



Katharina Rauschenberger. *Jüdische Tradition im Kaiserreich und in der Weimarer Republik: Zur Geschichte des jüdischen Museumswesens in Deutschland.* Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2002. 336 S. EUR 38,00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-7752-5625-4.



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Historians are familiar with the standard success story of the European museum—here was an institution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tied to the bourgeoisie and the nation-state, an institution that combined state and private funds in a larger project aimed at representing and schooling the public. Whether presenting great works of art, historical artifacts, or embodiments of good taste, museum collections (or those who put them together) created certain narratives of the past, present, and the future that individuals as visitors to the museums and as recipients and representatives of its overall mission could enact and embody. Within the past decade, German historians have turned their gaze upon the museum, producing a number of monographs that focus on the nineteenth-century museum boom. Museums have been taken as proof of a flourishing civic sphere in the imperial era, as signs of enduring provincial identities and agendas, and as important mediators between tradition and modernity, two concepts formed with the assistance of museum collections themselves.

Katharina Rauschenberger has chosen *Jewish Tradition in Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic* as the title of her new book (based on her dissertation at the Technical University in Berlin), and the question of how Jewish tradition should be defined is the leitmotif of her study, with its numerous related issues—what should

count as Jewish? Should the use of the objects be in the center of interest, or the origins of their makers? What, if anything, from the past should be part of a Jewish identity? What purpose should that identity serve? While the focus of her work is Jewish museums in Germany, the questions Rauschenberger tackles move beyond the collections themselves to consider how Jews (as well as some non-Jews) defined the role of Jews in German society, and viewed and used history to support their arguments. Rauschenberger's work thus provides a comprehensive overview of museum displays and exhibitions within German-speaking Central Europe (as well as important precursors elsewhere in Europe) that represented Jewish culture.[1]

The story of Jewish museums in Germany cannot be told in the tones of the success stories outlined above. Only sixteen initiatives between 1895 and 1933 aimed to found Jewish museums, and of these, only five were successful enough to count as independent undertakings. There were few museums and they did not enjoy an untroubled existence. Most of the collections were closed after 1938, and many objects were plundered and lost. Rauschenberger makes clear that her history will not focus on individual successes or the importance of the museum idea among German Jews. She notes at the outset that the museum did not hold particular or compelling in-

terest for most Jewish groups in the formulation of group identity (p. 21). Her goal is to complicate our understanding of nineteenth-century German Jewry and what Christian Wiese has called the Jewish crisis of assimilation. Rauschenberger hopes to accomplish this goal by placing these collections within the larger history of museums, thereby showing how some developments must be seen as responses to changes in museal theory and display culture. She also traces the great variation in content and message—the very lack of a unified plan or program in the museums she examines here defined Jewishness in terms more complicated than religious or ethnic identity can hope to capture.

Drawing on a wide array of sources, including museum records, catalogs, newspaper articles, and journals, Rauschenberger begins her examination of collections in Germany by comparing them to exemplars in other European countries: the Exposition Universelle in Paris (1878), the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition in London (1887), and Jewish museums in Vienna (1895) and Prague (1905). These collections all sought to create and project a certain Jewish identity: in France, Jewish art was equated with the art of the majority in terms of aesthetics, while at the same time its cosmopolitan nature was highlighted; in Great Britain, Jews sought to construct a Jewish identity based on loyalty to the British state; in Vienna, museum founders sought to counter the public belief that Jews had no artistic traditions and collected everything having to do with Jewish life, whether made by Jews or not; in Prague, Jewish tradition was caught between German and Czech nationalism and turned to history as a source of nostalgia and perceived unity. In France and Britain, exhibits were concerned with the role of Jews in a new national context, and Jewish art was displayed to identify the Jews. In Vienna and Prague, the focus on history resulted in nostalgic displays of Jewish life.

Within Germany, the three main Jewish communities in Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg, and Berlin sought to develop a universal concept of Jewishness. Discussions took place within a more general argument about the role of centralism or particularism, with German Zionists speaking out in favor of a centralized institution, but one located in Palestine (p. 53). Those who favored de-centralized institutions, like Alfred Grotte of Breslau, sought to integrate Jewish art and history into the history and identity of the regions in which they were located. We can distinguish two very different understandings and definitions of Jewish tradition in this period. One group followed a Zionist interpretation of the Jewish past and focused on the art history of the diaspora. The

lesson for the present was a return to the past, which was the only possible way of creating true Jewish culture. In this vein, Hamburg museum experts sought to remove Judaica from history and display artifacts as timeless expressions of an essential Jewish soul. Erich Toeplitz at the Frankfurt museum of Jewish Antiquities noted that past artistic achievement was a necessary prelude to a true national art (p. 80). The other group, represented by such professionals as Grotte, saw Jewish history and culture within the context of the history of non-Jews. In Kassel, Rudolf Hallos situated Jewish artifacts within a regional framework and emphasized that the relationship between Jews and Christians created regional identity itself.

Rauschenberger's treatment of the German museums is followed by a history of foundings in Alsace, Danzig, Kassel, and Breslau, as well as exhibitions in the Rhineland and Bavaria. Her achievement in laying out the impulses behind these foundings, as well as how objects were defined, collected, and displayed, is impressive. Her descriptions of the exhibits, based on contemporary press reports, and her detailed archival work and the fact that this monograph covers such a disparate array of undertakings make it a good addition to any library or for any scholar interested in museums or questions of Jewish identity in Germany. Its helpful glossary of terms and index contribute to its usefulness.

Rauschenberger states in her introduction that her purpose in tracing the history of Jewish museums from their origins is first to place these foundings within the larger context of museology and historical thinking, and second to ask what were the consequences of the turn to history, art history, or ethnography for Jewish identity defined in terms of ethnicity, religion, or nationality. It is this question that holds the most promise for historians of Germany, and although Rauschenberger buries the second part of this argument within the chronological flow of the first, she comes to interesting conclusions that link up with recent work on transnational identities and post-colonial studies.[2]

Notes

[1]. Her book has been the subject of several reviews, including: Sibylle Heike Kussmaul, *H-Soz-u-Kult* (August 10, 2002) <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/id=2024> (July 18, 2004) and Carsten Kretschmann, *sehpunkte* 3 (2003), Nr. 5 (15.05.2003) <http://www.sehpunkte.historicum.net/2003/05/pdf/1933.html> (July 18, 2004).

[2]. Frank Mecklenburg, "Reflecting on the Past, Envisioning the Future: New Perspectives in German-Jewish Studies," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 34 (Spring 2004): pp. 181-183. Located at <http://www.ghi-dc.org/bulletinS04/34.181.pdf>.

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