Abstract

The primary aim of this dissertation is the mapping of Jewish figural iconography in the Czech lands, primarily of the Post-Emancipation – end of 18th to 20th century – period. The research focuses mainly on the portrayal of contemporary Jewish figures found in Czech visual culture, following religious as well as gradually secularized Jews through iconographic themes. In dealing with the less observant or even wholly secularized Jewish figures, the aim is to show the iconographic elements by which these differ from the majority of society.

In the first part the most important aspects of the evolution of Jewish iconography are analyzed. Among these the most important ones are a liberal interpretation of the Old Testament prohibition of figural representation, Jewish emancipation involving gradual assimilation as well as the Jewish yearning for an authentic visual representation, which most likely was the main factor behind the evolution of Jewish iconography.

In addition to medieval and modern Jewish figural representations special attention is given to portrayal of Prague Jews and themes found in Hebrew manuscripts as well as printed materials, where surprisingly enough a much lower number of demeaning signs are found. Furthermore a gallery of portraits showing Czech Jews is shown, including rabbis, sages, prominent representatives of Jewish communities as well as family portraits.

Then follows a treatise of the Jewish life cycle linked to birth celebrations, such as circumcision and pidyon ha-ben, coming off age – the bar mitzva ritual, but also linked to wedding and burial. A certain space is then given to the specific iconography of Jewish holidays and celebrations, like Shabbat, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Hanukka and Purim.

Included are also representations of Prague Jewish Town and its inhabitants, with emphasis on figural motives linked to the Old-New Synagogue and the Old Jewish Cemetery. What follows is a part dedicated to the specific approaches to the portrayal of Jews. Historic and romantic representations of Jewish figures are complemented by those of Oriental and Eastern-European Jewry. Visual stereotyping linked to Jewish figures is another important theme.

Next comes a presentation of the problem of antisemitism, including the political, anti-German and anti-capitalist antisemitic representations. Zionism came as a reaction to antisemitism, thus an analysis of zionist iconography is included as well. A certain space is given to a selection of figurative representations created in the Terezin ghetto during World
War II. In conclusion an iconographic detour is added, presenting the figure of the Eternal Jew Ahasuerus of Czech visual culture.