Look at the Artists: African Americans and Jews in Los Angeles

Admire, Respect, and Even Like Each Other

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Los Angeles is a metropolis with a hugely diverse population, including extremely large numbers of African Americans and Jews. Residents of all races and nationalities live and work in close proximity to one another. For many decades, the city has experienced severe racial tensions, signified most dramatically by the massive urban rebellions in 1965 and 1992. According to some of the popular media, the region’s racial tension is especially pronounced in the relationships between Jews and African Americans. Newspaper and television reports often highlight the growing anxiety and conflict between these two different groups that nevertheless share a common (yet historically distinct) bond of racism and oppression. There is no doubt about the existence of such tensions; earlier strong African American/Jewish alliances, especially during the modern civil rights era, have deteriorated. Even on college and university campuses, students from both groups reflect the suspicion fostered in television and press stories. Nevertheless, these media accounts are often significantly exaggerated, promoting public perceptions of Jewish and African American hostility that foster suspicion rather than communication. These perceptions, in turn, reduce the probability of serious dialogue among various ethnic and racial groups generally.

A careful examination of the post-war visual arts tradition in Los Angeles reflects a vastly different perspective. The strong bonds between African American and Jewish artists promote a useful yet widely unrecognized model of interethnic cooperation and respect.

This alternative view of African American/Jewish artistic relationships reveals the continued presence of strong bonds and mutual respect and affection. Many of the actual works and personal philosophies of both African American and Jewish artists support a vision of interethnic relationships that counters many of the recent mass media presentations. Linkages of African American and Jewish artists are a comparatively recent development in art historical scholarship.

The breakthrough effort occurred in 1999 with Professor Millie Heyd’s work *Mutual Reflections: Jews and Blacks in American Art* (Rutgers University Press). That book was the first to explore, among other themes, the works of both Jewish and African American visual artists who used their visual works to comment on the historical struggles of the other group. It featured some
well known Jewish and African American political artists of the 20th century. Among others, Heyd included such widely known Jewish socially conscious figures as Ben Shahn, William Gropper, Raphael Soyer, Moses Soyer, Philip Evergood, George Segal, Jack Levine, and Art Spiegelman. She also discussed the lives and work of other Jewish political artists like Aaron Goodleman, Hugo Gellert, Harry Sternberg, Chaim Gross, Adolf Wolff, Louis Lozowick, Julius Bloch, Lucienne Bloch, Lili Asher, Seymour Lipton, and others. The cumulative works of this latter group make powerful contributions to the history of American political art, but these artists have rarely appeared in traditional American art historical scholarship.

A key contribution of Mutual Reflections involves Heyd’s treatment of Jewish artists who are not primarily known as political in orientation, but who nevertheless have addressed African American themes in part of their work. Among others, she focused on Philip Guston, Larry Rivers, Jonathan Borofsky, and Alex Katz. This feature expands the argument and encourages other scholars and critics to broaden the inquiry into Jewish artists for whom African American life and culture inform their overall work. Such inquiry might also include the efforts of Jewish artists like painter/cartoonist Arthur Szyk, painter/printmaker Edward Biberman, photographer Milton Rogovin, muralists Mark Rogovin, John Pitman Weber, Mike Alewitz, and others. Some of these artists are reasonably well known, but more comprehensive critical inquiry and recognition within and outside the academy remains a strong priority in the early 21st century.

Professor Heyd likewise identified prominent African American artists whose works included sympathetic depictions of Jews and Jewish history and culture. Several are well established figures in the African American art historical canon: Henry Ossawa Tanner, Jacob Lawrence, Cliff Joseph, Benny Andrews, Charles White, and Adrian Piper. Of these figures, White had a strong Los Angeles linkages and will appear later in this essay. Above all, Mutual Reflections initiated an exciting art historical focus that deserves considerable development and expansion. Further investigation would reveal more fully that African American and Jewish visual artists know and respect the works of artists from the other community and the deeper historical roots from which the works emerge. In short, African American and Jewish artists promote a humane vision of interethnic cooperation and understanding—far superior to that of many community and political “leaders,” for whom continuing tension among African Americans and Jews helps sustain their private and public agendas.

One crucial component of this historic artistic linkage can be found in the recent art history of the Los Angeles area. Visual artists from both communities have often worked closely together on cultural and political issues and have profited enormously, both personally and professionally,
from that interaction. These African American artists have a substantial
knowledge of Jewish history and the Jewish artists have a substantial
knowledge of African American history. In personal interviews with many of
these artists, I have ample evidence that they take strong issue with public
perceptions of African American/Jewish hostility and that they have a
contrary commitment to mutual affection. I will focus on several
contemporary painters, muralists, printmakers, and other visual artists who
have lived or worked extensively in Los Angeles in recent years.

A review of contemporary Los Angeles–based Jewish political artists
reveals a substantial community of painters, muralists, installation artists,
cartoonists, and photographers for whom black civil rights and related
themes are a major feature of their artistic vision. The origins of this
phenomenon are deep. An early example is the work of Seymour Kaplan, a
painter and printmaker who worked with Elizabeth Catlett at the renowned
Taller de Grafica Popular in Mexico City in the late 40s and early 50s. Always
a political artist, Kaplan created and published several cartoons in The
California Eagle, one of the oldest, most venerable African American
newspapers in Los Angeles. Under the direction of radical activist Charlotta
Bass, The Eagle was a longtime progressive voice in the black community.
Kaplan’s cartoons of the 1940s, focusing on issues of race and racism, made
him a rare Jewish artist working for an African American paper. His works,
especially at the time, presaged the more comprehensive Jewish/Black
alliance of the modern civil rights movement from the mid 50s to the early
70s.

More recently, other Los Angeles–area artists continued this tradition of
visual interethnic expression. Painter/muralist Eva Cockcroft, who died in
1999, spent an entire career in New York and Los Angeles producing
powerful and engaging works that frequently highlighted the African
American experience. Many of her most prominent murals focused on black
figures who made powerful but insufficiently recognized contributions to
American history and culture. One of the many senior artists contributing
artist to “The Great Wall of Los Angeles,” directed by Judy Baca in 1976, she
painted the civil rights panel near the end of this massive effort, the longest
mural in the world. This detail (Figure 1) depicts the interior of a bus, with
five African American figures rising from their seats and moving toward a
new era of racial equality. The figures are Paul Robeson, Rosa Parks,
Gwendolyn Brooks, Ralph Bunche, and Dr. Martin Luther King.

Significantly, the Robeson image is central to the overall composition,
dominating the entire panel. Cockcroft joined a larger visual community
seeking to restore Robeson to his proper recognition as one of the greatest
Renaissance persons in human history—a reality that few contemporary
Americans know resulting from Paul Robeson’s savage blacklisting during the
dark days of McCarthyism. Her mural detail elevates Robeson to his proper
place in the panoply of militant black civil rights figures in American history.
The image is especially powerful because Robeson himself regularly acknowledged his deep affection for the Jewish community in America and elsewhere. Her strong depiction of Paul Robeson encourages viewers to delve more deeply into African American history and to go beyond the superficial public display of Parks and King as the exclusive representatives of the historic struggles for racial dignity and justice. Such inquiry would lead, in turn, to a more comprehensive historical understanding of African American/Jewish friendship.

Eva Cockcroft painted a similar mural at the Southern California Library for Social Research in 1991 in a heavily black Los Angeles neighborhood. Entitled “History of Women and the Labor Movement in California,” this vibrant work featured five radical women leaders in California, with Charlotta Bass directly in the center of the composition. Once again, Cockcroft paid artistic homage to a key but underappreciated player in African American politics and culture. In the process, she reflected and solidified the long standing linkages in the Los Angeles area of artists from both communities.

Another prominent Jewish artist (now relocated to Santa Fe, New Mexico) produced several works around Los Angeles addressing themes of powerful significance to the African American community. Jill Ansell has spent an artistic lifetime creating striking images, especially with multicultural themes. As a young woman, she was profoundly affected by the 1968 murder of Martin Luther King, an event that crystallized her artistic commitment to multiculturalism and racial justice, making her one of the leading socially conscious artists of the contemporary era.

An accomplished muralist, she has combined artistic excellence and social consciousness in a major public art medium. In 1992, Ansell produced a colorful mural entitled “Immaculate Perception” (Figure 2), which combined a strong feminist consciousness with a deeper vision of racial inclusion. Each woman in the mural represents fertility, a theme reinforced in the composition by other cyclical symbols of life. The presence of a black woman is crucial. For many years during the feminist wave of the 1960s and 1970s, far too much focus centered on middle class white women. Agitation from women of color slowly (but still incompletely) persuaded American feminists to consider the unique challenges of this group, especially black women facing dual barriers of racism and sexism. Ansell’s inclusion of this group reflected both her deeper anti-racist vision and her commitment to use her art for the continuing struggles for racial equality.

Another veteran Los Angeles–based Jewish artist, Sheila Pinkel, has also devoted much of her long artistic career to political and social themes. Trained as a photographer, she has used this medium to offer provocative commentary about a wide variety of social and political topics. In recent years, she has turned her artistic attention to the growing problem of
incarceration in the United States, the phenomenon that Angeles Davis has appropriately labeled the “prison industrial complex.” Her large-scale installations reflect her distress at the growing numbers of minorities, including African Americans, serving time in local, state, and federal penal institutions. Her works are powerful renders of the structural inadequacies of a society that turns millions of its people into superfluous citizens, useful only for prison labor and incapable of productive life in society.

The most powerful example (Figure 3) is a pastiche of images, including iconic photographs from such socially conscious masters as Lewis Hine and Dorothea Lange. Among other details are images of African American political figures Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, and Angeles Davis as well as others. With the textual addition at the bottom of the work calling attention to contemporary American rates of incarceration, this visual artwork performs an exceptionally valuable educational function. Above all, Pinkel challenges her viewers by juxtaposing African American contributions to political struggle and images reflecting the long distance between American ideals of racial justice and the disturbing reality of racism and oppression. The artist has augmented her vision by producing a poster of the most famous African American political prisoner in contemporary America, Mumia Abu-Jamal. This work joins the larger national and international efforts to save Mumia from the death sentence or life imprisonment. It highlights yet another visual example of a Jewish artist for whom the black struggle is a central priority.

Beth Bachenheimer has likewise spent an artistic career devoted to social awareness. Her long personal experience in working in inner city Los Angeles high schools has given her a powerful understanding of the severe challenges facing the area’s African American population. One of her striking artworks responding to these realities is “This is Not a Place for Kids or Women” (Figure 4) in 1999. She mounted this installation in a venue in the middle of downtown Los Angeles, the locus of thousands of homeless people, with a significantly disproportionate minority representation. The work follows her visits and discussions with homeless black women and their children, who spend their days in this blighted and often dangerous area.

The centerpiece is a baby carriage, a concrete reminder to viewers that infants and small children suffer the consequences of a profoundly unjust society. The textual addition, “this is not a place. . . to live,” reinforces the message that profound social and economic change is required to address the scourge of homelessness. The photographic image of the young African American mother in this installation highlights the human dimension of homelessness, transforming it from an abstract notion to a compellingly concrete reality. Bachenheimer’s installation adds another dimension to the
long tradition of Jewish artistic concern for African American precariousness in contemporary capitalist America.

Los Angeles “guerrilla” artist Robbie Conal, a decidedly nonreligious artist of Jewish descent, has long used his satirical and critical posters to call attention to corrupt and hypocritical public figures and to condemn social and political policies that oppress people society’s margins. His public artworks constitute a dynamic counterattack against traditional models of artistic creation and distribution. He and his assistants post his efforts clandestinely in public spaces, causing viewers for more than 20 years to confront sharp and satirical imagery about politicians and political issues as they travel daily on city streets.

Conal’s poster works occasionally address racial themes reflecting the passionate anti-racist vision that has pervaded his life and career. He created one of his most powerful works in 1993 following the devastating 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles in the wake of the egregious acquittal of the four policemen who savagely beat African American motorist Rodney King—a videotaped event that millions of viewers throughout the world saw repeatedly. “Dis Arm” (Figure 5) combines Conal’s characteristic verbal play and provocative imagery to condemn the police brutality that catalyzed the 1992 rebellion. The burning police club suggests that as long as police treat African American brutally, street rebellion will inevitably reoccur—what James Baldwin in 1963 prophetically called “the fire next time.” The conspicuously lighted “Arm” portion of the poster at the lower right suggests, in fact, the legitimacy of a militant response to the legacy of police misconduct against African Americans. Through this and other artworks, Conal joins many other Jewish American artists who proclaim their solidarity with militant black resistance.

Many African American artists in Los Angeles have reciprocated this admiration and respect by depicting sympathetic visions of the Jewish community. Foremost among them was Charles White, one of the giant figures of 20th century African American visual art. Even before he relocated to the Los Angeles area, White, like his former wife Elizabeth Catlett, was deeply involved in leftist politics. An art teacher at the legendary radical children’s camp Wo-Chi-Ca in New Jersey in the 1940s, White regularly expressed both his commitment to socially critical art and his deeper vision of African American friendship and solidarity. Throughout his life, White reiterated this perspective, pervading his legendary mentoring of younger African American artists in Los Angeles.

His 1944 work “Speakers Link Anti-Semitism, Anti-Negroism” (Figure 6) expresses White’s view most dramatically. The central figure in the composition is a young African American, looking troubled after reading
various newspaper stories about anti-black and anti-Jewish activities during that era. The key story, at the left of the work, identifies the deeper racist roots of violence and discrimination against both minority populations in America and elsewhere, especially in Nazi Germany. Charles White effectively highlights a major truth about this phenomenon generally: racism anywhere is racism everywhere. The same impulses that led Adolf Hitler and his genocidal regime to try to destroy European Jewry are disconcertingly similar to the impulses motivating white supremacists who lynched African Americans and denied them economic, social, and political equality in the United States. For White, the struggle against racism requires a durable alliance of African Americans, progressive Jews, and others. This political vision, expressed brilliantly in his artwork, permeates the long-standing bonds of so many African American and Jewish artists in Los Angeles and throughout the nation.

Several other prominent area African American artists have acknowledged Jewish artistic, educational, and intellectual influences that have deeply informed their artistic careers. For example, venerable art historian and artist Samella Lewis worked with Jewish art educator Viktor Lowenfeld during her student days at Hampton Institute. An Austrian refugee from Nazi persecution, Lowenfeld encouraged his students to draw from their black heritage and experience to create artworks reflecting racial struggle, identity, and pride. In the early 1940s, Hampton was an exciting environment for young black artists, whose community included Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett, and John Biggers. Throughout her long career, Lewis has continued Lowenfeld’s vision in both her personal teaching and in her prolific body of painting and prints, using visual art to promote racial justice and dignity for her fellow African Americans.

Another major artist, John Riddle, likewise expressed his appreciation for Jewish influences on his work. Before his death in 2002, Riddle frequently discussed with me how American Jewish artist Ben Shahn had a seminal impact on his own teaching and studio efforts. Throughout his career, Riddle focused extensively on social and political themes, especially those affecting people of African origin. Many of his works were trenchant and provocative, similar to those of Shahn from the late 1920s until his death in 1969. John Riddle praised Shahn both for his personal and professional commitment to African American liberation and for his fusion of artistic excellence and social criticism. Riddle’s life and work represented an admirable extension of that perspective.

Tine Allen, who died in 2008, also spoke enthusiastically about the Jewish influences that informed her sculptural works over the years. Growing up in New York, she had substantial contact with Jewish residents there, admiring their resilience and their accomplishments in many fields, especially in
intellectual and educational activities. In her adult years, she read widely, including the works of critical Jewish intellectual/activist like Noam Chomsky. Her admiration for Jewish self-esteem led her to produce works that promoted equal self-respect in the African American community. Her engaging sculptures honoring such iconic figures as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Alex Haley, Malcolm X, A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, and show that African Americans, like their Jewish counterparts, deserve artistic recognition of their moral and political leaders.

Several Los Angeles area African American artists specifically incorporate Jewish subject matter directly into their artworks. One of the most renowned artists is Bill Pajaud, a longtime friend of Charles White, who has produced paintings, drawings, and prints of rabbis for well over fifty years. Internationally recognized for his magnificent watercolors, Pajaud has addressed numerous themes over the course of his distinguished artistic career. Among many others, his prolific output includes portraits of black women, images of African American music, especially from his native New Orleans, and biblical topics. Above all, Pajaud’s works celebrate the beauty and triumphs of his own people, a visual reminder of the dignity and accomplishments of African Americans despite centuries of oppression and hardship.

Pajaud’s commitment to the African American population has never limited his appreciation and respect for other populations. Throughout his life, he has understood and venerated the close bonds between Jews and African Americans. His religious training as a young man provided him with a strong knowledge of the Old Testament and a corresponding affection for Jewish history and culture. And his visual expression of rabbis reflected his deep understanding that “rabbi” means teacher, a person who promotes learning and ethical vision above all. A sketch of “Rabbi No 1” from 2008 (Figure 7A) is typical of his recent work. The rabbi’s expressive eyes and his traditional beard reflect his veneration of the ancient tradition—a veneration that the artist clearly shares. His contemplative look mirrors the historic Jewish commitment to learning and thought. Bedecked in his traditional prayer shawl, the rabbi exemplifies the scholarly vision that has given rise to Jewish ethics and social responsibility for thousands of years. Part of that tradition, clearly, has been substantial Jewish support participation in black struggles for liberty and dignity.

A companion drawing from the same year (Figure 7B) shows the rabbi in full religious splendor, with his full beard dominating the composition. Appearing deep in thought, perhaps about commentaries or interpretations about Torah teachings, he inspires veneration for the ancient Jewish tradition of sages and Talmudic scholars. Pajaud depicts the rabbi as solemn and immutable, a powerful symbol of the pervasive, unshakable drive of Jews
throughout the world not only to survive, but to persist in their identity as the “people of the book.”

Ernie Barnes, another iconic Los Angeles African American artist, has likewise used his art to promote his affectionate vision of Jewish life and culture. After a successful professional football career, Barnes relocated to the Los Angeles area, where he lived for five years in the historic Jewish Fairfax District. He found encouragement from artists Charles White and from gallery owner Benjamin Horowitz, a Jewish art dealer who helped break the color line in the area art market. His 1971 breakout exhibition, “The Beauty of the Ghetto,” addressed the joys of ordinary African American life in pool halls, barbershops, music and dance clubs, churches, and elsewhere. Barnes understood that the word “ghetto” has historical origins beyond the residential barriers of millions of African Americans. Specifically, it refers to the historic Jewish quarters in Europe, where people lived and developed their heritage of learning and culture. The artist used the term specifically to link both communities together in solidarity, reflecting similar heritages of separation and discrimination, encouraging unique racial and ethnic contributions of art and beauty.

Barnes regularly speaks with passion of his years in a Jewish neighborhood. In “Sam and Sidney” (Figure 8), he pays artistic tribute to he familiar scenes of Jewish daily life in Los Angeles and many other locations throughout the world. The painting features two Jewish men engrossed in conversation. They appear to be speaking robustly, perhaps even arguing, with the man in front making his point in an animated fashion, while his friend seemingly resists with equal intensity. More important than their theological or political dispute, however, is the closeness of the relationship, signified by their linked arms. The gesture suggests the unity of the Jewish people, fortified by their historic record of arguing with both vigor and mutual respect. “Sam and Sidney” reflects Barnes’ broader sympathy with human diversity at the same time it pointedly repudiates the widespread allegations of black anti-Semitism.

In 2008, Ernie Barnes added another striking artwork to his visual affection for Jewish history, religion, and culture. “The Tallit” (figure 9) is a painting that reinforces the vision of eternal Jewish spirituality and strength. Like Bill Pajaud’s rabbinical figures, the figure wraps himself in the tallit, signifying his embrace of his historical roots and religious heritage. His expression reveals both serenity and pride, communicating to viewers that the Jewish tradition will endure, despite centuries of hostility, persecution, and genocide. The images of the Torah scrolls at the top of the painting complement the growing plants at the bottom. Together, “The Tallit” suggests that the past, present, and future of Jewish life and history have
converged in the central figure, symbolic of the continuity and dynamism of the Jewish tradition generally.

Drawing again on his early Los Angeles years in a Jewish neighborhood, he also developed plans for “The Fairfax Mural,” his personal visualization of Jewish values. If financial arrangements can be finalized, he will paint a mural that will simultaneously promote pride among contemporary Jewish residents and visitors and reveal a powerful bridge of understanding and respect from a venerable African American artist. Many preliminary sketches are completed and the final product will make a huge contribution to African American/Jewish mutual appreciation and friendship.

Los Angeles already has one prominent Jewish mural that an African American artist produced. In 1995, former Los Angeles resident Daryl Wells received a mural commission from the Social and Public Art Resource Center of Venice (SPARC), one of the premier public mural organizations in the world. Awarded a site at the building of the National Council of Jewish Women, she created a multicultural effort celebrating various 20th century women political and cultural leaders throughout the world. Entitled “Not Somewhere Else But Here” (Figure 10), this work follows the long tradition of using murals to highlight the images of people who remain insufficiently recognized in traditional media and educational outlets. Like many contemporary muralists, Wells used her talents to recognize women of several backgrounds and accomplishments, adding aesthetically pleasing educational imagery to the historic Jewish Fairfax neighborhood of Los Angeles.

Among the many persons highlighted are several accomplished Jewish women: anarchist leader Emma Goldman; playwright Lillian Hellman; Holocaust heroine Hannah Senesh; feminist writer Betty Friedan; painter Lee Krassner; and U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer. Others include United Farm Worker Union organizer Delores Huerta; former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan; Guatemalan resistance leader and Nobel laureate Rigaberta Manchu; Burmese opposition leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi; and several other notable women. Wells pointedly places her subjects before a table of various ethnic and national foods. Honoring this traditional symbol of women’s work, she simultaneously suggests that women can never be limited by domestic roles and responsibilities alone. The presence of children at both ends of the composition reinforces this powerful feminist message. The text below, “Community Service, Social Action, Education,” reflects the broader perspective of multifaceted women’s activities in the global community of the early 21st century even as it augments the record of African American artists addressing Jewish subject matter.
Visual expressions that reveal mutual affection and respect among past and present Los Angeles Jewish and African American artists suggests that artists are well equipped to provide moral leadership that runs contrary to popular prejudice. In his eloquent lectures as the 1956–57 Charles Elliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard, Ben Shahn spoke of the historic role of artists as nonconformists and as visionaries temperamentally opposed to the political, social, and aesthetic status quo. Later published in book form as The Shape of Content, Shahn's words reflected his own courageous commitment to visual social criticism in a time of Cold War conformity and the international ascendancy of the politically uncontroversial school of abstract expressionism. Ben Shahn’s thoughts have powerful relevance for the present in very different contexts. In times of severe social stress, in a world devastated by terrorism, economic meltdown, poverty, hunger, and disease, it is easy—all too easy—to search for scapegoats and to drive wedges between people and communities. It is time, once again, to look at the artists for a more progressive and humane perspective.