

**THE OTTO SCHNEID ARCHIVE OF  
JEWISH ART AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO:  
A UNIQUE RESOURCE FOR THE HISTORY OF JEWISH ART  
BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS**

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**Description:** The paper will discuss the life and life's work of Otto Schneid, artist, art historian and thinker. The main focus will be on the archive of material related to the European Jewish artists before the Holocaust which Schneid had gathered in preparation for a book he was writing on twentieth century Jewish art. This archive is now located in the University of Toronto Library. Many of the artists discussed and documented were killed in the Holocaust and are not at all well known.

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Otto Schneid was a painter, sculptor, art historian, writer, and thinker. He was born in Jablunkova, Czechoslovakia on January 30, 1900 to parents who had migrated there from Poland. His family then moved to Bielitz, Silesia, where he attended school. He began to express his artistic talents at an early age, creating expressive and realistic

drawings as well as clay models for sculptures. He attended university in Vienna and later Paris, studying anatomy, art history, philosophy, aesthetics, and ancient Near Eastern history. Since he had hoped to pursue a career in medicine, he did not enroll in an art academy. However, he soon found that his true interests lay in art and he decided to specialize in art history.

After completing his doctorate in Vienna in 1926, he continued to study and travel, lecturing on art and producing paintings and sculptures. In 1934 his first book appeared, devoted to the representation of plants and animals in Chinese art. He spent the years 1936-1938 in Vilna, where he established an art museum under the auspices of YIVO, the Yiddish Scientific Institute. The museum contained over 100 works of art by such artists as Marc Chagall, Mane Katz, Mark Antokolski, Yankl Adler, Maurycy Gottlieb, B. Kratko and Chaim Nisn Tyber. This art in the collection was either donated by the artists (Chagall, Cukierman, and Katz), by a distinguished citizen or by a community group that supported YIVO and its work.<sup>1</sup> The collection was a good representation of the contemporary Jewish art scene, but it also contained religious art and ritual objects, thus reflecting the totality of Jewish life at the time. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, the collection was confiscated by Alfred Rosenberg and was apparently shipped to Germany.

During the early 1930s Schneid began to work on a monograph on twentieth-century Jewish artists. In the course of conducting his research he corresponded with

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<sup>1</sup> See Carl J. Rheins, "Recovering YIVO's Stolen Art Collection," YIVO News 191 (Winter 2000-2001):3.

artists all over Europe, who sent him their biographies, samples of their work, either on postcards or in reproduction, and catalogues of their exhibitions. He also traveled extensively and visited artists in their ateliers and homes. He enjoyed full cooperation from his fellow artists and compiled an extensive collection of material for his book. When Hitler rose to power in 1933, he soon targeted the Jewish community for segregation and discriminatory legislation. He also declared war on Jewish art and artists, calling it and other contemporary German art degenerate and morally decadent and as a misuse of tax revenues. Joseph Goebbels Degenerate Art Commission seized art from both public museums and private art galleries, and sold much of it to foreign dealers. But Goebbels also reserved a large number of items for propaganda and instructional purposes, displaying them in a travelling exhibition called Degenerate Art (Entartete Kunst) which showed in major German cities in 1938. The show, which featured many confiscated works of Jewish Expressionists such as Kathe Kollwitz, Oskar Kokoschka, Otto Dix and Max Pechstein created a sensation. According to Hermann Goebbels, “the frightening and horrifying forms of the Exhibition Of Degenerate Art in Munich demonstrated how deeply the perverse Jewish spirit had penetrated German cultural life,” and that the suppression of this perversity had nothing to do with the suppression of artistic freedom and the progress of society.

When Schneid learned of this vicious, campaign against the Jews and their art his book project took on additional meaning and a sense of urgency. He felt that he could write a book, which would prove to Hitler and the Nazis the essential value of Jewish art and convince him that their views were misguided. In the introduction to the Hebrew version of the book, he describes how he came to write it and the challenges that it presented to him:

This book was written under difficult circumstances during the tempestuous years between the two world wars and has since become a historical witness to an entire world that is no more. The decision to write it was taken at a time when the great crime or the great madness [National Socialism] was seen as one of the nationalistic movements, which could still be influenced by propaganda and persuasion. The authors of the actual destruction were still amassing arguments against their victims. At that stage they were still interested in displaying before Germany and the world the poisonous influences of the Jews in all areas of human endeavour, the economy, politics, and culture. The enemies of Communism had to see the Jews at the root of this movement and the enemies of capitalism had to ascribe this system to the very same Jews. In these propaganda campaigns, culture played an important role and the plastic arts became a central focus. In sensational exhibitions of painting and sculpture by Jewish artists, the viewer was confronted with the poisonous creations of this people and everyone had to inevitably conclude that evil itself was a Jewish creation. At that time I took upon myself the complicated task of responding to all these accusations in as completely an objective manner as possible. Under these conditions, there did not seem to be any possibility or hope for a Jew to be scientific or objective. But I was inspired to overcome these difficulties by the example of the Bible, which is completely devoid of cheap idealization. On the contrary it describes its characters with fearless truthfulness, with an honesty that does not hesitate to reveal and immortalize disgraceful deeds and scandals with humane and unadorned realism.

Schneid rises to the challenge and produces a work, which treats modern Jewish art honestly and fairly, without sinking into sentimentality or crass promotion. One of the main tasks Schneid set for himself in his book was finding a common denominator among the various Jewish artists, despite their geographical separation and ideological differences. He also decided to include in his book only artists who he felt truly belonged to the twentieth century and its struggles and sufferings, and not those who seemed representative of the nineteenth century.

Schneid completed the manuscript of his book, entitled *Die Juden und die Kunst*, in 1938 and submitted it to his publisher in Vienna. The book was set to be published that year, but before this would happen the plates were confiscated by the Nazis and the book never appeared. Schneid then became a wanted man, being sought by the Nazis because of his work. He went into hiding in Poland for six months, moving from friend to friend, until he surrendered to the police, thinking that they would be sympathetic to his plight. Instead they imprisoned him. He was held for three days, until somehow his friends in the Warsaw Jewish community were able to secure for him a student visa for the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He thus managed to barely escape the clutches of his Nazi pursuers and was able to leave Poland with a suitcase full of his precious archival materials and a manuscript copy of his book. He arrived in Palestine in the summer of 1939 and stayed there throughout the war, living in very difficult conditions, barely eking out a living. His art and poetry during this period reflect his despair over the personal losses he suffered and his fear for the future of humanity. In 1945 he met and married Miriam Goldschmidt, a young poet and he received a new lease on life. The following year his book on the biblical frescoes of Dura-Europos, [*The Synagogue Drawings at Dura-Europos : an Ancient Jewish Creation and Its Place in the History of Art*] was published in Hebrew, a language he had become fluent in. His two sons Yaakov and Adam were born in 1946 and 1950, and between those years he also published books in Hebrew on the biblical paintings of Rembrandt, (*ha-Tanakh bi-temunot Rembrandt*) and on classic Greek art [*Omanut yavan ha-klasit*]. From 1947-1960 he taught art history at the Technion (Israel Institute of Technology), in Haifa, Israel and continued to write about art. In 1957 he completed a Hebrew version of his magnum opus on twentieth century Jewish art, which he called *Omnutenu ba-golah*, Our art in the Diaspora. Schneid considered this latest version of his book to be a memorial book to the hundreds of Jewish artists who had perished in the Holocaust. Perhaps this was the main reason he did not expand the scope of the work, although he states that he felt that he was not familiar enough with the Jewish art of the Soviet Union or Israel. Concerning his attitude to his work after the Holocaust, he says: "I read today these pages with a shudder; many of the words written in them have assumed an aura of holiness, and I stand in silence before them, unwilling to add or subtract from them." He did, however, update the biographies of the artists, both of those that died in the Holocaust and those that survived.

Though he had an agreement with a publisher, at the last minute the publisher reneged, out of fear that because Cecil Roth had just published his *History of Jewish Art*, the market would be overcrowded. Schneid was devastated by this unfortunate turn of events and never returned to this project. In 1960 he decided to concentrate on his creative work – poetry, painting, sculpting, and writing--and moved to the United States, where he lived from 1960-1963. During that period he had seven one-man shows in the United States and one in Canada. In 1964 he moved to Toronto, where he continued to

paint and to write. He died in Toronto in 1974. His art works are located in the British Museum in London, The Pitti Palace in Florence, the Albertina Museum in Vienna, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, the University of Toronto Art Centre, the Roosevelt Memorial in Hyde Park, the Everhart Museum, Scranton Pa., and in important private collections.

Otto Schneid's life is typical of many Holocaust survivors. It is marked by tragedy and disappointment on the one hand, and resilience and determination to persevere on the other. The Holocaust left an indelible mark on his psyche, which is reflected in much of his artistic work. The self-portrait in stone, which he completed in 1959, shows the artist with his eyes closed, with a bird perched on his head, its beak digging into his forehead. The bird, which is probably an eagle, is symbolic of German oppression and the portrait shows how the weight of the Nazi persecutions still oppressed him. Schneid also completed a model for a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, entitled, "A Monument to Death and Resurrection." It is a conic structure rising in two opposing spirals. Below are the bodies of the victims, above the heroic partisans. Out of their bodies rises the phoenix, symbol of hope and rebirth. Unfortunately, for lack of funds, the sculpture was never completed.

In 1998, the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library was approached by Otto Schneid's widow, Miriam, who offered to donate his archive, which she called his "treasure". The donation was made in two installments, the larger one in 1998, followed by a smaller but substantial one in 1999.

The archive is extensive, consisting of over 5000 items, broken down into the following categories:

- 1) The manuscripts of Schneid's books, both published and unpublished
- 2) Schneid's articles on art history
- 3) Correspondence with world leaders and public figures about the state of the world
- 4) Correspondence with artists
- 5) Photographs of artwork by some 180 European Jewish artists from the early 1930s
- 6) Exhibition catalogues of these artists (4 boxes)
- 7) Autobiographies of the lives of some 160 artists

All of this material awaits redemption. Schneid was a remarkable man, a humanist with a troubled, but generous soul, who cared for humanity and its future and worked tirelessly in his own way to advance the cause of humankind and assure its future. The archive of art that he assembled deserves to be studied and its contents made available to the public. The material in the archive presents rich picture of the varieties of artistic expression in Europe in the interwar period. Many of the artists featured in the archive perished in the Holocaust and this archive may contain the only records they left behind. Schneid's book on the art of these artists deserves to be published. It should be translated into English and published in North America, so that it can reach as wide an audience as possible. For his sake and for the sake of those that perished and who live on in his work.

[At the end of the talk, excerpts were shown from the video made in 1995 about Schneid and his work for the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation]