



CONTEMPORARY SYNAGOGUE ART



AVRAM KAMPF

Contemporary Synagogue Art

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE
UNITED STATES, 1945-1965

by AVRAM KAMPF

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Ark, bronze, 13'6" x 16'6", 1964. Temple B'rith Kodesh, Rochester, New York. Architect, Pietro Belluschi. Artist, Luise Kaish.

TEMPLE B'RITH KODESH, ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

Man's encounter with God, his struggle with Him, his rebellion, flight, submission, exile and redemption are the subjects which have preoccupied Luise Kaish in her monumental bronze cast ark for Temple B'rith Kodesh in Rochester. This ark, 15'6" x 13'6", stands in the lofty yet intimate prayer hall under an immense twelve-sided wooden and glass dome designed by Pietro Belluschi.

Kaish's ark is unique in contemporary synagogue art due to its bold representation of the human form. It is cast in high and low relief and includes a massive five foot figure of Moses.

Kaish embarked on an ambitious program in the monumental tradition of Ghiberti and Rodin. She selected those aspects of the Bible which seemed both the most personally significant to her and the most relevant for the twentieth century. Her representation follows biblical imagery. God appears to man through an angelic messenger, in a voice calling from the fire; in the song and prayer of the harpist; through the appearance of miraculous signs such as a cloud.

The tension and elemental experience of the encounter between man and God is expressed in the poetic handling of the bronze. The surface is roughened by the spirited touch of the artist's hand which leaves its mark in the sharp cuts, deep incisions and nervous penetrations. The surfaces tremble as light breaks over the raked, hollowed and furrowed metal. As light advances and recedes, it alternately hides and reveals the wing of an angel, the leaf of a plant, the strings of a harp, a row of mourning men, or a figure blown by a gust of wind. All emerge from the agitated surface and disappear into it again. The composition is divided into eighteen panels of uneven size which are combined in an asymmetrical arrangement. The left side and to a certain degree the entire ark is dominated by the large figure of Moses who stands stretched to his full height with up-raised arms ready to receive the Tablets of the Law. Enveloped by his winglike garments, Kaish conceived him as an ecstatic and inspired prophet rather than as a stern leader of men.



Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law, detail of ark.

At the upper left an angel, his wing projecting like a sail from a stormy sea, sweeps down to stay the hand of Abraham. In the adjacent panel Jacob wrestles with the angel of the Lord. To the left of the figure of Moses are two panels. In the upper one, David, the poet of the Psalms, plays his harp before the ailing Saul, who reclines behind his shield. In the lower panel, Elijah, who has challenged the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel, stands on a chariot pointing to the fire which the Lord has sent to consume his offering. To the right side of the Tablets of the Law, Moses is seen again, leaning dazed against the side of the hill as he is being called to from out of the burning bush. His dread is echoed by the vigorous handling of the bronze. In the lower panel beneath a cloud signifying the presence of God, Solomon dedicates the First Temple. In the lower right corner exiles lament, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem." Their shrouded backs turned to us, they face the wall into which they seem to merge. In the small composition beneath the figure of Moses, the prophet Amos is driven from the city of Beth El.

The upper section of the right side of the ark contains the most daring and interesting conception. Seraphim purify the lips of Isaiah with glowing coal and Jeremiah laments over the destruction of Jerusalem. Both panels are perceived as one; the vigorous modeling of vertically razed walls on the left fuses into the projecting seraph's wing which shelters the figure of Isaiah. The center is dominated by Ezekiel who is carried in a turbulent whirlwind over the Valley of Dry Bones as he prophesies: "Behold I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live . . . and ye shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezek. 37: 1-3). In the narrow panel directly to the left, Ezra brings the Torah before the congregation; to the right, Isaiah summons the people to be "a light unto the nations." On the lower left section, Jonah rests beneath the gourd, pleading with God; in the center, Nehemiah leads the people in rejoicing after the rebuilding of Jerusalem; and to the right a *menorah* made in the shape of seven horns projects from the ark.

In the center of the panel which bridges the two wings of the ark, is the vessel of the Eternal Light with two winged cherubim converging on it from above and below. There are in this ark sections of unusual expressiveness, which reveal the profound depth of the artist's own vision of the transcendent vision of the prophets. Her work is animated by a personal religious sentiment which is reflected in the bold choice of the theme of the encounter of man with God. It seems that behind this choice lies the conviction that personal religious experience is the core of religious faith. It is a pity that the bronze doors which had been planned for the ark were not incorporated in the final design but were replaced instead by a curtain with metallic thread. It is perhaps the absence of a strong center, which the doors might have provided, that leaves the artistic unity of the work open to question. The panels, though carefully planned and related to each other in subject matter, do not always play into each other in terms of their formal continuity. Their marked angular divisions intrude upon the flow and movement of the masses. As the ark stands now, each panel is superior in its own composition to the arrangement of the whole. The plastic possibilities which are indicated in the upper right section are not carried through consistently. Yet despite these shortcomings there is no question that the ark takes an important position among the works of art for the contemporary synagogue.





(Left) Moses receives the Tablets of the Law, detail of ark, side view. (Above) An angel stays the hand of Abraham, detail of ark.



Moses Called from the Burning Bush, detail of ark. (Opposite page) Moses at the Burning Bush, detail of ark.







(Left) The Lament of Exiles, detail of ark. (Above) Amos Driven from the City of Beth El, detail of ark.





(Opposite page) *Jeremiah laments destruction of Jerusalem, Seraphim purify the lips of Isaiah, details of ark.* (Above) *Sketch for ark, bronze, 16" x 14", 1961.* Artist, Luise Kaish. (Courtesy the artist.)

that we cannot "say anything about the unconscious in itself," he proceeds on the other, undaunted, to describe it: "The unconscious is a state out of which these two phenomena (body and soul) have not yet evolved and in which the two cannot at all be distinguished from one another. The unconscious is our being itself in its wholeness," etc. (pp. 34ff.). The value of such psychological meanderings is self-evident.

In short, those readers, who are previously committed, for whatever reasons, to Buber's beliefs and conclusions, will find the volumes under discussion enlightening and significant; others will probably find their contents vague or illusory, and their pretensions bombastic and unfounded.

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In the past twenty years, hundreds of synagogues have sprung up everywhere in the United States, but especially in suburban communities, and the building of houses of worship is still continuing. Hence the present book fills a real need, particularly since its author, in preparation for actual writing, spent years traveling from coast to coast to examine the architecture as well as the interior decorations and objects of ritual art of post-war synagogues. The author finds much to praise, but is not blind to faults and shortcomings, and states them with a refreshing bluntness. Focussing on the interiors rather than on the purely architectural aspects of the synagogues—a topic well covered by Rachel Wischnitzer in a comprehensive volume that appeared here in 1955—Kampf ascribes the weakness of so much in contemporary synagogue art to a large degree to the rabbi's inadequate aesthetic sense. The rabbi is often "merely an innocent and helpless bystander." Often even the architect lacks

understanding, and there is no one to whom the artist can turn for advice. While, on the whole, the synagogues are entirely up-to-date and satisfactory as far as seating arrangements, lighting, plumbing, acoustics and ventilation are concerned, they display, now and then, an opulence recalling the not so good old days when Babbi's were the arbiters of "taste." Kampf—like this reviewer—prefers elegant simplicity to the flamboyance of an over-decorated sanctuary "which reflects, affirms and sanctifies the commercial values by which [the elders] live."

Dr. Kampf concedes that even the most melodramatic interiors created today are restrained and refined, compared to some of the neo-Gothic, neo-Moorish, or neo-Baroque monstrosities indulged in during the boom that preceded the Great Depression. Still, many builders fail to realize how absurd it is to decorate an utterly modern, functional edifice, beautiful in its sophisticated understatement—with art, or rather quasi-art, that was of dubious aesthetic merit even when it was new thirty or more years earlier. He is, in particular, displeased with artists who offend perceptive onlookers by their reckless exploitation of the Hebrew alphabet in a childish expressionistic manner: "The notion that a Hebrew letter automatically creates Jewish art is naive. It cannot fulfill its decorative purpose unless it is well constructed, unless it functions in an overall design, unless its basic structure is understood. Otherwise, its distortions become meaningless and offensive."

Kampf notes with dismay that so many synagogue builders rely on commissioned work done coldly, without conviction, instead of seeking out works that are the fruits of genuine soul-searching, the outpourings of inner needs. By this neither the author nor I mean to imply that commissions cannot lead to works of true greatness—vide the paintings and sculptures made for churches from the Middle Ages up to the French Revolution! The leaders of a congregation must, of course, find an artist both skillful and sensitive, both capable and uncompromising in his approach to metaphysical programs. Such an artist is the sculptress Luise

Book Reviews

Kaish, whom the leaders of Temple B'rith Kodesh in Rochester, New York, asked to do a monumental ark for the prayer-hall in the new building, designed by Pietro Belluschi. Kampf's enthusiasm for this outstanding work comes through in his vivid description: "The tension and elemental experience of the encounter between man and God is expressed in the poetic handling of the bronzes. The surface is roughened by the spirited touch of the artist's hand which leaves its mark in the sharp cuts, deep incisions and nervous penetrations. The surfaces tremble as light breaks over the raked, hollowed and furrowed metal."

Contemporary Synagogue Art is a most valuable contribution to the literature of art in our time.

New York City.

ALFRED WERNER.