

Leo Koenig's Yiddish little magazine *Renesans* (1920), a publication closely linked to the Ben Uri, offers an intriguing opportunity to encounter Jewish writing about art in Yiddish from 100 years ago. The following translations are just a small excerpt from a remarkable publication.¹

**David Bomberg: On his exhibition in the Adelphi Galleries by Stephen Winsten
Renesans 1:1 (Jan 1920, 71-72)**

If you want to become intimately acquainted with the modern art movement, the best thing to do is to study the evolution of Bomberg's current method. From speaking to him, it could be that he justifies his non-realist method on the commandment in the Pentateuch that one is not allowed to make likenesses. I fear, however, that Bomberg is in competition with his creator, devising forms which show a truly intense life.

It is simply impossible to judge Bomberg's work according to conventional ideas about art. Not one of his pictures tells a story, you also will not find in real life any forms which are similar to his, and yet, as soon as you free yourself from previously established art rules, and you want to understand what Bomberg wants, then you enter into a new world which is not altogether without interest.

An image has to be given a name, and it is exactly that which leads us astray. In music you do not expect that natural sounds ought to be translated, and why should the same distinction not be given to colour and form, so that they should have a meaning in and for themselves?

Exactly that is the key to Bomberg's work. It is wrong to say that Bomberg avoids the realist method, assuming a more angular expression. If you begin to study his work closely, you will see what carefulness his "patterns" demand, and he himself definitely does not avoid it. His realist drawings show a powerful capacity for the conventional forms, only for him better expression comes through doing it in his own way.

Bomberg takes his work seriously, and therefore one must also judge it seriously. People look for objects in his works, as if the pictures were riddles, and they think that they have found the answer as soon as they see the shimmer of a body. The artist would want to abolish all similarities to existing forms in his work.

¹ For more around this subject and journal, see William Pimlott, "The Journal *Renesans* and the Rebirth of Art and Literature in Yiddish London", MA Dissertation, UCL, 2016 and, for a broader exploration of Jewish culture and politics in Yiddish in the East End, his upcoming PhD dissertation. For an analysis of the potential for a critique of British art in Yiddish, as manifested in Stephen Winsten's work in *Renesans*, as well as a larger discussion of early twentieth-century cultural production and the Jewish East End, see: Alexander Grafen, "The Whitechapel Renaissance and its Legacies: Rosenberg to Rodker", PhD Dissertation, UCL, 2020. William Pimlott and Alexander Grafen are currently working on a paper on *Renesans* and Leo Koenig's conception of Jewish art.

It is thus no surprise that a famous art critic, who has made a great name for themselves with their reviews of academy exhibitions, would think that Bomberg aims simply to make “carpet models”. Why then floor and ceiling decorations should be allowed to be made, as per convention, in an angular way, and not wall decorations, I do not quite understand.

In Bomberg’s later work the subject that inspired the “pattern” becomes much more clear, and therefore some people will even say that he is returning to the realist school.

Let us, once and for all, try to grasp that the pictures are absolutely misunderstood if one views them from this standpoint. What is important in his work is the form, and not what it represents. If you insist on sticking to the view that he ought to have been able to develop the subject so that it would look like the model, or you think that his pictures are not finished, then you simply have to compare his canvas to one which treats the same subject in a realist style, and you would see straight away that from a truly artistic standpoint one line more in Bomberg’s image would disturb the effect.

Now, when the cubistic method is already well developed, it is astonishing what kind of an effect of tense emotion they can create, and so it is wrong to start calling it a cold-blooded geometric caprice. We have to welcome it because it widens the field of artistic expression, and brings new forces to light.

It is interesting to observe Bomberg’s further development, now that he has gone through the realist experience of the war. One is curious whether he will give up his accumulated discoveries in form - turning to the realist method, or if he will become even more angular. Definitely, however, you can be certain that he has original impressions which burst out from him, and it will not bother him whether we understand him or not, so long as he is certain that his work truly expresses his feelings.

**Alfred A Wolmark: On his exhibition in the Hampstead Gallery by Joseph Leftwich
Renesans 1:1 (Jan 1920, 72-75)**

When method becomes more important for the artist than their artistic idea, then we can already begin to stop grappling with it because art is the expression of a constantly growing personality, and therefore it must never be allowed to stand still in one place. The growing concept develops together with its method: one brings along the other. There is no separation. The artist must feel both as a whole unified thing. That is why artists are always dissatisfied with their work. Before they have finished it, they have already outgrown it.

Wolmark has already changed his methods several times. He began with a successful apprenticeship in the Royal Academy school, where he won a golden medal, still very young. At this point he had started by exhibiting Rembrandtesque groups of rabbis, which duly provoked a significant amount of attention and praise from the critics.

Travelling through Galicia, in the same circle as Hirszenberg and Gottlieb, who he already knew, he painted Jewish style pictures more or less in their style. *Ost und West* reproduced a fair number of them together with an article which heralded him as a genius.

It is incomprehensible why a young man like Wolmark stopped making such pictures. It was worthwhile for him, made him popular, and at least the prayer shawls and the beards looked Jewish.

But Wolmark travelled on further from Krakow, he went off to Spain, and became acquainted with Velasquez' work. He modified his style, he became stricter and simpler with his lines. Only he still stuck to his school and students.

Suddenly, however, he became sick with sun fever. He became pagan. He began to paint sunny fields and dancing girls. He became drunk from light and joy. His pictures became burning colour-harmonies. The French Post-impressionists intoxicated him. His patrons and respectable critics said that he was a revolutionary, that he was mad and they distanced themselves from him.

But Wolmark is a child of a stubborn people, and he went his own way. He made a success in this new area too.

There developed in his work a strong sense for tone, and colour has no patience for staying in the frame of a salon picture. It floods the canvas, and also in Wolmark's case it burst onto the walls of his house. For him it wanted even to paint frescos, to fill up great walls with mosaic-like pieces of colour.

He took himself to the theatre and made stage decorations and costumes. His exhibition of theatre pieces, which was arranged by the "Stage Company", prompted great interest, and his curtains and coloured cushions in several plays made an impression.

Subjects had ceased to interest him. Decoration became everything for him. Even his colours stopped being colours from real life, they became unnaturally shrill. And if he were to paint for once a figure, he caricatured it, distorted it, so that it should fit the colour plan, not worrying about the figure itself. All that was important for him was how the picture might look as a decoration.

Wolmark decorates everything: church windows, private houses, pots, furniture, picture frames, clothes, whatever he can get his hands on. And he has already had important exhibitions in all these areas.

Above all Wolmark's chief worth is as a poster artist.

He is a colourist-decorator, he creates colour-combinations.

His pictures in this exhibition belong to this type, and still they show signs of a change. Wolmark is still growing, his great work still needs to be created.

To paint Jewish themes in a conventional way is certainly not a Jewish art. It is true what Wolmark says, that naked women from a Jewish viewpoint are more Jewish than rabbis with long beards which are painted in the usual way.

For a fair amount of time already Wolmark has felt dissatisfied with his current work. It is as if he feels that something greater is growing in him and because of that he becomes even less certain in his work than usual. Wolmark always approaches a new picture with fear. It is as if he has never painted a picture before. He begins slowly, looking for the way, but suddenly he feels more secure and he begins to work with conviction, casting up his colours on his first attempts, laying them on thick as if they were mosaics manufactured from pieces of colour. Wolmark is truly a painter. He is no drawer, he does not look for the beautiful form, fine muscles and the folds of clothes. He takes another path altogether.

It seems to me that Wolmark uses his strong colours because he has such an agitated, revolutionary temperament. He revolts against the grey english tones, and he extracts brighter colours from his imagination. It is possible that such a country as Arets-Yisroel would alter his art altogether. He would perhaps revolt against its bright colours and he would become quieter, more subdued.

Wolmark will develop further in such a way. Exactly that is where his growing ideas are leading him. For the time being it is still not Arets-Yisroel alone which occupies him, but motifs from Arets-Yisroel influence him very strongly.

Wolmark dreams of a powerful Moses, he has great ideas about him. And his conception develops, gradually his work becomes more quiet. Scarcely filled in Jewish figures begin to people his canvases.

This is not a return to his old method. The playing with colours has gone far enough for Wolmark, he is already master of it. And now, I believe, his true creating is starting.

Wolmark's exhibition makes a very fine impression. It is full with warm colour and with decorative harmony. But that is not what is most important. There can be observed in the majority of the pictures the signs of the new method which is now coming into being for Wolmark, and promises that he will perhaps shortly begin to climb the path which leads to genius.

**[This] Season['s] exhibitions by Yitzhok Avner (Tsvi Avner? Or even Yitskhak Ben-Tsvi?)
Renesans 2:2 (May 1920, 133-134)**

If it is as it appears, the current season of art exhibitions in London looks to be inexhaustible. Not even taking into consideration the fact that a whole row of new summer exhibitions are about to open, the exhibitions of the spring season are not yet completely finished.

In almost every exhibition there are Jews. Only in the Group X exhibition, which consists of the ten members who left the "London group" with Wyndham Lewis at their head, are there no pictures by Jews. There is a hypothesis that Group X was in fact founded because its members could no longer stand the "mixedness" and the "cosmopolitanism" of the "London group".

Wyndham Lewis is very possibly looking for a certain unifying "truly english" method of expression. But in his work there can be felt a great mishmash of pseudo-innovative French methods, the echo of his post-cubistic vorticism.

Between the remaining artists of the "London group" which are exhibiting in their current exhibition, there stands out two of the three Jews which can be found there, David Bomberg and Mark Gertler at the head. Bernard Meninski - the third - is shown to be in the exhibition much weaker than usual.

Bomberg, Gertler, Ethelbert White, Nash and Adeney are the most important artists in the current exhibition.

Bomberg makes the strongest impression of them all. Disregarding the fact that he is not at all a landscape painter, but nonetheless put on display two not entirely successful but very interesting landscapes, he shows even in them his fine, unconventional taste. He also has on show two interiors - the girders of a theatre, and a twilight studio motif. The pit and gallery which Bomberg displays reveal themselves not only to be grotesque, but also full of atmosphere and warmth. The surprising warmth of the red theatre picture rivals very powerfully the dirty, almost black greyness of his studio interior. Apart from the atmosphere which the two pictures possess, they can be viewed as the most real in the whole exhibition. But it is a shame that Bomberg returns to the realist. The abstract artistic creation is truly more realist and nearer to the in-itself (in zikh) hidden artistic expression than the naturalist idea. In Bomberg's work that is very clearly the case.

He would not simply have had to colour his "designs". A true painter does not "design" and does not colour. He paints "ardently" (sanguinely), with sweat and blood (bones). For this reason Gertler is more the painter. He departs from the truly painterly standpoint, and if he does not use a broad pallet that is only because he is satisfied with an assumed tone which fits the atmosphere of the composition. His circus people do not have as much movement as they ought to have. One does not see the fire of the arena, there is not the lightning movement nor the makeup on the faces. But after all, the details do not play any role whatsoever in Gertler's work. He seeks atmosphere. His love for French art makes itself felt very clearly. Grey

Cezanne-ish tones and Toulouse-Lautrec character background lie close to Gertler's heart. He only lacks the French lightness and the "charmant piquanterie" of the Montmartrians with which he shows a strong kinship.

Both Bomberg and Gertler are exceptional in the "London group" exhibition. One cannot say the same thing about Meninski. It is not important that he treats mother and child with such great love, and it is also not important that he paints them in such sweet tones. The love for painting and for sweetening the tones does not mean idealising. It is evident that Meninski wants to be lyrical. But one does not see love for one's mother in his paintings, only the model of a woman and a child. There is no background, no atmosphere. Only a dry, professional treatment.

A contrast to Meninski is Clara Klinghoffer, who now has an independent exhibition in the Hampstead Gallery. She treats the same themes as Meninski.

In her work warmth rules and to a certain extent the naivety of past Italians. If one treats Clara Klinghoffer as a wunderkind she is definitely wonderful. But one cannot put her on the same level as all the mature painters, and treat her from that standpoint. She does not yet display personal maturity. An artist with her abilities and knowledge has to say and reveal something.

Clara Klinghoffer draws with a certain light dexterity according to the method of the plein air school. Her drawing and, often too her judgement, reminds one of the old Italians and that is where her strength lies - in her instinctive drive to the Italian style of the 14th Century. She possesses, however, only the softness of the Italians. She has not yet grown to her full maturity. Being only on the threshold of her development, one still cannot demand from her the mature resolution of a master. Only a personality can be masterful. Clara Klinghoffer has great possibilities. Once she grasps that, she will be able to exploit them.