
OBSERVATIONS

Jews and Photography

William Meyers

J EWS HAVE played an indispensable role in the history of American photography, at least as important a role as blacks in the development of jazz. It is a bit of a puzzle why this should be so, if only because, well into the modern era, Jews were not notable for their work in the plastic arts. Although it is true that a number of Jews in Eastern Europe were active in photography during the period of its first growth in the 19th century, it was only in the 20th century and in America that the numbers involved in every facet of the art became large, and their talents very conspicuous.

Several recent exhibitions help to focus the question. The first was *New York: Capital of Photography*, which ran at the Jewish Museum last fall and is now on tour. Of its several hundred pictures of New York City, a startlingly high proportion—about 85 percent—were

WILLIAM MEYERS is a New York City photographer whose work will be in the Jews of Brooklyn exhibit at the NYU Bronfman Center this spring. His essay, "Cheering 'Metamorphoses,'" appeared in the July-August 2002 COMMENTARY.

taken by Jews, moving the show's curator, Max Kozloff, to contribute an essay to the catalog pondering the issue of a "Jewish sensibility" in photography. The other two shows, occupying rather disparate points on the photographic spectrum, were *Shekhina*, an exhibit of religion-related pictures by the actor Leonard Nimoy, and (if less pertinent to our theme) the retrospective of portraits by Richard Avedon at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

To see the connecting links among these events requires some history.

ALFRED STIEGLITZ (1864-1946) was the first American Jew to affect the larger culture with a camera. In contrast to most of those who would come after him, Stieglitz's parents were German (rather than Eastern European) in origin, and they were rich. His father had abandoned his religion upon coming to America, and Alfred seems to have become most vividly aware of his family's Jewishness only when his father was refused membership in the exclusive Jockey Club.

In his young manhood, Stieglitz spent time studying in Germany,

and it was there that he both learned photography and absorbed a romantic devotion to art with a capital A. On his return to the U.S. in 1890, he quickly came to dominate art photography, remaining in this position by dint of the brilliant pictures he took, the magazines he edited, his involvement in photographic organizations, and the influential galleries he ran. In the early part of the 20th century, Stieglitz did more than any other single individual to have photography recognized as an art, worthy of serious attention to the same degree as painting, drawing, and sculpture.

The body of Stieglitz's photographs puts him, however, outside the arc of development of most of the Jewish photographers who succeeded him. True, he was noted for pictures of New York, but what interested him most was the city's buildings, seen as abstract blocks in artful arrangements; the citizens of the city did not much figure in his work. For most later Jewish photographers, it was to be the other way around. Also atypical was his interest both in the nude and in nature; the former is exemplified in

the series of pictures he took of his wife, the painter Georgia O'Keefe, the latter in *Equivalents*, the series of shots of clouds that he made at his country estate near Lake George.

The differences may have been simply a matter of temperament, or may have had something to do with socioeconomic background. In either case, Stieglitz's example was not so much emulated as defied. The movement away from his brand of refined aesthetics was recently well captured by the photographer William Klein, who first made his reputation in the 1950's with the publication of *Life Is Good and Good for You in New York: Trance Witness Reveals*. Interviewed last year on the occasion of the book's reissuance—two exhibitions of his work were held simultaneously—Klein wisecracked: "There are two kinds of photography, Jewish photography and goyish photography. If you look at modern photography, you find, on the one hand, the Weegees, the Diane Arbuses, the Robert Franks—funky photographs. And then you have the people who go out in the woods. Ansel Adams, Weston."

STIEGLITZ WAS nobody's idea of funky. His protégé Paul Strand, however, produced work with enough elements of edginess to be included in Klein's aphoristic definition. Born Paul Stranzky on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in 1890, he was taught photography at the Ethical Culture School by the great social documentarian Lewis Hine. At the same time he was imbued with attitudes that would take him ever more leftward, until politics vitiated his art.

Strand's early photograph *Blind Woman* (1917) had an enormous impact. The picture is a close-up portrait of a woman wearing a peddler's license and a placard that says, "BLIND." One eye is mostly shut and cloudy, the other open but wandering to the side; the grim, oval face is framed by a black shawl and backed by massive granite building

blocks. *Blind Woman* is without pity in its scrutiny, but that very absence of sentimentality is what made it modern and made it effective.

In later years Strand taught at the Photo League, an important training ground in the 1930's and 1940's for a large number of photographers. Many who studied and taught there came to be identified with what critics came to call the New York School. This group exercised a sustained influence on many branches of photography—photojournalism, art photography, fashion photography, and portraiture. Its members changed the way Americans looked at their country and at themselves. Although each photographer had his own idiosyncrasies and his own favored subject matter, certain shared tendencies made it reasonable to refer to them as a school.

There was, first of all, an obsession with gritty realism, which frequently meant pictures that were blurred or grainy or slightly out of focus. The rules of formal composition were often violated, even flouted. And there was something tough, occasionally brutal in the work of the New York School: pictures might be beautiful, but they were never merely pretty.

The final thing New York School photographers had in common was that nearly all of them were Jewish—thirteen of the sixteen selected for inclusion in Jane Livingston's standard text, *The New York School: Photographs 1936-1963* (1992): Sid Grossman, Lisette Model, Helen Levitt, William Klein, Weegee (Arthur Felig), Robert Frank, Louis Faurer, Ted Croner, Saul Leiter, Leon Levinstein, Bruce Davidson, Diane Arbus, and Richard Avedon.

This is not to mention influential Jewish photographers of the time who were not associated with the New York School: Ben Shahn and Arthur Rothstein, for example, who worked for the New Deal's Farm Security Administration along with (the non-Jews) Dorothea Lange

and Walker Evans; Joe Rosenthal, who took the picture of the Marines raising the U.S. flag on Mt. Suribachi during the battle for Iwo Jima, the single most reproduced photograph ever; Leonard Freed and Dan Wiener, who covered the violent confrontations of the early civil-rights movement; Irving Penn, Milton Greene, and Arnold Newman, famous for their fashion and celebrity photography; sports photographer Nat Fein, who took the famous picture from behind of Babe Ruth leaning on his bat at his farewell appearance at Yankee Stadium; Ezra Stoller, the country's preeminent architectural photographer; and Ben Ross, born Rosenblatt, who was the best known aviation photographer in the post-World War II era.

In *The Tumultuous Fifties: A View from the New York Times Photo Archives* (2001), there is a picture of the twelve men who were the newspaper's staff photographers in November 1951. To judge by their names, at least half were Jewish, and Jews were similarly overrepresented on the staffs of many other publications. At *Life*, for example, the first cover was by Margaret Bourke-White, and the most covers—101—were by Phillippe Halsman; *Life* employed Alfred Eisenstaedt, Carl Mydans, Robert Capa, and many more.

The list goes on through the decades. Today it would include Annie Liebovitz and Mary Ellen Mark, Jeff Mermelstein and Joel Meyerowitz, Joel Sternfeld and Cindy Sherman and Michael Ackerman.

IN CONTEMPLATING the overwhelming presence of Jews among those represented in *New York: Capital of Photography*, the critic Richard Woodward remarked that "the Jewish imprint on 20th-century photography . . . would seem to be too remarkable and contentious a topic to be ignored by scholars much longer." I agree. Before the scholars

arrive, though, let me take a stab at it by offering something less than a full-fledged etiology but, I hope, more than just a list of pertinent contributing factors.

Among those factors, Woodward is certainly right to observe that most of the Jewish photographers now considered important worked in commercial areas, especially photojournalism, advertising, and fashion. In other words, they had to earn a living, and found they could do so with a camera: it takes very little capital to set up shop as a photographer.

The commercial habits absorbed by these photographers stood many of them in good stead in their later careers. Most of the work in Richard Avedon's recent show—which confirms both the talent that made him famous and its limitations—was done on assignment. Weegee is remembered for the work he produced on the job as a news photographer. Bruce Davidson supports himself by shooting advertisements so that he can pursue the projects for which he is best known.

Of course, other impoverished immigrant groups—Irish, Italian, Hungarian—could have followed the same route upward, but did not. Here is where another element enters in: the tendency of Jews in the last century to be drawn to activities exploiting brand-new technologies. These included not just photography but also the movies, records, radio, and television. What attracted Jews to such new arts (or businesses) may have been the absence of a social structure functioning to keep them *out*. The territory was open to whoever got there first, and whoever got there first was also free to define the territory's boundaries, including its boundaries of taste.

Jews have also tended to be drawn to artistic genres that examine society as opposed to those defined by more formal or abstract considerations; they have been more successful at writing plays and novels than

at lyric poetry. Within photography, and leaving aside Stieglitz and one or two others, they have pursued human-interest subjects, frequently concentrating on areas with a strong political, ideological, or news value.

Jews have also leaned toward arts with mass audiences—a natural correlative of their tropism toward the new technologies that made such mass audiences possible. Photography may not have been as classy a pursuit as painting on canvas, but its products got to be seen everywhere, by everybody. It was an art form that affected public opinion, changed perceptions, and could, it was hoped by some, change attitudes as well. And it was nonverbal, an advantage for those otherwise disqualified from the opinion-molding professions by an immigrant accent or a less than perfect command of English.

FOR MOST Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, photography itself was hardly something unknown or "foreign." In both Western and Eastern Europe, photographs were exchanged as a means of maintaining ties with distant family members, and portraits of famous or revered personalities adorned many Jewish homes, including the most pious. Photography had been absorbed into Jewish culture, both high and low, and fully legitimized.

Nevertheless, Max Kozloff rightly notes a peculiarity about the Jewish photographers whose work dominates his *New York: Capital of Photography*: with few minor exceptions, they "did not depict other Jews." In this, they were like many other second- and third-generation American Jews, eager to escape what they perceived to be a confining ethnic ghetto and more than willing to jettison whatever religious baggage they had inherited. Photography, for them, was a way *out* of a parochial Jewish environment into what seemed to be larger, more universal, worlds of art and politics. Kozloff refers to them as "human-

ists," but that is a pallid epithet for the strong and often very particular passions that were at play.

A brief interchange ten years ago did much to fix my own understanding of the orientation of Jews in photography in the 20th century. I had organized a colloquy on the subject, and at one point in the discussion I asked, "Why was it that of all the ethnic groups in New York City in the 1930's and 1940's, it was the Jews who took it into their heads to go to Harlem and photograph the blacks there?" Naomi Rosenblum, a teacher and the author of *A World History of Photography*, promptly replied, "We weren't Jews; we were leftists."

Rosenblum is a reliable informant. During those decades, her husband Walter was involved with the Photo League, some of the time as its president. The League, whose membership was overwhelmingly Jewish, championed documentary photography with explicit social and political objectives, and frequently sponsored projects in Harlem. In 1947, U.S. Attorney General Tom Clark included the League on a list of "totalitarian, fascist, Communist, or subversive" organizations. Although many contemporary photographers of stature—from Ansel Adams to W. Eugene Smith to Dorothy Lange—came to its defense, the blacklisting led to the League's dissolution in the 1950's. Whether or not the League was actually a Communist-front organization is unclear to this day, but it was certainly left-wing, and many of its members, including the charismatic Sid Grossman, were certainly Communists.

Leftism provided these Jews with a way of seeing. They could photograph blacks, and migrants, and derelicts, and gangsters, the dispossessed and the homeless, because they had a social framework in which these subjects could be understood. The same framework could be applied to their shots of the high and mighty, the celebrities, the successes of commerce and pol-

itics and popular entertainment. But, however the vestiges of their religion may have disposed them to have sympathy for the downtrodden, they had nothing to say about their own. They wished to be invisible to themselves as Jews or, at any rate, not to use their art to make their presence as Jews known to others. ("We weren't Jews; we were leftists.") There was no counterpart among them to, say, Roy De Carava, who throughout his career has photographed blacks in domestic settings with charm and affection.

AN INTERESTING turn in the last decade or so, however, is that a number of talented Jewish photographers have committed themselves to long-term projects of Jewish content. The dean of them is probably Bill Aron, whose book, *From the Corners of the Earth* (1986), contains many beautiful images of Jewish ritual practice. Lori Grinker, an award-winning combat photographer, has taken time out to produce *The Invisible Thread: A Portrait of Jewish-American Women* (1989), and Joan Roth has traveled around the world working on a similar project. Penny Diane Wolin combines vintage photographs with her own work in *The Jews of Wyoming: Fringe*

of Diaspora (2000). A few years ago, an exhibit by Yves Mozesio, *Varieties of Religious Experience: Photographs of Jews at Work*, offered portraits of observant Jews taken where they earn their livelihoods, with comments by them on how their faith affects the way they do their jobs.

There are other, comparable projects, and more appearing all the time. An important figure in the movement is Neil Folberg, who grew up in San Francisco, studied photography with Ansel Adams, became a "returnee" to Judaism, and now lives in Jerusalem where he runs the country's only gallery devoted exclusively to photography. Like his teacher, Folberg uses a large-format camera and is able to imbue images of buildings and landscapes with great spiritual depth. In public lectures on *And I Shall Dwell Among Them* (2001), his book of pictures of synagogues, he has cited the Torah and Talmud and later rabbinic authorities in formulating what amounts to an aesthetic grounded in Jewish learning.

The new interest in Judaism on the part of Jewish photographers has echoes in other arts: the novels of Allegra Goodman, the music of Daniel Asia, the paintings of Tobi Kahn. Perhaps needless to say, it does not

automatically translate into superior work. *Shekhina*, the exhibit by Leonard Nimoy, best known as *Star Trek's* Mr. Spock, that has been on display in the Skirball Museum of Hebrew Union College in New York, has pictures of naked women wrapped in prayer shawls and phylacteries. The work, we are told, draws on kabbala, but it has less in common with Judaism than with New Age spirituality, which is to authentic religion what kitsch is to real art.

In her book *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (2001), the contemporary biblical exegete Aviva Zornberg suggests that what lies at the heart of artistic creation—Zornberg's immediate subject is the building of the tabernacle in the desert, as described in the book of Exodus—is "a sustained concern with time and memory, a fascination with both the timeless moment of full presence and the subtle gifts of temporality and process." That phrase, "the timeless moment of full presence," has its own mystical tinge to it, but to me it also sounds like what great photographers try to capture in their work. That Jewish artists, photographers among them, should be looking to their tradition for inspiration and usable structures is a development of some significance.