



# The Human Figure and Jewish Culture

*Eliane Strosberg*

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In the twentieth century, the avant-garde movements promoted abstraction and formal experimentation in the visual arts, often dispensing with the human form altogether. Yet many artists of Jewish descent resisted this trend and continued to depict the human figure with sympathy and understanding. Few of them portrayed overtly Jewish themes, but—as Eliane Strosberg argues in this thought-provoking volume—their persistent devotion to the human figure was itself a reflection of their Jewishness. Though their individual styles were diverse, they all used the human figure as a means of communicating, in secular terms, aspects of their Jewish intellectual heritage, such as their humanistic values, passion for social justice, and opposition to the nihilism that underlay so much of modern culture. For this reason, their work may be said to constitute an ethical, if not an aesthetic, art movement, which Strosberg aptly dubs “Human Expressionism.”

Strosberg begins her highly readable text with an overview of Jewish tradition that illuminates the mindset of many Jewish artists. She also provides a concise history of Jewish art from Genesis to the Enlightenment, in which she demonstrates that figurative art has actually had a place in Judaism for thousands of years, despite the Second Commandment’s prohibition of graven images. However, Strosberg devotes the greater part of her study to a comparative analysis of those artists who fall under the rubric of Human Expressionism. Though her scope is impressively broad, ranging from Camille Pissarro to George Segal, she pays particular attention to the immigrant painters of the École de Paris, like Soutine and Modigliani; the American social realists, like Ben Shahn and Raphael Soyer; and the masters of the postwar School of London, like Lucian Freud and R. B. Kitaj.

Abundantly illustrated with well-chosen works by the artists under discussion, *The Human Figure and Jewish Culture* is an essential addition to any library of art history or Judaica.

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