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# The CANVAS Compendium

## DISPATCHES FROM THE NEW JEWISH RENAISSANCE

### From Assimilation to Reclamation: A *Forward* Writer on a Century of Jewish Arts and Culture

CANVAS supports Jewish arts and culture networks to inspire the creation of new work while fostering a sense of community. We also support reporting on Jewish arts and culture so that the work doesn't exist in a vacuum. With the help of CANVAS funding, our media grantees—the *Forward*, Hey Alma, and Hyperallergic—are exploring Jewish creativity with range and sophistication for their readers.

For this issue of the CANVAS Compendium, we asked Mira Fox, a talented arts reporter for the *Forward*, to dig into the archives of America's most venerable Jewish newspaper to identify the themes that have emerged and shifted over one hundred years of Jewish arts and culture coverage. —Ed.





A poster for *King Solomon* at the Thalia Theatre in New York City, circa 1897, the year the *Jewish Daily Forward* was founded. Image: [Library of Congress](#).

By Mira Fox

A century ago, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, based on the Lower East Side, was one of America's premier metropolitan dailies. It wasn't the only Yiddish newspaper in the U.S., but it was one of the biggest, with a nationwide circulation of over 250,000—at one point, its circulation outstripped that of the *New York Times*. Jewish Americans turned to the *Jewish Daily Forward*—then called *Der Forverts*—to make sense of the news and of their own position in a new country.

In its early days, the *Forward*, which was a socialist and pro-union paper, largely covered issues of politics and news, especially labor conditions, breaking headlines on events such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. But it also addressed more everyday issues that concerned the Yiddish-speaking immigrant community. Editors took turns answering reader questions in an advice column, the Bintel Brief, and considered the biggest cultural events of the community—in those days the Yiddish theatre.

A century ago, a clear concern presented itself: assimilation. For much of American Jewish history, it was the dominant pressure. Jewish immigrants came to the new world for a better life, but they couldn't quite shake off the old country—and many weren't sure if they wanted to.

## 1920s: Beyond Fiddler

*Forward* critics covered dozens of Yiddish theatre productions redolent of both nostalgia and ambivalence about the shtetl. Of course the best remembered are the stage adaptations of Sholem Aleichem's Tevye stories, the source material for *Fiddler on the Roof*. But the coverage of the early 1920s evinced a wider range of influences on the Yiddish theatre.

Some productions adapted other familiar stories, such as [Di Khelmer Khokhanim](#) (*The Wise Men of Chelm*) which riffs on the Chelm folktales, such beloved stories that the critic—none other than Abraham Cahan, *Forverts* editor-in-chief—wondered why no one had adapted them sooner. (Cahan thought it a “successful” production.)

Sometimes assimilation could be played for laughs, such as in [Oy, Amerike!](#)—the name says it all—a musical comedy about a young immigrant, Elke, who must choose between her husband Shmuel and Irving, the very American man pursuing her. Critic Dan Kaplan lauded its “happy, hilarious scenes,” while being less impressed by the only “slightly moving” songs.

*In a Shabes Nokhmitog* (*On a Shabbos Afternoon*), which was actually translated from English, is a musical about Max Silver, a Poughkeepsie dentist longing for his first love, Dora, from the old country. When they finally meet again, she has aged into a “plump, swampy Jewess, with the abusive language of a yente,” as the critic, Lazar Fogelman, [indelicatey put it](#). By the end, Max has realized he is happy with his own life built in America.

Nevertheless the inability to shake off the old ways, the old food, the old habits—despite the constant pressure of the new—was the central tension of Jewish life. And this tension continued through Jewish art for decades, much of it explored in the *Forward* when it was reborn as an English-language weekly in 1990.

Consider Marc Chagall's nostalgic shtetl paintings reimagined in [theatre](#) and [dance](#), or Philip Roth's novels of [neurotic, sex-obsessed characters](#) trying—and failing—to shed their inherited trauma, and even Borscht Belt bits about the inability for Jews to quite fit in. (Lenny Bruce was more blue than Brown's, but there was his [unforgettable routine](#) about what's Jewish and what's goyish. Pumpnickel: Jewish. White bread: goyish.)

## 2020s: Looking Backward to Move Forward

Today, however, as an arts reporter for the *Forward*, I see artists grappling with the opposite question. Instead of seeking to assimilate, they are looking to the traditions, rituals, and language of the past to define themselves and consider how to move forward. Instead of desperately trying to be more “modern” and less Jewish, they're asking: How can modern people be Jews and keep alive the

value of “from generation to generation,” *l’dor v’dor*?

I found this theme perfectly encapsulated by a piece at FENTSTER, a Toronto-based gallery that operates out of a single storefront window, where scrappy curator Evelyn Tauben puts up incredibly well-considered exhibitions.

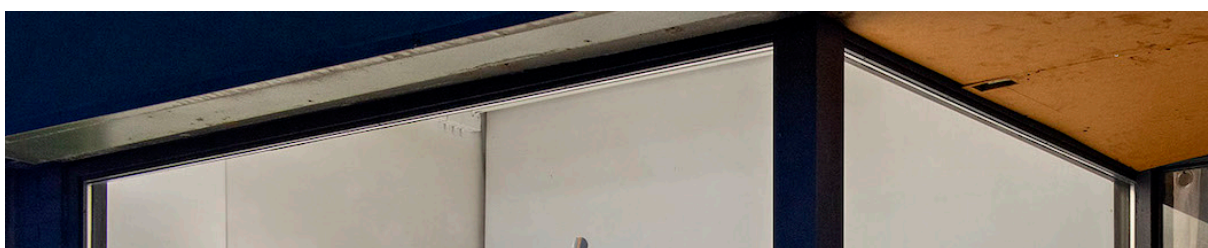
The piece, “[Tower of the Sacred and Ordinary](#),” is by architect Daniel Toretzky. Inspired by the Jewish ability to persevere, he has re-imagined a *besamim*, the container for the spices ritually smelled at the end of Shabbat, as a futuristic vessel, a towering, portable structure that will survive the floods wrought by global warming.

In a fascinating inversion of climate anxiety, Toretzky has filled the structure with small panels depicting warm, sustaining memories of Jewish life—a raucous Shabbat dinner, a snowy Sukkot—to remind us of better times during the future flood, evoking the nostalgic glow with which older generations of artists once recalled the shtetl.

It’s an ideal piece through which to understand the state of Jewish art today, because Toretzky draws from the richness of so many Jewish traditions, yet transforms them, making religious practice into something that will enable us to survive and provide joy.

Toretzky told me his piece was a gesture of pride in the Diaspora, a way to free himself from the idea that Israel determines Judaism. And the urge to embrace the Diaspora—which often comes with an embrace of languages such as Yiddish and Ladino—is something I have heard from other young Jews, especially those in the thriving Yiddish scene.

Whereas Yiddish was once a sign of the old country, today it is often [a symbol of progressivism](#) and a way for young people to reimagine Judaism freely. (It also hearkens back to the decidedly socialist views of *Der Forverts*). Yiddish arts and music ventures are growing as a result, whether through the reinvigorated [Yidstock](#), an annual festival in Amherst, Massachusetts, or the new klezmer label, [Borscht Beat](#). (And thanks to its Yiddish roots, the *Forward* is especially well positioned to cover the contemporary explosion of Yiddish art and music, as well as its political implications.)





Daniel Toretsky, *Tower of the Sacred and Ordinary*, 2022, on view in the FENTSTER window gallery in Toronto. Photo courtesy FENTSTER Gallery.

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## Jewish Influences on the Larger Culture

Another fascinating theme is how Jewish culture inspires non-Jewish artists. For instance, Kehinde Wiley, who painted the presidential portrait of Barack Obama, examines race in Judaism with "[Alios Itzhak \(The World Stage: Israel\)](#)," a portrait of a young Ethiopian Jewish man with a richly patterned background inspired by an Ashkenazi synagogue's *mizrah*, the decoration that traditionally covered a shul's eastern, Jerusalem-facing wall.

And when the *Forward* sent me to Utah to cover an [all-Mormon production of \*Fiddler on the Roof\*](#), I discovered that the Latter-Day Saints identify deeply with the play, and even see themselves living out its themes on the tensions between tradition and modernity. It's an interesting demonstration of how Jewish themes have become woven into the fabric of American society. In fact, this Jewish reporter became part of the conversation, talking with the cast for hours about Jewish and Mormon understandings of God and becoming the show's de facto cultural consultant.

Even major museum exhibitions, which draw on older and more established artists, are engaging with the Jewish art in their collections, turning a new lens on classic pieces and making historically informed exhibits a priority. (Such exhibitions have become increasingly common since New York governor Kathy Hochul passed a law last year requiring museums to label any art in their collection that was looted during the Holocaust.)

At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, a retrospective of Surrealist artist [Meret Oppenheim](#) examined the artist's depression in the context of her isolation in Switzerland, where she fled from Paris during World War II after her father was persecuted for being Jewish.

And in a powerful testament to the through-line of Jewish art's historical importance, the Jewish Museum in Manhattan put together an [exhibit of masterpieces stolen by the Nazis](#), giving an important window into Nazi aesthetics, or lack thereof. The more abstract pieces, whether by Jewish artists like Paul Klee or non-Jews like Picasso, were labeled "degenerate art" and slated for destruction, while more classical works were earmarked for the Führermuseum, Hitler's unrealized collection that planned to epitomize Nazi ideals.

This kind of exhibit feels especially impactful when Holocaust books such as Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, about the author's difficult and complex relationship with his father, an Auschwitz survivor, are being banned in schools across the country. Art and literature don't just document and reflect on history, but, as the Jewish Museum's exhibit made clear, are active tools used to either form or fight hateful ideologies.

### **One Thing Hasn't Changed...**

Then and now, Jewish artists have reckoned with antisemitism. In the 1920s, the Jewish community had fresh memories of the violent, early twentieth-century European pogroms. Today, many Jewish artists are examining present-day antisemitism as well as the lingering pain of the Shoah.

One such artist is Lisa Oppenheim, whose solo exhibition revealed a [fascinating technique](#). Oppenheim takes the negatives from the photographs Nazis took to meticulously document the possessions and artwork they stole and solarizes them—that is, overexposes the negatives to invert the tones. **The resulting images are surreal re-imaginings of the looted objects and works, keeping these lost pieces of history alive, yet transforming them into something new—just as Yiddish culture has become new again at KlezKanada, or at Yidstock, or at FENTSTER.**

As I cover Jewish arts and culture, I've been drawn to the experiments in how the Jewish past has been reclaimed, reinvigorated, and reinvented through the art, politics, and lives of a new generation. Even as today's Jewish artists embrace new beliefs and confront present-day issues—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the rise in antisemitism, gender and sexuality in Judaism—their work remains rooted in tradition, keeping it alive even as they turn it inside-out. It's a great time for Jewish arts and culture, and a great time to write about it for the *Forward*.

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Lisa Oppenheim, *Stilleben I, (1942/2021)*, 2021. Set of 9 silver gelatin photographs exposed to firelight. Image courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles.

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