup>35</sup>.

Yet at the same time, a direct attempt to combine animal images with a human shape was to be seen in the figures of lions in which more or less visibly human faces would stand forth. The passage from Lissitzky comes to mind: "Can we not see the Rabbi's face in the lion's image among the signs of the Zodiac from the wall paintings of the Mohylew synagogue?..."<sup>36</sup>.

Another composition is also very telling: the image of the lion upon the Torah Ark in Ashkenazic Ari synagogue in Safed (rebuilt 1875), whose decoration scheme is largely indebted to Eastern European tradition<sup>37</sup>. The painter was an immigrant from Kołomyja, and undeniably an insider of this artistic culture. He captured in the "humanized" image of the lion the name of «Ari» in correspondence to the acronym of the great Kabbalist Rabbi Itzhak Luria, in whose honor the synagogue is named. Even though in later years the rabbis required that the Ari's face not be made visible, the anthropomorphic features were only somewhat smudged, and remain clearly discernible to this day<sup>38</sup> (*fig.10*).

In this way, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs became the arena in which the artist would measure the dogma of Judaism against the relatively marginal artistic tradition. Curiously enough, these two types of images literally flowed one into another. While in the human motifs the artists would avoid depicting the human being, in the zoomorphic ones the opposite would hold, with the artists emphatically aiming for anthropomorphic allegory.

<sup>32</sup> Е. Котляр, *Зникаюча містерія. Розписи львівської синагоги*, «Образотворче мистецтво», Київ 2008, № 2, с. 112-113.

<sup>33</sup> According to Jewish tradition, the Torah is likened to the five things: water, wine, honey, milk and butter ... About where milk and honey are? "Honey and milk are under your tongue." (Midrash Devarim Rabbah, section 7).

<sup>34</sup> I. Huberman, *Living Symbols. Symbols in Jewish Art and Tradition*, Tel Aviv 1996, p. 31-34;

<sup>35</sup> Б. Хаймович, Подольское местечко: пространство и формы, с. 64. (IM VNLU NASU). Fund 278, no 473, file 1017 (a detail of the synagogue wall painting in Michałpol. Photo by P. Zholtovsky 1930).

<sup>36</sup> Л. Лисицкий, Воспоминания о могилевской синагоге, с. 9.

<sup>37</sup> A. I. Gellis, *Majesty and Glory. Synagogues in the Land of Israel*. Jerusalem 2011, p. 22-25. It is noteworthy that this anthropomorphic image remained after having been removed all animals of its décor. This happened as a result of the conflict, when one of the rabbis, Samuel Heller, opposed the «forbidden animals», saying that Eretz Yisrael laws should be more stringent, and permitted in Europe images should be banned here.. Sh. Sabar. *Synagogue Interior Decoration and the Halakhah*, p. 316.

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.tzfat-kabbalah.org/tour.asp?p=209>; 30.10.2013.



Paradoxically, in the process of solving one problem, Jewish artists achieved a different artistic and even spiritualistic effect, directly connected with the sacred and liturgical purpose of the synagogue. Replacing obvious human images deformed and transformed physical space, rendered it mystical and opened it to the inner gaze of the congregation, immersed in this mystery. Clearly enough, too, this was not a preconceived plan, but a special “side effect” of the art. In this way, the programme of “concealing the human image” did not simply turn into an “art of compromise.” It formed a remarkable artistic tradition, which allowed even for a certain freedom of original creativity. This was the tradition which later evolved into a separate phenomenon in Jewish art: the art of representing the invisibly visibly.

### Figures:

1. Wooden synagogue in Noryńsk (now in Zhitomir oblast/province, Ukraine). XIX c. Wall painting. Photo by F. Vovk, 1907. (*SA IA NASU, The F. Vovk Fund, no 253, file. 1. Noryńsk.*).
2. Wooden synagogue in Michałpol (now in Khmelnytskyi oblast/province, Ukraine). Vault painting. Mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Painter master Yehuda. Photo by P. Zholtovsky, 1930 (*IM VNLU NASU, Fund 278, no. 473, file 583*).
3. Wooden synagogue in Michałpol (now in Khmelnytskyi oblast/province, Ukraine). Vault painting. Mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Painter master Yehuda. Photo by P. Zholtovsky, 1930 (*IM VNLU NASU, Fund 278, no. 473, file 577*).
4. Stone synagogue in Łańcut. Painting in the Bimah. Scene «Adam and Eve». Photo by E. Kotlyar, 2007.
5. Wooden synagogue in Smotrycz (now in Khmelnytskyi oblast/province, Ukraine). Vault painting. 1746. Painter Alexander Zeev ben rabbi Isaac Katz. Photo by P. Zholtovsky (*IM VNLU NASU, Fund 278, no. 473, file 800*).
6. Stone «Glaziers» synagogue in Kishinev. 1910s. Ceiling painting. Zodiac sign “Sagittarius”. Photo by E. Kotlyar, 2008.
7. Białystok Synagogue in New York. 1905. Wall painting in the lobby. 1930s. Scene «Lamentation upon the Rivers of Babylon». Photo by E. Kotlyar, 2008.
8. Beit Tefilat Benyamin Synagogue in Czernowitz. (Ukraine today). Wall painting. Scene “Akeidah” (“Binding of Yitzhak”). Painter from Wiznitz. Dating from 1924. Photo by E. Kotlyar, 2010.
9. Wooden synagogue in Mohylew on the Dnieper (Belarus today). Vault painting. Scene “Bears Climbing a Tree in Search of Honey”. C. 1740. Painter Haim ben Isaac Segal of Słuck. Photo by S. Yudovin. Detail, 1912-1914.
10. The Ashkenazi Ha’Ari Synagogue in Safed. Polychrome of the Aron Kodesh. Painter from Kołomyja (Ukraine today). Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Photo by E. Kotlyar, 2005.

Fig. 1

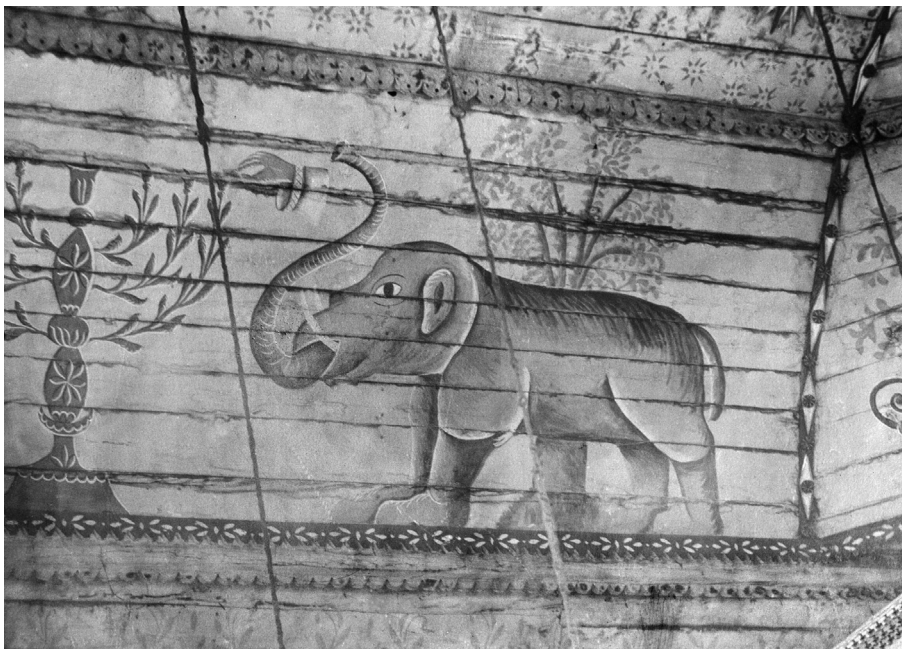


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

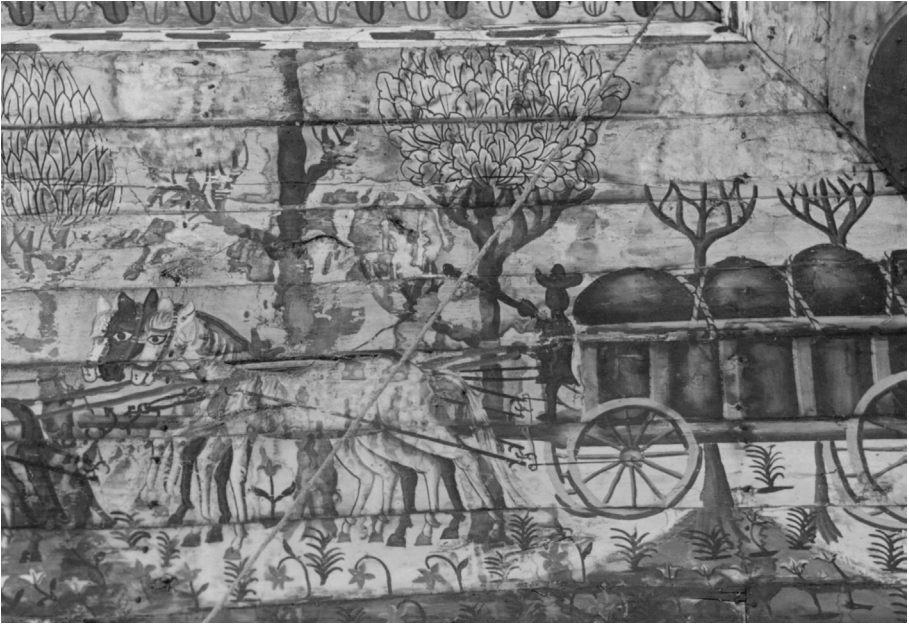


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



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# The Art of Compromise: The Human Figure in Eastern European Synagogue Decoration

Arguments against human representation, leveled by normative Judaism at artistic practice, are based on the Second Commandment. Yet the principle of *hiddur mitzvah*, emphasizing serving God “in all ways befitting His Holiness,” led to elaborate synagogue decoration supposed to intensify awe before the Lord.

This discrepancy is clearly instantiated in Eastern European synagogue wall paintings, where Ashkenazi traditions met the spiritual mystery of the *shtetl* to produce new graphic renditions of Torah, *midrashim*, and local folklore. Humanly imaged *Shekhinah*, *Moshiach*, *kohanim*, simple Jews, and metaphors for the virtues became central in symbolically imaging the universe, spiritualizing space and intensifying concentration during prayer. But this was done rather originally, indicating the painters’ attempt to avoid human figures. Common anthropomorphic motifs include images of hands, small-scale human figures barely silhouetted or schematized, and the few large-scale ones with “dissolving forms” and smudged facial features. The populous bestiary expressed the didactic, ritual, or eschatological subtext, where people “through animal and bird masks gaze with human eyes” (El Lissitzky). These tactics produced powerful artistic effects, turning physical space into a mystical essence available to the congregation’s inner beholding.

Based on surviving text documents and photographs, the article studies general typology, iconography, and specific instances of these images.