

2011 Abstracts

Brian Amkraut, Siegal College

“Fashioning Jews on the Screen: The Impact of Dress on Crafting the Jewish Image in Film and Television”

The importance of the motion picture and television industries for characterizing and even shaping the image of contemporary Jewry cannot be overstated. In the realms of media heavily populated by American Jewry, whether producers, writers, actors, or in some other role, the nuances of Jewish characterization take on even greater import. Within the overall genre of Jewish film studies, the power of the visual image not only to identify, but moreover to shape the viewers' attitudes towards specific Jewish characters lies at the heart of the power of the media. Yet the many volumes of scholarship attuned to this area rarely examine the specific realm of fashion. How do specific modes and styles of dress impact the representation of Jewishness on the screen? At times the import is obvious when Jewish characters are ascribed stereotypical old-world garb. But how do we assess the nature of “Jewish dress” on film and television when the distinctions are more subtle? This presentation offers specific still and video images demonstrating how Hollywood dresses its Jews.

Flora Cassen, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

“The Jewish Badge in Renaissance Italy:

The Iconic O, the Yellow Hat, and the Paradoxes of Distinctive Sign Legislation”

In 1215 Pope Innocent III first ordered the Jews to wear distinguishing clothing. Legislation enforcing this was adopted in England, Hungary, and France by the end of the thirteenth century, and in Italy, Spain, and Germany during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The marks imposed were diverse and changed over time but in Italy the sign did not vary. Through the fifteenth century the Jews were forced to wear a yellow circular badge on their chest. This mark was invariably represented by the icon “O” in the documents. While the O was a well-known sign Given the endemic conflicts between the Italian city-states, both the widespread adoption of those signs as well as the synchronized switch to the hat were unexpected and suggest that their symbolic power could override political disagreement. I will argue that this was not only because the Jews were depreciated and shamed by the O-badge and hat, but also because these signs’ descriptions and the rhetoric in the legal texts represented the ruling authorities’ wish for an ordered society.

Using archival and edited sources as well as imagery displaying the Jewish badges and hats, this paper will examine the symbolic meanings of these two marks and their impact on perceptions of the Jews. Moreover through a visual analysis of written documents and artistic imagery it will offer a framework for understanding the motivations of the authorities and the paradoxes of distinctive sign legislation.

Phyllis Dillon, New York City, Presenter, and

Andrew Godley, Henley Business School, University of Reading, England

“The Evolution of the Jewish Apparel Industry in America: 1840-1940”

Recent scholarship by Phyllis Dillon and Andrew Godley shows that the long history of Jewish involvement and entrepreneurship in the American apparel industry can be illuminated by a long overview of the specific economic conditions of distinct historic periods (“The Evolution of the Jewish Garment Industry 1840-1940” in *Chosen Capital* edited by Rebecca Kobrin, Rutgers University Press in press). In the mid-nineteenth century German immigrant Jews jumped into the infant industry of ready-made men’s suit manufacturing and dominated it by 1870. The factors behind their commercial success were “occupational affinity” for the dry goods business and the increased demand created by post civil war prosperity and business expansion. (The fact that large-scale men’s suit production was already established as profitable by revolutionary Gentile manufacturers in the 1840s-50s will be noted) The German Jewish business strategy of peddling, step-by step migration, community credit, and family networking (with specific examples of well known firms such as Hart, Schaffner and Marx and Levi Strauss) will be described. The notion of “occupational affinity” will be further strengthened with Dillon’s more recent research about early nineteenth century Jewish history in clothing production and retail in Germany.

A completely different set of economic opportunities and realities underlay Eastern European Jewish domination of the garment industry after 1900. Simplified silhouettes and expanded work opportunities for women created a huge market for ready-mades that was followed by the maturation of department store techniques in retailing and advertising where fashion content became crucial for survival. Despite abysmal conditions in the industry, Eastern European Jews followed ethnic recruitment into firms started by German Jews and replaced them through competition. Their skill at mastering the highly competitive women’s fashion business by creating small, nimble businesses will be described. The large expansion of the women’s market in Great Britain and Canada in the same period allowed similar success for Eastern European immigrants in those countries. The talk will feature attractive visuals.

Steven Fine, Yeshiva University

“Costume and Identity in the Dura Europos Synagogue Paintings”

The synagogue of Dura Europos, discovered in 1932, is the single richest example of Jewish visual culture from late antiquity. Biblical scenes arranged in three registers were painted on the walls of this synagogue in 244/5 CE. The Dura synagogue paintings preserve important evidence for the significance of costume in the formation of Jewish identity in late antiquity, reflecting approaches known both within the Babylonian/Persian and the Palestinian contexts. The synagogue will serve as a focal point through which to discuss this phenomenon. I will begin by comparing the use of costume in the synagogue to paintings, sculpture, and textile discoveries at this site. I will then move to the broader context of the Syrian desert region and finally to rabbinic sources from both Babylonia and Palestine. I will focus upon the use of Persian vs. Roman garments, the portrayal of the priestly garments, and finally nudity as a kind of costume at Dura.

Rachel Gordan, Harvard University

“Female *Tallitot*: Creating American Jewish Women’s Religious Experience through Fashion”

One of the reasons ultra-Orthodox Jews prohibit women from wearing *tallitot* is the Jewish ban on dressing like the opposite gender. Men and women are biblically forbidden to wear clothing associated with the other gender, these Orthodox Jews say. Since a *tallit* is traditionally a male garment, for a woman to wear one would constitute a violation of this statute.

Ironically, women who wear *tallitot* often obviate this transgression by donning *tallitot* that are distinctively feminine in appearance. Whether consciously or not, such women follow the advice of the eminent Orthodox rabbi, Moshe Feinstein, who taught that a woman may wear a *tallit* provided it is distinctively feminine. Such *tallitot* suggest that their wearers have appropriated a male custom through the medium of fashion.

This ethnographic study of a Cambridge-based group of *tallit*-wearing women examines their self-understanding about their practice. Do these women feel they are appropriating a traditionally male custom through the medium of fashion? If not, what is the significance of their “distinctively female” *tallitot*? Why not wear the same *tallitot* as men? And, what might this study say about the role of fashion – considered a form of individual self-expression – in American Jewish women’s religious experience?

Adam Mendelsohn, College of Charleston

“Shmattas in the North, Shmattas in the South: The Civil War and the Birth of the American Jewish Clothing Industry”

During the Civil War, the claim that Jews preferred to profit from conflict rather than fight in it surfaced in both North and South. In the first months of the war, as the Union army struggled on the battlefield, the press and public in the North cast around for culprits. Loath to admit that the badly led and inexperienced armies were themselves responsible for their military failures, the popular press displaced much of the blame on to military contractors who supplied the vast new volunteer armies with everything from tents and uniforms to rifles and artillery. The conspicuous presence of Jews among the ranks of the contractors did not escape those prone to anti-Semitism. In the decades after the war ended, several Jewish historians rushed to prove that Jews had fought for the Union and Confederacy in numbers proportionate to their presence in North and South.

Using this conventional measure of Jewish wartime service the Civil War had very little long-term impact on American Jews. Even on the rare occasion when Jewish issues were prominent during the war, they left almost no lasting legacy. Not so the legacy of the Jewish suppliers of the Confederacy and Union. By this measure, the consequences of the war on American Jews were monumental. This lecture will suggest that it is impossible to properly understand the prominence of Jews in the garment industry -- and perhaps the origins of American Jewish economic success -- without appreciating this forgotten legacy of the Civil War.

Ted Merwin, Dickinson College

“Clothes and the Weaving of American Jewish Comedy”

At the turn of the twentieth century in New York, Jews were overwhelmingly employed by two industries, the garment trade and show business. Weaving together these two realms, clothing became both a durable and versatile theme of American Jewish comedy. As Jewish entertainers tailored their routines to mixed audiences of Jews and non-Jews, they mined uproarious humor from the awkward nature of the acculturation process, as Jews strove, more or less nakedly, to fit into American society.

From Fanny Brice’s classic Jazz Age lament, “Second Hand Rose,” and Eddie Cantor’s routine about a pair of unscrupulous salesmen in a men’s clothing store on the Lower East Side, to Yiddish radio commercials for Joe and Paul’s bar mitzvah suits, to more recent *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* routines revolving around “puffy” pirate shirts and ruby velvet smoking jackets, Jewish humor about clothing has expressed deep-seated insecurities about social display, justifying British psychoanalyst J.C. Flugel’s trenchant observation that “clothes resemble a perpetual blush upon the surface of humanity.” Rather than functioning merely as entertainment, Jewish pop culture thus articulated both Jewish and universal themes about dressing for success in a competitive capitalistic society.

Featuring audio and video clips of the comedy routines discussed, this presentation will seek to illuminate how Jewish entertainers put their audiences in stitches as they used the theme of clothing to knit together what would ultimately become two of the most visible and potent American institutions--the fashion industry and the modern media.

Christine Palmer, Hebrew Union College

“The ‘Disinherited’ Priesthood: A Look into Biblical Israel’s Unshod Priest”

This paper explores the absence of footwear in biblical Israel’s priestly dress through the lens of iconography. Among the lengthy and detailed narratives of ritual dress, footwear is conspicuously absent and explicitly forbidden on holy ground (Exod 3:5; Josh 5:15).

Property rights in the ancient world were symbolically enacted by treading a parcel of land underfoot (Deut 2:5, 11:24; Josh 1:3). The sandal in particular seems to play a role in land and inheritance claims (Ruth 4:7). Sale-adoption deeds from Nuzi record a legal symbolic act associated with the transfer of property whereby the owner raises his foot from the land (relinquishing rights) and then places the adoptee’s foot on the property (effecting a sales transfer). The biblical text states that “to the tribe of Levi, Moses had given no inheritance” (Josh 13:33a). Is the priesthood’s lack of footwear indicative of a disinheritance?

In the iconography of the ancient Near East, the foot—specifically, the sandaled foot— is a symbol of authority. On the other hand, the destitute, mourners, and prisoners of war are depicted as going barefoot. This paper will explore the priestly dress of ancient Israel through comparative iconography to answer the question whether the unshod priesthood is to be understood as humbled and disinherited on holy ground or if the image of bare feet is to be associated with partaking of the realm of the divine, since “the Lord, the God of Israel is their inheritance” (Josh 13:33b).

Nils Roemer, University of Texas at Dallas

“Jewish Photographers and the Body in the Weimar Republic”

Robert Newton, who had trained in Berlin with the Jewish female photographer Yva, is to this day a widely celebrated fashion photographer. His aesthetic sensibilities were indicative of the unprecedented rise in photographic publications that introduced a new visual culture often merging art and commercialism. Aesthetic concepts and techniques of the avant-garde now shaped the creation of fashion photography that heralded a new way of seeing. This new visual culture, which was often believed to be more authentic than language, was nowhere more conspicuous than in the realm of the emerging fashion photo industry during the Weimar Republic. Men like Erwin Blumenfeld and Martin Munkácsi, but particularly women like Ellen Auerbach, Isle Bing, Florence Henri, and Germaine Krull, excelled professionally in the realm of photography. The pioneering developments in fashion photography of this period are inextricably linked to these Jewish female photographers. Their work not only advertised fashion; race, class, and gender overlapped and often interacted in complicated ways in their work. My paper aims to analyze the contribution of Jewish female fashion photographers during the 1920s and the early 1930s and to highlight their lasting legacy in Robert Newton.

Asher Salah, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. 2011-2012 Fellow of the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

“How a Rabbi Should Be Dressed: The Question of Cassock and Clerical Clothing among Italian Rabbis from the Renaissance to Contemporary Times”

From the end of seventeenth century it became fashionable, among European Jews in general and in Italy in particular, to have important figures of culture or commerce portrayed by contemporary artists. Images of rabbis and physicians appear at first in simple sketches on university diplomas, on title pages of books, on etchings and engravings. Later on in the eighteenth century renowned painters begin to draw portraits of rabbis reproducing in great detail their official apparel.

As a part of a larger research project on rabbis and rabbinical literature in Italy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I have been able to discover in the past decade some 40 portraits, mostly unknown, of rabbis active in different communities of the peninsula during the age of the ghettos and after Emancipation. This collection, together with other sources such as responsa, travelogues, and literary descriptions of the time, sheds light upon an important, though ignored, chapter of material culture of the Jews since the fundamental but outdated contribution by A. Rubens, *A History of Jewish Costume*, New York, 1967.

Through the progress from lay clothes to the dress of modern Jewish clergy in Italy it is possible to address questions about the widening gap between rabbis and their communities, the transformation of rabbis from spiritual guides to communal clerks, and the impact of Reform and Emancipation in Jewish customs and also to understand the differences existing in the peninsula among Jews of Sephardic, Ashkenazic, or Italian descent and between Jewish and Christian material culture and everyday life.

Eric Silverman, Wheelock College

“Aboriginal *Yarmulkes*, Ambivalent Attire, and Ironies of Contemporary Jewish Identity”

Throughout history, as I discuss in my forthcoming book *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress*, Jews have donned and doffed garments to express a wide-ranging, irresolvable tension between Jewishness and citizenship. For centuries, Church and State dressed European Jews in derisive garb to signal theological and social banishment. The classic rabbis, too, endeavored to dress Jews differently from the rest of society. On the eve of modernity, Europe switched suit: Jews were now encouraged to forsake their characteristic outfits and to dress like ordinary citizens, not Jews.

Today, I will argue, Jews continue to mobilize garments to express tensions between ethnic particularism and generic citizenship. But have the terms or styles of this debate dramatically changed? The garments and phrases are new—how about the messages? I begin with Australian *yarmulkes* depicting Aboriginal designs and then turn to American *yarmulkes* emblazoned with multicultural and pop-culture motifs. I next shift to recent American t-shirts that contest the reigning ideologies of mainstream Jewish gender and identity. My goal is to show that these witty, sometimes sardonic, occasionally jarring garments represent a rethinking of Jewish identity that is refreshingly new yet thoroughly traditional—in a word, ironic.

Lisa Silverman, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

“Picturing Vienna’s New Woman: Madame d’Ora meets Ella Zwieback-Zirner”

Madame d’Ora’s (Dora Kallmus, 1881-1963) vibrant portraits of twentieth century luminaries remain important testaments to European cultural life at the turn of the century and beyond. As the first woman accepted into the Austrian Association of Photographers in 1905, her achievements in portrait and fashion photography paved the way for the careers of other women photographers in Central Europe, many of whom were Jews. One of her Viennese subjects and collaborators is much less well known today, but was surely no less influential in her time – Ella Zwieback-Zirner (1878-1970), who took over the management of her father’s grandiose eight-story luxury department store, Zwieback & Brothers, in 1906. As the store thrived under her leadership, Zwieback-Zirner became a Viennese icon of both fashion and conspicuous consumption, aided by Madame d’Ora’s photographs. Vienna’s *Bildarchiv* houses dozens of fashion and other photographs from the 1920s arising from their collaboration, but the relationship between these two Jewish women has yet to be explored. Through an examination of d’Ora’s portraits of Zwieback-Zirner and her other fashion photographs for the Zwieback department store, this presentation explores how Jewish women emerged in Vienna’s public sphere at the turn of the century as purveyors of a “fashionable” femininity that reshaped standards of taste at a time when other career paths for women remained restricted or closed.

Kerry Wallach, Gettysburg College

**“WEIMAR JEWISH CHIC FROM WIGS TO FURS:
JEWISH WOMEN AND FASHION IN 1920S GERMANY”**

“JUDAISM HAS LITERALLY COME INTO FASHION: EVERYONE’S WEARING it again!” Proclaimed in a 1927 book of satirical anecdotes, this statement by German-Jewish author, Sammy Gronemann, hints at the complex relationship between self-fashioning and Jewishness in Weimar Germany (1919-1933). Drawing on a range of contemporary Jewish periodicals, fashion magazines, advertisements, and objects, my paper analyzes Jewish styles and representations of women’s fashion. These varied sources suggest that German Jews actively created their own versions of some popular styles, while negotiating the tensions between tradition and modernity, modesty and ostentation, poverty and luxury.

By investigating Jewish participation in constructing and marketing women’s fashions, this paper also considers broader intersections between Jewish (sub)cultures and emerging trends and consumption practices in Germany. Fashion journalists such as Julie Elias contributed articles to general as well as Jewish periodicals; Jewish graphic artists sketched designs for advertisements; Regina Friedländer’s hat salon was celebrated for its interior design and high fashion creations. Moreover, Jewish-owned department stores and boutiques (including Nathan Israel, N. Gottschalk, and Hermann Gerson) numbered prominently among the producers and distributors of fashionable clothing to Jewish women consumers. Through close readings of textual representations and their cultural contexts, as well as the various uses of objects including women’s *sheitels* and fur coats, I aim to elucidate the ways self-fashioning was intertwined with the desire to wear and display Jewishness.