

In Memoriam: Moshe Barasch (1920-2004)

Ziva Amishai-Maisels

Moshe Barasch could well be considered the father of art history in Israel, a fact acknowledged by the State in 1996 when it awarded him the first Israel Prize ever given for Art History. Born in Czernowitz, he first gained fame as a child prodigy for his Expressionist paintings on Jewish subjects. He held his first exhibitions at the age of 12 in Czernowitz, and in 1933 his paintings were shown at the 18th Zionist Congress in Prague and at a private salon in Boston after they had been brought to the attention of Dr. Stephen Wise.¹ One of his paintings – *Moses* (1934) portrayed during the battle with Amalek – is now in the Israel Museum. At the same time, through extensive reading in libraries throughout Europe, he taught himself history, art history and philosophy. At the age of 15, he published his first book, *Des Glaubens schwere Wege*, that states in ecstatic, poetic terms his deep belief in Judaism and in a return to Zion, ideas that colored his entire life. This book shows the strong influence of Hasidism and of Martin Buber, and closely parallels the feeling for Jewish suffering and faith expressed in his paintings. Three years later, in 1938, he published his first learned tract, *Josefus Flavius*, in which he stressed the differences both between the rational Greco-Roman and mystical Jewish worldviews, and between the national and cosmopolitan tendencies in Jewish life that Josephus tried to combine. These conflicts would play a major part in Barasch's own life, and like Josephus, he too would try to find ways to combine them. However, Barasch also saw in this history a lesson for contemporary Jewry: he wrote of the Eternal Jew who cannot be killed, and continues to survive despite all his sufferings and all the destruction around him.²

Barasch continued to develop and combine his art with his interest in Judaism, philosophy and history throughout his life. During World War II, he was engaged in the Resistance as a member of the Hagana's Briha (flight) organization, forging passports for Jews trying to escape from Europe through Rumania, and he later joined the Red Army to fight the Nazis. Arriving in Israel in 1948 with his wife Berta, he joined in the War of Independence, and also published in *Abysmal Reflections* drawings that reflect his reactions to his experiences in World War II. He continued painting for many years, now using glowing colors in strong contrasts, but soon combined his various interests by changing his focus from producing art to writing and lecturing about it. He began to teach art and philosophy in kibbutz seminars, and to publish articles on these subjects. Both his understanding as a painter of the actual processes of creative work and his love of philosophy and history aided him in

¹ Mayer Ebner, introduction to Moses Barasch, *Des Glaubens schwere Wege*, Czernowitz, 1935, pp. 5-8; Jan Assmann, introduction to *Representation in Religion: Studies in Honor of Moshe Barasch*, ed. Jan Assmann and Albert I. Baumgarten, Leiden, 2001, p. x.

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explaining art in his books and in his classes to the same degree as did his wide reading and his intellectual and literary abilities.

In 1956, Barasch began to teach courses on art history at the Hebrew University. Inspired by the works of major art historians, especially Erwin Panofsky and Meyer Schapiro who became his friends, he penetrated deeply into the subjects he analyzed, stressing the importance of the history of ideas and art theory to the full understanding of works of art. Although his preferred field was the Renaissance, he disdained the notion of limiting himself to one area, and both wrote and taught on all periods of art history, often combining them, for instance in the course “The Classical Sources of Medieval Art” (1960). He also instigated the idea of the “cross-section” which traced a theme – for instance, “King David in Art” (1967) – through its development over the ages. His courses would lead him to produce books in Hebrew, such as *Michelangelo* (1961), *The Image of Man in the History of Art* (1967) and *Introduction to Renaissance Art* (1968). To encourage the translation of books on art history and the history of ideas into Hebrew, he joined forces with Mossad Bialik to produce, for instance, Heinrich Wölfflin’s *Principles of Art History* (1963), Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1984) and Richard Krautheimer’s *Mittelalterliche Synagogen* (1994), to which Barasch wrote insightful introductions. He believed that although the universities required lecturers to publish for international audiences, the way to open the Israeli public and students to art was through publications in Hebrew, and was determined to lay a strong basis for publications in this field.

The immense popularity of his lectures at the Hebrew University – some classes numbered 400 students – convinced the University to open a Department of Art History in 1965 under his chairmanship, and to allow him to train young art historians to teach in the department. Despite the small number of teachers that he first assembled, who included Michael Avi-Yonah, Avram Kampf, Bezalel Narkiss, and a number of fledgling assistants (myself included), the department became immediately popular, with 130 students in its first year, and a like number of entering students for many years thereafter. Instead of trying to develop a monopoly on art history at that university, Barasch eagerly helped others to start new projects even when they would compete with those of his own department. He took an active part in opening the art history departments in Tel Aviv, Haifa and Ben Gurion Universities, whose programs were all based on the one he had pioneered in Jerusalem. In like manner, he encouraged students and colleagues to explore topics in a wide variety of fields, including Jewish Art, feeling that each person should find the areas to which he or she could best contribute. He was constantly willing to give people a chance to prove themselves, and a chance to convince him that their ideas were right even if he at first disagreed with them.

After retiring from the Hebrew University, he went on, despite bouts of ill health, to teach regularly at Yale and New York University. At the same time, almost every year, he

published books on a wide number of subjects that fall into a few major categories – especially iconography and art theory in their broadest aspects – that develop his early interests. Whereas his early studies on Crusader sculpture in the Holy Land had focused primarily on style (1970-71), he continued to study medieval art, but concentrated on the problems of the icon, figuration and the depiction of God (*Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea*, 1992; and *Das Gottesbild: Studien zur Darstellung des Unsichtbaren*, 1998). In a way these works echo his earliest deliberations on God in *Des Glaubens schwere Wege*, except that now they extended beyond Judaism into the more “cosmopolitan” sphere of Christian art and thought. This connection to his original interests can also be seen in three works that he wrote on pathos gestures and facial expression, *Gestures of Despair in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art* (1976), *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (1987) and *Imago Hominis: Studies in the Language of Art* (1991). These themes hark back to his concerns in his early Expressionist paintings, but the subjects have now been raised to a highly intellectual level in analyzing Western religious art, and stress the sources of these gestures and expressions in earlier (often Greek) art. All these works would inspire an international congress on religion and art (*Representation in Religion*) that was held in his honor in Heidelberg and dealt with Jewish, Greek, Christian, Indian and Buddhist art as well as with problems of imagery in modern art. The fact that such a broad group of subjects and specialists were gathered to honor him shows the international standing he had attained.

Another major category of interest concerned theories on art, aesthetics and art history. Barasch began publishing in this field in the early 1960s, with articles on the aesthetic theories of Theophile the Monk and Cristoforo Sorte, and about color in Renaissance thought.³ In 1977 he published a seminal book on the subject of art historical theories in Hebrew, *משפחות האמנות בדרושה האמנות*, that began as a course in Methodology and still serves students in this field today. One of his major books in this area analyzed a little-studied subject, *Light and Color in the Italian Renaissance Theory of Art* (1978). This subject combined his own love of light and color that he had displayed in the paintings he did in Israel with his deep interest in artists’ theories that he always stressed were as important as those of philosophers and art critics. In three later books that form a series, Barasch analyzed art theories from Plato to Kandinsky (1985-98), analyzing the ways the ideas of artists and theorists interacted.⁴ Far from being a compilation of texts, these books present a clear analysis of the development of ideas about art, covering subjects ranging from “The Artist

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⁴ Moshe Barasch, *Theories of Art from Plato to Winckelmann*, New York, 1985; idem, *Modern Theories of Art, I: From Winckelmann to Baudelaire*, New York, 1990; idem, *Modern Theories of Art, II: From Impressionism to Kandinsky*, New York, 1998.

and the Medium” and “Unity and Diversity of the Visual Arts” to “The Subject Matter of Abstract Painting”.

Two of Barasch’s recent books could be used to epitomize his approach to art. In *The Language of Art: Studies in Interpretation* (1997), Barasch studied the way that art communicates with the spectator from ancient Egypt to our day, and the ways we can use to understand it in depth. Here the source of the approach is the work of art itself, and the interpretation hinges on a number of different sources, from the traditions of image-making to the function and ideas the artist wishes to express. *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (2001) starts from the opposite end of the spectrum, with an idea, one that is particularly frightening to artists for whom eyesight is a primal necessity. It traces the way this idea has been given meaning and form in Western culture from the ancient blind seers, through the Christian belief that the synagogue is blind, to the 18th century’s interest in the way the blind perceive the world. Here, art becomes an illustration for the way culture adumbrates a concept.

Barasch was a constant inspiration to his students – including myself – because of the openness of his mind and the broadness of his interests. He taught us to see the many sides of an artwork and to research art history to its depths by constantly questioning previous suppositions and thus to uncover mysteries that no one had pierced. Moreover, he encouraged us to pursue many new fields and ideas. He died, much mourned, in July 2004, but he will long be remembered.

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{I took this out and made a correction in the text that I think is enough, and it follows the information supplied by his daughter. The information in this note is also not entirely correct as far as what he actually did} [Name of an organized underground operation moving Jews out of eastern Europe into central and southern Europe between 1944 and 1948 as a step toward their – mostly “illegal” – immigration to Palestine.]

3. Moshe Barasch, “Quelques remarques sur l’esthétique chez Théophile le Moine,” *Revue d’Esthétique* [can you supply volume no.? – I will do so when I get Malka’s corrections, as I have to go to the library to do it] (1960): 257–72; idem, “Cristoforo Sorte as a Critic of Art,” *Arte Lombarda* 10 (1965): 253–59; idem, “The Color Scale in Renaissance Thought,” in *Romanica et Occidentalia: Études dédiées à la mémoire de Hiram Peri (Phlaum)*, ed. Moshe Lazar (Jerusalem, 1963), 74–87. [author, please confirm that Lazar was the editor; unclear from JNUL catalogue – I will check this in the library as I have to order the book to do so]

4. Moshe Barasch, *Theories of Art from Plato to Winckelmann* (New York, 1985); idem, *Modern Theories of Art, I: From Winckelmann to Baudelaire* (New York, 1990); idem, *Modern Theories of Art, II: From Impressionism to Kandinsky* (New York, 1998).