

EXHIBITION REVIEW: "JEWISH WOMEN AND THEIR SALONS: THE POWER OF CONVERSATION"

Judith Rosenbaum

"On my divan Austria comes alive," declared Berta Zuckerkandl, one of twelve Jewish salonières featured in a recent exhibition at the Jewish Museum, New York, "Jewish Women and Their Salons: The Power of Conversation."

Zuckerkandl's assertion raises the question at the heart of this exhibition: what was the role of Jewish women and their salons in the process of social, cultural, and political change from the end of the eighteenth to the middle of the twentieth century?

On view at the Jewish Museum from March 4 to July 10, 2005, and at the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College in partnership with the New Center for the Arts from August 22 to December 4, 2005, this exhibition

illustrates and enhances the important contributions of women's history and gender studies to the field of Jewish studies. Curators Emily D. Bilski and Emily Braun draw on a variety of historical sources—from letters and diaries to painting and literature—to analyze how social exchange within the private arena of the salon shaped culture and politics.

The scope of the exhibition, which traces Jewish salonières from their emergence in 1780s Berlin to their

demise in Los Angeles in the 1950s, argues for a broader, more inclusive consideration of Jewish women's salons that extends beyond the usual focus on the early years of the

nineteenth century. Within this expanded context, the exhibition and its rich companion catalogue explore how Jewish women, whose experience negotiating boundaries as both women and Jews, honed the social mediation skills necessary to



Florine Stettheimer, *Soirée*, 1917-19. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

preside over a successful salon. As a result, they became influential salonières in disproportionate numbers. First serving as wealthy ambassadors for assimilation and later as critics and shapers of avant-garde culture, these women used the egalitarian sociability of the salon—made possible by its location within domestic space—to blur boundaries of class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality and to pursue a greater degree of education and influence

for themselves. For example, in her early Berlin salon, Rahel Levin Varnhagen found an outlet for her powerful intellect and an opportunity to reinvent herself as something beyond a mere "Jewess." Genevieve Straus, whose bohemian salon attracted a diversity of artists and cultural types, developed a close relationship with Marcel Proust, giving him the notebooks in which he drafted *À la recherche du temps perdu* and serving as the model for the character of Madame de Guermantes. After the framing of Alfred Dreyfus had been revealed at her summer home, her salon became the Dreyfusard headquarters—a role that lost her many salon habitués but cemented her place in political history.

While emphasizing the salonières' roles as powerbrokers and significant cultural handmaidens, the exhibition makes clear that they were not only muses, facilitating the careers and accomplishments of others (men), but contributors in their own right, crafting their own personas and pursuing their own careers as writers, critics, and musicians. In fact, the salons themselves could also serve as muses, inspiring the creativity of the women who presided over them. Florine Stettheimer, one of only two stateside salonières featured in the exhibiton, made the

salon she led with her two sisters the subject of her art. In one of the strongest essays in the catalogue, Lucia Re argues for reading Gertrude Stein's experimental modernist prose as a written expression of the circling salon conversations at 27 Rue de Fleurus.

One of the strengths of the exhibition (and even more so, of the catalogue) is its presentation of the common threads connecting this

diverse compilation of salons whose central concerns ranged from music to painting, from politics to literature. The salons were not uniform in their political persuasions—of the two Italian salons featured, Anna Kuliscioff’s agitated for Socialism while Margherita Sarfatti’s promoted fascism and her lover, Mussolini—or in their types of conversation, which might take the form of formal “polite” conversation, literary witticisms, or a multilingual fusion. The curators succeed in capturing the variety and idiosyncrasy of the salons and persuading the viewer that there is value in considering them together. The exhibition is more successful, however, in revealing the continuity in aspects of the salonieres’ gender identity than in their Jewish identities.

The greatest challenge in creating an exhibition on salon culture and the power of conversation is its ephemeral nature, the lack of conversational record. In an attempt to compensate for this absence, the exhibition features a wide range of artifacts and media—guestbooks, artwork, manuscripts, music, furniture, and film—meant to evoke the atmosphere of each salon, and portraits of salon habitués to people it. Unfortunately, the portraits are hung too high to represent effectively the presence of these salon members in the room. The detailed audio guide of narrated excerpts from letters and diaries is a welcome addition and a creative attempt to imply conversation, but it cannot provide a real sense of dialogue and exchange—the heart of the salon experience. Finally, a warmer exhibition design—one that suggests the domestic spaces of the salon, would have strengthened the impact of the exhibition and reinforced the significance of interior space to salon culture.

The exhibition catalogue offers a wonderful visual and intellectual

enhancement to the exhibit, presenting additional, compelling images and further consideration of issues raised but not addressed in sufficient detail in the exhibition itself. The conversion to Christianity of three featured salonieres (Henrietta Herz, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel—who was baptized as a child) is noted but not analyzed in the exhibition; the catalogue pays deeper attention to this topic. The catalogue essays also explore in more detail the role of gender within the salons, and, in Leon Botstein and Lucia Re’s excellent essays in particular, the relationship between femininity, Jewishness, and other marginalized identities.

The exhibition ends fittingly with the little-known actress and screenwriter Salka Viertel, whose salon offered a cultural home for German refugees in Santa Monica, California. As the film in this section of the exhibition illustrates poignantly, the themes of exclusion and acceptance that animated the first Jewish salons carried through to this last one, though the salon itself shifted from a gateway into German culture to a nostalgic representative of it for the refugee community in America.

The essays in the catalogue emphasize that nostalgia was a central feature of salon culture from the beginning, as the salonieres imagined and longed for the ideal sociability

of another time. Because the power of the salon lay in the experience of the moment, the salon was always perceived as passing and on the decline. Today’s culture of anonymous, virtual communication only reinforces the tendency to wax nostalgic for the era of salons and the lively, face-to-face encounters they cultivated. That this exhibition effectively evokes the appeal and power of salon culture and Jewish salonieres without succumbing to this nostalgic inclination is to be applauded.

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AJS 37th Annual Conference

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YAD HANADIV FELLOWSHIPS IN JEWISH STUDIES FOR 2006-2007

Yad Hanadiv and the Beracha Foundation have established a Visiting Fellowship Program in Jewish Studies. Fellowships will be granted each year to scholars of Jewish Studies who hold non-tenured university positions (or who will receive tenure after September 2006). Fellows will spend the academic year in Israel pursuing their own research while also working with a senior scholar in their field. The fellowship for 2006-2007 will be in the sum of \$20,000., with an additional \$2000. for spouse, plus \$2000 per child. Fellows are required to confirm that upon completion of the fellowship they will resume teaching Jewish studies at a university abroad.

**The deadline for receipt of applications
is 31st December 2005.**

Application forms and additional information may be obtained by writing to:

Yad Hanadiv/Beracha Foundation Fellowships
16 Ibn Gvirol St., Jerusalem 92430 ISRAEL
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