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THE NEW ART OF AN ANCIENT PEOPLE
THE WORK OF EPHRAIM MOSE LILien

By M. S. LEVUSSOVE

1871

H. L. Deegan

The New Art of An Ancient People
The Work of Ephraim Mose Lilien



Dr. H. H. H. H.

THE NEW ART
OF
AN ANCIENT PEOPLE

THE WORK OF
EPHRAIM MOSE LILIEN

BY
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THE NEW ART OF 'AN ANCIENT PEOPLE



O all the psychologic phenomena of history, perhaps the most remarkable is presented in the intense national quickening undergone, in our sight, by an ancient people—the Jews. For centuries homeless and dispersed, in many lands confined in ghettos, without freedom of speech, occupation or thought, one would have expected them to lose all national spirit. And surely when we take into account the tendency of all subordinated peoples, the tendency to assimilate with the opinions and ideals of the dominant, we would naturally conclude that, by our time, all their characteristic and distinctive points of view should have been completely obliterated. And yet,

THE NEW ART OF AN ANCIENT PEOPLE

the Jewish soul, far from having exhausted itself in what Matthew Arnold calls, its message of "conduct" and "obedience to the word of the Lord," is now awakening to a newer activity and a larger creative effort. Not only have its recent travails brought forth a Zionist political movement, but, in addition, an extensive literature, a drama, and an art. The rising sun of Zion is shedding its light on everything Jewish, and this light is reflected in the thousand works of the younger intellectual Jews. Ephraim Mose Lilien is one of these younger Jews.

The European art-world of to-day has had a renaissance; the younger element, in the so-called Secession, while creating new forms and ideals of its own, has been making an onslaught on the academic and classic art. We all know how Cimabue's first life-like touches to the Byzantine Madonna initiated an art-revolution in the religious pictures of his time. Similarly, have the Dutch School and the French Romanticists completely broken through and shattered the crystallized rules of the art of later days. And now, divers groups of young artists, fighting, some under the standard of realism, others under the banner of "naturalism," or the newer ideal-



The Silent Song



The Song of Life

ism, have been developing a new art, whose content and style, even if at times erroneous, bear witness to the zeal with which they seek to create new and more beautiful combinations in color and form. Lilien is a member of one of these latter groups.



EPHRAIM MOSE LILIEN was born in 1874 in a poverty-stricken little village in Galicia, in the midst of Austria's mining district, at a place known as Drohobicz. Seven-eighths of the population consists of Jews, not rich "enlightened" Jews, anxious, where environment permits, to cast off allegiance to race and faith, but Yiddish-speaking, *Torah-loving, hard-working mechanics and small shop-keepers, who live in poverty, study God's law and obey His commandments. It goes without saying that young Lilien learnt by bitter personal experience the indignities to which his race is, in European lands, so often subjected. His immediate kin were as much in fear of the peas-

*Torah—the law.

ant's rough treatment, as much oppressed by petty officials, as much hampered by anti-Jew laws, as were any other members of the Jewish community; and he himself suffered like all those whom he loved.

His father was a wood-turner and too poor to send the boy to the State schools; hence what education young Ephraim received came to him, as it does to so many of his race, only through the study and discussion of the Bible and its commentaries. But, apparently, he suffered no loss thereby, for he was absorbed in what to others seemed a useless occupation—the drawing of pictures. What then was more natural, in casting about for some employment for the boy, than to apprentice him to a sign painter, that he might learn in time to do “well” that which he really loved to do? Accordingly this was done; and gradually he began earning enough to pay his way.

But as he worked on, his soul was filled with dreams of beauty, and he longed to create, to express himself in the only way an artist can. He went to Cracow to the Academy of Fine Arts; and the training he received there, far from satisfying him, served rather to stimulate his ambition. It was not surprising then that he sought the great centre of the newer art

movement, the master workshop from which came so many beautiful creations—Munich. To Munich he went, only to find that, hampered as he was by the lack of funds, he could not acquire the training he had so ardently longed for. And so, without experience, without instruction, guided only by an instinctive appreciation of the beautiful, and by his characteristic tastes and ideals, slowly and laboriously, began the development of his artistic nature.

It is this part of a man's life that is most critical and momentous, the period of storm and stress, of struggle, of temptation to leave one's chosen calling. Many a man who vigorously starts to hew his own path, to assert his own individuality, soon discovers that it is easier to follow than to lead, returns to the well-trodden highways, only to mingle with the common crowd. Not so Lilien; he persisted in his determination and developed his own strong personality. At the present writing this young man is in Berlin, recognized and admired as a man who turned art into a new channel, who delivered a national message by means of form. His drawings have won him a place easily in the forefront of modern illustrators.

* * * *

Lilien's work may be summed up as follows :—

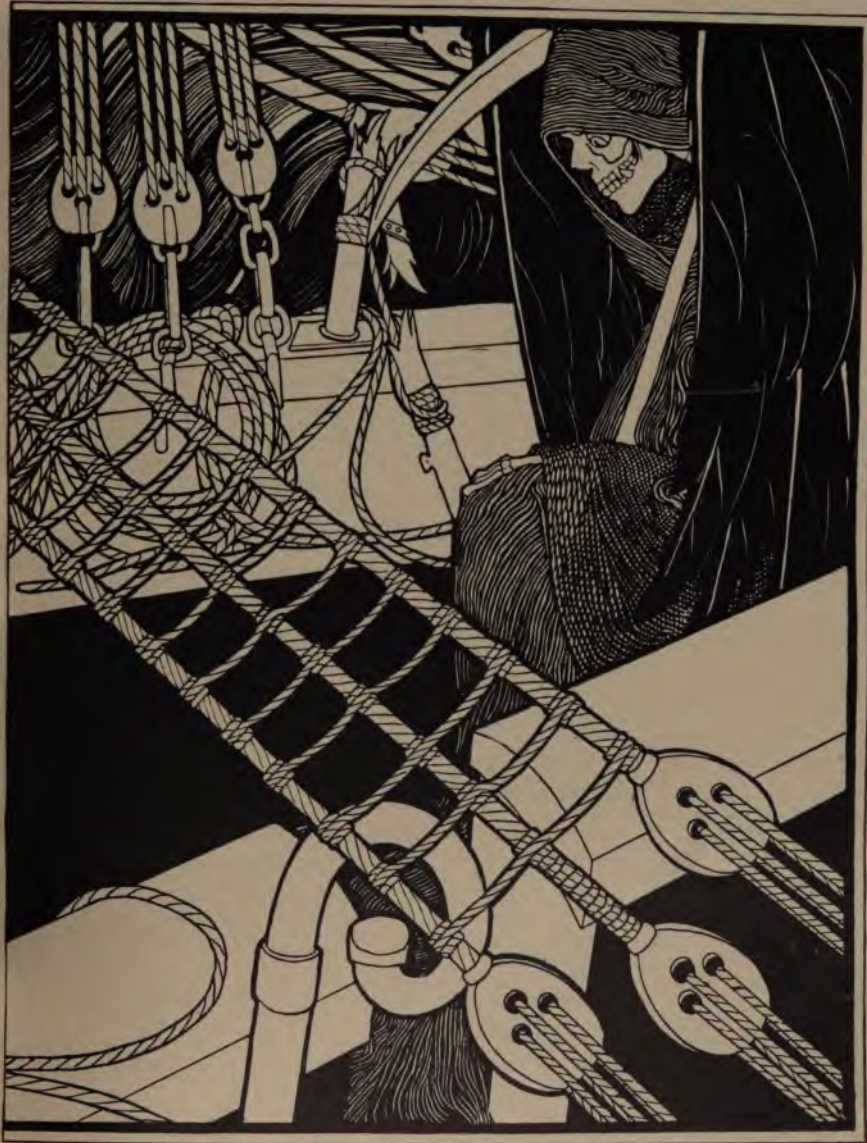
1. Illustrations to "The Tax Gatherer of Klausen," a volume published in Berlin in 1898; 2. Illustrations that appeared in "Jugend" and in "Vorwärts;" 3. Illustrations to "Juda," a volume of poems written by the Freiherr von Munchausen; 4. Designs for book covers and ex-libris; 5. Illustrations to Rosenfeld's "Songs of the Ghetto."

His first work (in "The Tax Gatherer of Klausen") showed little individuality or strength, although it foreshadowed possibilities. The heads are well drawn, yet over-much detail diverts the attention from a central point. Shortly after the publication of this volume several illustrations appeared in "Jugend" in which, technically, the artist's individuality asserted itself more strongly. In "Juda" he has shown his most characteristic work.

It would be impracticable to give an analysis of every one of his drawings. We, therefore, select a few that will serve as examples of the art of this really great master of black and white.

"The Silent Song" is the title of a drawing whose subject is not at all national. The universal passion, love, is pictured simply, and yet with Jewish feeling.





The Storm Scene

A girl is seated, half undraped, her cloak falling carelessly to her lap; while a youth bends over her in embrace. Her arms and supple body as she clings to him exhibit a grace and physical charm rarely surpassed. The action of both is completely expressed with a few delicate and clear-cut lines. Behind them is the dark night, illumined only by a few stars whose light barely reveals the trunks of some trees in the distance, while, near by, the motif is repeated in the form of two billing doves.

In "The Song of Love" two nude figures, a beautiful woman and a muscular man, stand in close embrace. In the drawing of the female, with her sensuous wealth of hair, Lilien showed a full appreciation of the physical type; yet, the peculiarly Jewish side of his art is shown in this, that despite the pose, subject, and treatment, he does not, like other artists of the Secession, leave, as the abiding result of the picture, an impression alone of fleshliness.

Technically he shows here a noteworthy variety in the treatment of black and white. Depth is suggested by a distant stream merging into the mysterious ground. The peacock perched on the limb of a tree forms a fitting symbol, and the graceful curve and

downward sweep of its feathers tempers, through a happy handling of mass, the violence and contrast of the black background.

In "The Song of Sorrow" a few stars shine through an inky night on the outstretched figure of a girl; in the centre is placed the burning incense; to the left, stands a neglected harp with its broken strings, while the weeping face and bent body of the sorrowing Jew are revealed beside it. "Like unto a silent stream in the night is my sorrow."

The salient points of this composition are relieved against the light and simple ground and seem strongly to emphasize the outstretched figure of the ghastly dead.

"Tears on the Iron" is the title of one of his symbolic drawings illustrating Rosenfeld's "Songs of the Ghetto." Through a huge cobweb is seen an unfortunate East-side workman, haggard and suffering, bending over a piece of cloth which he is ironing; and the observer's attention is divided between his hopeless, tear-stained face and the symbolism of a repulsive spider-like creature sucking the life-blood of a hapless bee ensnared in his web. As a picture of suffering it is strong; as an example of symbolism, the



The Song of Sorrow



Tears on the Iron

border and the cobweb are both striking and effective. As a work of pure art Lilien surpasses it elsewhere.

An illustration to Rosenfeld's "Song of Life" is a typically Jewish girl, arrayed in the praying-shawl, impersonating the spirit of Jewish Poesy, in the garb of Religion. Her hands rest on a harp, while she listens to the music of two angels behind.

“Wen weihst du, süsßer Sänger
Wohl deiner Lieder Klang?
Wer hört dich: Wer versteht dich?
Wen rührt dein heller Sang?”

“To whom, sweet singer, do you dedicate your song? Who hears, who understands you? Whom does your clear singing move?” asks the poet; and she seems to feel the force of the warning:

“Es mag deine ganze Seele
Einströmen in dein Lied.
Kein Herz wirst du erwecken
Im harten, starren Granit.”

“Though your whole soul may be poured into your song, you'll quicken no heart in the hard, unyielding granite.”

“The Storm Scene” is one of his strongest pictures. On a boat driven through the dark night are

two old Jews, traveling onward. A storm is raging around them; and amidst the rigging, enveloped in wings of inky blackness, sits the Angel of Death gazing upon her helpless and forlorn prey. The studied simplicity of the drawing, the omission of superfluous detail, and the contrast of mass are noteworthy.

"Isaiah," likewise, is a powerful composition. To the left is the noble figure of the prophet lost in profound meditation, pausing in a thorny path through which he has walked. In the middle distance may be seen a group of young people dancing joyously in the light. Far behind them are the houses and roofs of Jerusalem over which broods a threatening storm. Wrapt in thought, the prophet watches those dancing figures through the burning incense of the central altar. The exalted figure of Isaiah, the wind-driven trees amidst which he stands, presaging the approaching storm, the deepening clouds brooding over the entire scene, the pleasure-loving crowd all heedless or unconscious of the impending danger, not only show Lilien's mastery of the technique of composition, but they express the Hebraic nature, the gloom and inspiration of his style.

In "The Exile's Light," the head of an old man





Isaiah

is seen looking up from a bible, his hand resting lovingly on its open page. The table on which the book rests as well as the shelf behind, with the candles, give a horizontality to the composition, broken by the vertical tapers in the foreground and back. A cleverly conceived border of ram's horns and palms, objects used on the Atonement Day, frames the illustration. When darkness and danger threaten him, when poverty and despair oppress him, when life is a burden, and hope well-nigh abandoned, this Book, this Sacred Word of the Law, is his sole light, his comfort and his guide.

As a "Souvenir of the Fifth Zionist Congress" Lilien designed a post-card that for simplicity, strength and directness, has few equals. An angel points out the road to a sorrowing Jew, and shows him in the distance a strong man following the oxen and plough. This is Lilien's solution to the Jewish problem.

Less delicate in line, but stronger in effect, than the "Isaiah" is his "Passover." Omitting half-values, with bolder outlines and greater simplicity, he represents a strong Jewish head and part of the figure in the left-hand corner. The man is wrapped in the religious robe, the Talith, and twining about him are

stalks armed with monstrous thorns. His face is turned half way to the observer while he makes his way from a black past into the blazing glory of the day, as the sun of Zion rises above the horizon. Grandly and vividly this light reveals the monumental works of the past. The pyramids, which had seen the glory of Egypt and its fall, look upon the figure of this ancient Egyptian slave marching towards the light. In this picture Lilien appeals to the imagination with remarkable directness.

The "Autumn Melodies" exhibits a curious drawing. An old exile, bundle in hand, stands in a field of thistles, relieved against the sea. What a unique and curious caprice of the draughtsman to give the waves of the ocean, the boats and the sea-gulls in air; in the clear space above the horizon, the exile's head; and straight against the body of the wanderer a black mass in which his feet are seen through thistles. Poor wanderer, with your autumn leaves! Your head may be in the clear light and free air, but how your advance is impeded! However clearly you may think, however far ahead you may see, you shall stumble, you are destined to distress. We can almost hear the cry of Rosenfeld:



The Exile's Light



Autumn Melodies

“O Elend! Du allein von Allen
Liebst mich seit meinem Ersten Tag.
Und ausser dich—soweit ich blicke
Ist auch nicht einer der mich mag.”

“O Misery! Thou alone, of all the world, dost love me from my birth; and beside thee—as far as eye can reach, none would have me.”

His book-plates exhibit the characteristics of all his drawings, beauty and strength. Exceptionally graceful is the one designed for his own use, a beautiful girl absorbed in reading a book as she walks along. For strength and simplicity of execution, the book-plate Lilien drew for Maxim Gorky is probably unsurpassed. An uncouth half-savage Muscovite peasant stands on an open book inhaling the rising, pure air of freedom. Against his knee he breaks the knout that so long kept him the slave of the tyrant. In the distance is the Kremlin from which two ravens—birds of dark and evil omen—fly outward through Russia's black atmosphere. More directly than words does this simple composition tell of the horror, the tragedy, the hope, of the land of the awakening Moujik; and it is difficult to conceive a drawing more completely in harmony with Gorky's style and Gorky's views.

Of his book-covers, that of "Juda" may for charm of design and harmony of color be described as a masterpiece. That of Rosenfeld's "Songs of the Ghetto" is simple and appropriate.

Has Lilien a sense of humor? Let us look at the vignette of the post-card of "Die Kommenden." To the right on a bench is a girl who has just fled from a courting musical faun. As he follows with his lowered violin, she half turns, and in a not very dignified but most graceful pose raises her hand to her nose and twirls her fingers at him. The action in the faun is so completely expressed that one forgets he is part of the bench-post and cannot follow the tease.

In the drawing entitled "The Land of Illusion" are two figures kneeling on a small piece of sod and lost in one long kiss. They are held high up amongst the clouds by a tremendous giant, Fate, whose derisive smile shows how ridiculous these people are to him in their complete forgetfulness and dream of eternal bliss. He has but to part his fingers and the pair are dashed to the ground miles beneath; and as he watches them, completely absorbed in each other and in their dream, he is amused. Around him circle half-suspicious, half-laughing planets, and far below in the distant back-



The Land of Illusion



Ex-Libris—Maxim Gorky

ground may be discerned a tiny city with its houses, trees and hills. The grim humor, combined with the pessimism, of this illustration shows the artist's philosophy of life apart from his national views.



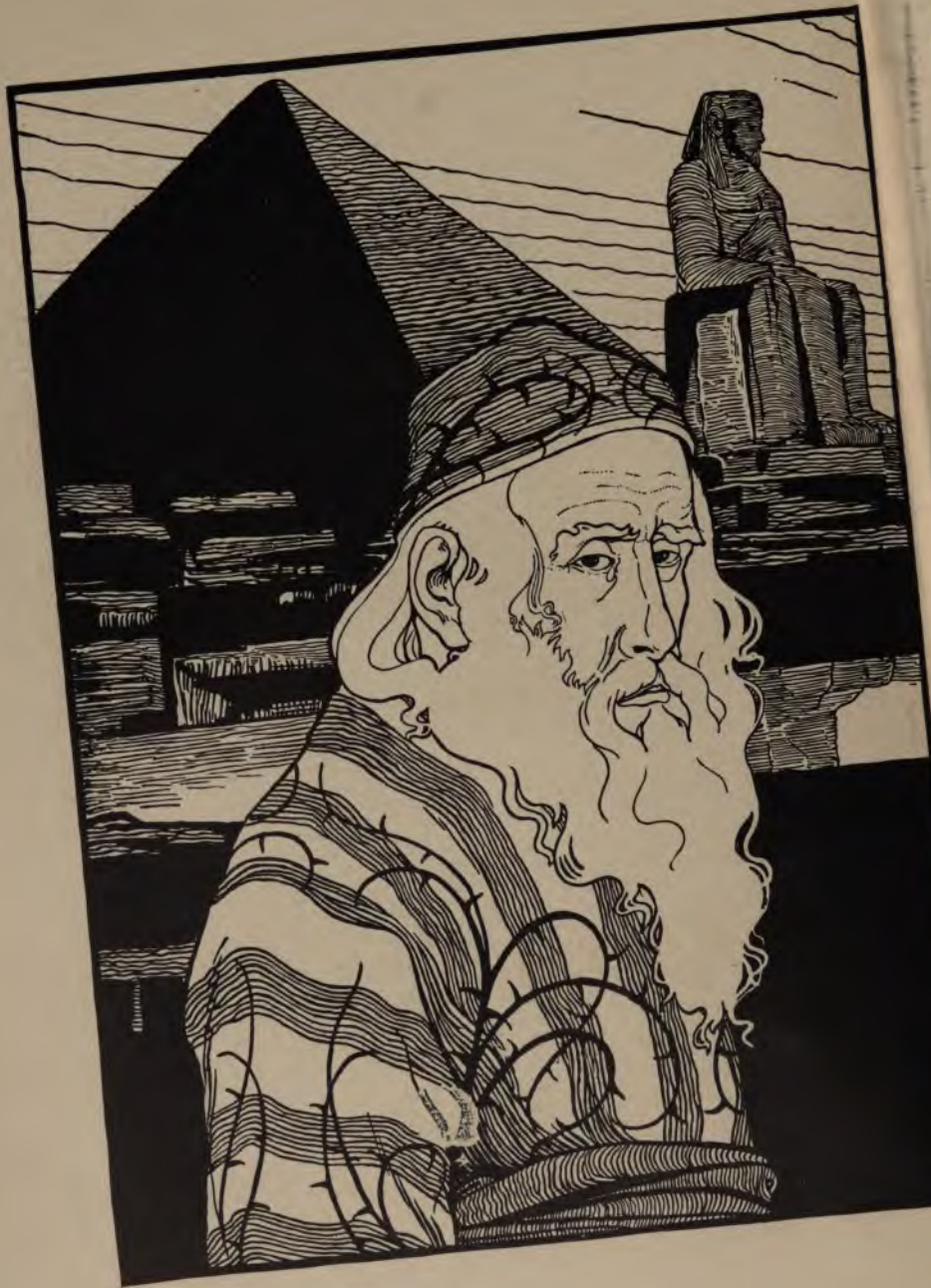
IN reviewing his style as a whole, one hardly knows whether to admire it more for its beautiful technique, or for its strong content. As regards technique his first care is promptly and vividly, and yet agreeably, to impress the eye and the mind of the observer. To this end his compositions are made up of large and bold masses of black and white, whereas his detailed figures are worked out with clean, clear-cut, graceful lines of subtle harmony. In the latter he shows a study of the European masters of wood-engraving; in the former we perceive the influence of the decorative artists of Japan.

His masses of black and white sharply displace each other, with little attempt at softness or gradation; and yet this very violence produces, as it is calculated

to produce, a sense of vastness and depth hardly to be expected from a flat surface. And in his figures, the high lights and deep shades caused by the manner of lighting the model give a sense of strength, mighty and crushing.

The perspective employed in all his pictures is of course distorted, but distorted methodically, the better to produce a desired impression. Instead of accurately representing the foreshortening, he exaggerates it and moulds it to his purpose. Thus, the paths along which the Jew travels begin wide and rapidly diminish to thread-like lines; the figures as they recede quickly dwindle in size—so that the illusion of distance is powerfully produced at the first glance. His perspective is not geometrically correct; its peculiar form of exaggeration may be termed intensive, distorting the truth to intensify effect.

As to the details in his pictures, he eliminates all he can dispense with, leaving little besides the essential elements. And what he retains, he conventionalizes, symbolizes, transforms into suggestion. Just as a familiar musical air left unfinished will be completed by the hearer out of his own consciousness, so Lilien's clear, carefully chosen symbols, by association, bring





Passover

to the observer feelings that make the work deeply impressive. Thus, the praying-shawl, the Star of Israel, the seven-branched candle-stick of the Temple, the hands of the high-priest at benediction, the rose-stalk with immense thorns, etc., are used with telling effect.

If objection be made that his work is not realism, is not a true picture of life, the answer is self-evident, it is not intended to be. Compare this man with another well-known illustrator dealing largely with the same subject—Oppenheim. The latter is somewhat realistic. But contrast the short, unattractive, frequently emotionless figures in his Synagogue or Pass-over pictures with Lilien's beautiful soul-expressions, and you cannot but conclude that a pseudo-realism, such as Oppenheim's, failing to express a spirit is incomparably inferior to a symbolism that conventionalizes externals. An art in which the parts are formed, proportioned, and connected merely to burn an emotional meaning into the soul, an art in which everything studiously supports the main idea, conveying its message almost as clearly as words, is infinitely more effective than the most accurate photography of drapery and feature.

Turning from technique to the content of his art, we find his feelings ranging from the purely lyric, as in "The Silent Song" or "The Song of Love," through the deeply tragic, as in "Isaiah" and the "Passover." His humor, so suggestive of Heine's, is well shown in such productions as the art post-card of "Die Kommenden."

Though pessimistic in some things, he appears ever optimistic as to his race. The gloomy tragedy of the past always dawns into a bright future, and it is this optimism for the future, as well as his keen artistic realization of the Jew's sorrowful history, that forms the keynote to his best work.

To sum up his characteristics, perhaps the distinctive qualities of his work are: technically, a studied subordination of the minor elements to bring out the main idea of the picture; an effective employment of large masses in composition, and of delicate, rhythmic, living lines in the working out of details. And in content, a profound pathos, a pathos born of his Judaism, and a tremendous power of appealing directly to the imagination in expressing national suffering and national hopes.



Die Kommenden



The Song of Love



ART has had a reawakening. In Paris, in Munich, in Vienna, the art rebellion, the war of the Secession, is being merrily waged; the younger element is creating a new style, is producing novel beauty.

Judaism has thrown off its lethargy. The Zionist movement, the later Hebrew poetry, the growing Yiddish literature, the new Jewish drama, point to the renaissance of the Jewish spirit in Germany, in France, in England, and in America; not the Talmudic spirit, but the spirit of a young and healthy national self-consciousness.

And after all, are not these two movements essentially identical, essentially the same striving of the soul—the art soul or the national soul—for a larger freedom and a more complete expression? A new spirit when aroused expresses itself in manifold ways. Why then should not a Jewish artist wed the Hellenic with the Hebraic? Why should not the ancient prophetic soul be incorporated in the beautiful?

Lilien is a Jew and an artist. Not a Jew in name only, to whom religion is but a faint memory, but one whose heart throbs in unison with the heart-beats of his people; his longings are their longings, his sorrows their sorrows, his joys their joys. Small wonder that his art is the art of living Judaism; an art in which a living people hope and love, work, wander and weep. He has been compared with Beardsley; but if Beardsley is brilliant it is with the phosphorescent light of decay, while Lilien shines with the light of a rejuvenated and growing people. He has been compared with Mucha; but if Mucha is beautiful, his beauty is of the earth and on the surface, while Lilien's is deep and far-reaching, a manifestation of the strength and beauty of the soul.

Strange, (is it not?) that a nation which had not before expressed itself graphically should, after ages of silence, readily manifest its national feelings in art. Through centuries of wandering and homelessness, through constant contemplation of the vision of God, the Jewish sight had become so confined and pre-occupied, and the art-sense behind it had become so disused, that the nations believed the Jews incapable of art, believed them capable only of thought. But

the Jewish Renaissance expresses itself in Lilien as Art.

* * * *

On the slope of one of the mountains of the Rockies, there peacefully and quietly flows a stream. At one point in its path it suddenly disappears, is completely and mysteriously swallowed up, leaving no trace behind. Yet, miles beyond, this stream, which had apparently sunk into the bowels of the earth never to reappear, rises again, bubbles up, richer and stronger, laden with myriads of crystals, catching and reflecting the light of dawn in a thousand rainbow colors. Even so has the National Spirit of the Jews again come to light. For two thousand years overwhelmed by the nation's woes, it was believed to have been completely swallowed up, giving no indication of existence, except in faint rumblings heard in the Talmudic disputations and the narrow mysticisms of the middle ages. To-day it reappears richer and fuller than ever, laden with newer gifts, reflecting the dawn of a new life in the thousand beautiful forms of a Jewish Art.



Souvenir of the Fifth Zionist Congress

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