**Loren Lerner**

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## SAM BORENSTEIN, ARTIST AND ART DEALER: THE POLEMICS OF POST-HOLOCAUST JEWISH CULTURAL IDENTITY

By the time Montreal painter Sam Borenstein died in 1969 at the age of 61, he had earned a reputation for creating accessible, intuitive, and yet transcendental paintings imbued with an aesthetic sensibility uniquely his own. Borenstein was a modernist, though his concept of modernism was unlike that of other Canadian painters of his era. From the 1930s to the 1960s, while most of his colleagues were responding to modernism from an objective and formal point of view, Borenstein was exploring the expressive properties of nature and the human spirit through portraits, flower paintings, and landscapes of inner-city streets and Laurentian villages. The result was a large output of emotionally charged works that communicated passions ranging from exuberance to melancholy and celebrated the artist's experience of seeing.

Though the colour and form of Borenstein's paintings frequently evoked the sensations associated with abstract art, Borenstein looked upon abstraction as an art form that relied too heavily on the imagination. Determined from his early years onwards to capture the reality of the landscape, he worked on site, setting up his easel and painting for five to six hours at a stretch. His plein-air paintings, however, as well as his portraits and still lifes, were always an imaginative distillation of the scene that lay before him. In fact, Borenstein's modernist style was highly personal, an outgrowth, in part, of his struggle to separate from the Judaism of his father, Simcha, a rabbinical scholar. "Art is my

religion," Borenstein said. "Just as one prays, so does one paint, for spiritual satisfaction." (Kuhns and Rosshandler, 1978, p. 58)

Borenstein's attitude towards his Jewishness is revealed in the many portraits he painted of his father. The volume alone of these portraits, which he continued to produce even after Simcha's death, suggests that his interest verged on obsession. As one of the *mitnagdim,* Simcha was an adherent of a mainstream, anti-mystical strain of Orthodox Judaism that had emerged in Poland and Lithuania in the late eighteenth century (Rabinowicz, 1996, p. 318). According to this tradition, Jewish practice requires strict adherence to the Torah and the pursuit of rigorous intellectual enquiry to uncover the Torah's true meaning. After settling in Canada where rabbinical scholars were neither in demand nor highly respected, Simcha suffered from constant sadness, which was compounded by the difficulties he faced with his son, who was determined to abandon Judaism and embark on an artistic career.

Borenstein's conflicted feelings about his own and his father's Jewishness are most apparent in a large drawing entitled *Portrait of My Father* (fig. 1). Here, Borenstein overstates Simcha's features in a way that almost caricatures his religious devotion. We see an older man sitting full face to the artist and centred on the canvas. With a mean and uncompromising expression, Simcha appears to be an imposing authority. Tersely built up with rubbed and pointed charcoal, the nose is long and broad, the lips are firmly closed, and the pointy shape of the ears is exaggerated by the angular repetitions in the collar and vest. In the lower part of the canvas, nestled in the corner of Simcha's suit jacket, is a second, softer drawing. Here, Simcha looks downward as if reading a book. In this composite of two fathers, it seems that the larger father is cradling the more tender version of himself. The gentler image has the character of a second self that for Borenstein may have compensated for the unsatisfactory reality of a difficult parent.

Even as Borenstein was putting Judaism behind him and struggling with his relationship with his father, he was search-

ing for the right vehicle to express his aesthetic sensibilities. He was fortunate to find emotional and intellectual sustenance from a circle of Jewish artists and friends who were part of Montreal's vibrant Yiddish-speaking community. One of Borenstein's frequent destinations was the home of Yiddish poet Ida Massey (Maza). In her living room on Esplanade Avenue, Borenstein met poets, musicians and the artists, Alexander Bercovitch and Louis Muhlstock. The poet, Miriam Waddington, noted that, "To these artists, most of them middle-aged and impecunious, and all of them immigrants, Mrs. Maza was the eternal mother—the foodgiver and nourisher, the listener and solacer, the mediator between them and the world. Then she would sit with hands folded into her sleeves, her face brooding and meditative, listening intently with all her body. As she listened she rocked back and forth, and, as it then seemed to me, she did so in time to the rhythm of the poem being read" (Waddington, 1996, p. 120). In his *Portrait of the Poet Ida Massey* (fig. 2), Borenstein captured the cadence of Massey's movements by exaggerating the oval shape of her head, the flow of her dress, and her large interlocking hands.

Following in the footsteps of other Montreal Jewish artists, Borenstein often painted the streets of the working-class neighbourhood where he lived, now known as the Plateau Mont-Royal. But his interests were not limited to Montreal painters. He also admired the expressive gestures and painterly qualities of European artists such as Maurice de Vlaminck, Vincent van Gogh and especially Chaim Soutine. He felt particularly connected to Soutine, who, like Borenstein, was a *shtetl* Jew born in a Lithuanian village and an outcast scorned by his family for wanting to be a painter. Borenstein discovered Soutine's paintings in October 1938, when he visited the exhibition, *Paintings by French Masters: Delacroix to Dufy*, mounted by the Montreal art dealer, W. Scott & Sons. The exhibition included Soutine's *The Groom* (c. 1925), now hanging in the Centre Pompidou in Paris, which so impressed Borenstein that he hoped to meet the artist in Paris during a trip he was planning for the following March.

Borenstein's native Lithuanian village was Kalvarija, where he was born in 1908, the youngest of fifteen children. His youth was marked by poverty, the terror of pogrom after pogrom, and the First World War. When he was four years old, his family moved to Suwalki, Poland, where his father had found a job with the Singer Sewing Machine Company. A short time later his brother was killed in a pogrom, and five years after that, his mother, Chava, died of influenza. In 1921, Borenstein emigrated with his father and a sister to join four brothers who were already in Montreal. After spending three months in grade three, his only formal schooling, Borenstein was apprenticed to a furrier in Ottawa for two years. He returned to Montreal and at sixteen began working as a cutter in a garment factory, where he was employed on and off until 1937.

By the time Borenstein quit factory work for good, he had been painting for seven years. Even in this early period he showed a riveting ability to transcend the banal by transmuting topographical material with colour and converting the raw material of external circumstances into a rich surface of touch and texture. At the core of his practice were improvisations that changed the image and altered the definitions of reality in a way that emphasized the forms of luminosity as much as the forms of things. He had his first one-man show and made a name for himself as someone who "has painted very few uninteresting pictures." (Main, *Canadian Forum*, 1935, p. 347)

In the autumn of 1938, Borenstein married Judith Aron, a recent immigrant from Germany. Judith encouraged Borenstein to pursue his art and was a constant source of strength and emotional support. After spending several months in Europe the following year, they returned to Montreal where Borenstein continued his explorations in painting. Within months, he had a show at the Sidney Carter Art Gallery on Victoria Street and was invited to join the Contemporary Arts Society and participate in their exhibits. In 1939, the art critic of *Saturday Night* expressed the sense of shock viewers might

experience upon seeing paintings such as *Street at Night* (fig. 3). "Mr. Borenstein," he said, "looks at downtown Montreal with an eye that catches and intensifies every stray bit of colour, and if there is no colour he will create it for himself … in a new and more joyous unity than that which it presents to your eyes and mine."

The 1940s marked a period of new development for Borenstein. In 1941, he showed twenty of his paintings at the Art Association of Montreal exhibition, most of which contained the familiar urban subjects, but some—still life paintings and views such as *Percé Rock, Quebec Farmhouse* and *Gaspé Coast*—signalled an expanded repertoire. The impetus to paint country landscapes was precipitated by the artist's stay in Brittany in 1939. Borenstein was further encouraged by William Watson of the Watson Art Gallery, who offered to represent Borenstein and urged him to focus more on the country scenery so typical of Canadian painting during this era. He also began to concentrate more intently on portraiture, focusing on revealing the inner nature of his subject by plumbing the subject's psychological dimensions and emotional spirit and by choosing the right formal elements for each picture. (Lerner, 2005)

Borenstein also had the support of fellow artist Ernst Neumann, who helped him develop new methods of painting with oil. In 1941, Neumann wrote in the *Canadian Jewish Year Book* (1941, vol. 2, p. 172) that Borenstein's paintings "depend not on form but on contrast of tone and colour—colour which is artistically expressive rather than literally exact... he puts on the canvas a harmony of contrast of colour which will express that emotion, rather than make a picture which is close to the actual appearance of the subject." During this period, Borenstein's paintings, such as *Sainte-Marguerite Station* (fig. 5) were more conceptual, his subject matter less rudimentary, his compositions more architectural, and his forms increasingly incisive. Not only did he paint on larger canvases, he painted in the studio using his memory as a guide.

By 1947, with a family on the way, Borenstein had to

make time for pursuits that would bring in extra money. He began to buy paintings by Canadian artists and sell them to dealers for a modest profit. He also bought and sold antiques, having learned about them from books and by visiting antique stores and auction houses, just as he had learned about painting as a young man by reading and visiting museums. Some of the antiques he acquired were Jewish ritual objects recently salvaged from Europe's Jewish communities which had been wiped out during the Second World War (Nicholas, 1995). In fact, Borenstein played a pivotal role in developing the first public collection of Jewish ceremonial objects in Canada.

The original collection consisted of five objects that belonged to Josef Aron, Judith's uncle, who had arrived in Montreal from Germany in 1904.[1] Crafted mainly by Christian silversmiths, they were commissioned between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries by individuals or Jewish community representatives for use in religious ceremonies in synagogues and homes.[2] Aron and his wife, Anna, donated the objects to Temple Emanu-El (now Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom), which set aside a space that was inaugurated as the Aron Museum on 4 September 1953. A photograph bearing the caption, "This is the first time that a Museum of Religious Art Objects has ever been established in Canada," shows a display cabinet containing the precious items. Standing next to the cabinet are Josef and Anna Aron and Rabbi Dr. Harry Joshua Stern, the synagogue's long-time rabbi.

On the top shelf of the cabinet are a *kiddush* cup of Austro-Hungarian origin, dated 1858, and two eighteenth-century, Polish *pidyon haben* trays used for carrying a first-born baby boy during the redemption ceremony. Aron had purchased the tray from Borenstein. On the bottom shelf is a Chanukah *menorah* (candelabrum) crafted in the late nineteenth century by the silversmith, Hans Boller of Frankfurt-am-Main, for the House of Rothschild. Next to the *menorah* is a pewter Passover Seder tray from 1770 in the centre of which is etched an urn holding flowers. On its rim, the maker identifies himself in Hebrew: "I am the writer Leib bar Zalman from Mansfort in the

year 5530 [1770], twenty-fifth day in the month of Nissan, according to the abbreviated way of counting the year."

Over the next seven years the museum acquired more than forty pieces of Judaica. They came from three main sources: the Judaica collection that Josef's brother and Judith's father, Paul, had acquired in Germany before the Second World War;[3] pieces Josef and other Temple members purchased from Borenstein, who made many visits to Jacoby's auction house on their behalf; and the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction commission, whose mandate following the war was to find homes for Jewish ceremonial objects that had been stolen by the Nazis and dispersed throughout Europe. Before Josef died in 1956, he secured the future of the museum by stipulating in his will, "a Memorial Fund in the name of Josef and Anna Aron, the income of which is to be used for the purchase of Jewish Ceremonial Art objects and display-cases, for the Museum in the said Temple founded by myself and my said beloved wife." The Memorial Fund fell under the care of a committee headed by Anna, who continued to look to Borenstein for recommendations.[4]

Borenstein's search for Jewish ritual objects for the Aron Museum took place in the context of a worldwide Jewish community deeply affected by the Holocaust and by the destruction of Europe's once-rich Jewish culture. In *The Rape of Europa*, Lynn Nicholas chronicles the plundering of art across Europe and the difficult restitution process. She explains that one of the problems at the conclusion of the Second World War was deciding what to do with "heirless" Jewish property. The usual solution of reverting unclaimed cultural property to the state for distribution to museums and libraries was unthinkable when the nation in question had attempted to exile or kill the entire Jewish population of Europe. In late 1946, the American military asked Captain Seymour Pomrenze, a former employee of the National Archives in Washington, to go through the million or so Jewish books and objects that were sitting in Nazi depositories. He selected over a thousand Torah scrolls, prayer shawls, paintings, furnishings and ritual objects made of

precious metals and stones for distribution to synagogues and museums worldwide by the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction. Many of the less valuable items were ultimately sold. (Nicholas 1995, p. 434)

Countless stories exist of the loss and recovery of Jewish artifacts. Soon after the war, Mordechai Narkiss, director of the Bezalel Museum in Israel, travelled through Europe and retrieved thousands of Jewish art objects (Narkiss, 1985, pp. 78-79). In a work of fiction based on fact, *The Iron Tracks*, the novelist and Holocaust survivor, Aharon Appelfeld, evokes the endless search for remnants of the Jewish culture that had flourished in central European towns and villages for hundreds of years before the war. Closer to home, Montrealer Yehuda Elberg, a survivor and private collector of Jewish ritual objects, discovered in a New York auction house the *kiddush* cup given to him by his grandfather as a wedding present in 1939.[5]

At Jacoby's auction house, Borenstein regularly found Jewish ceremonial objects that had been acquired by dealers in Europe. Jacoby's was also a clearinghouse for precious possessions sold by impoverished refugees and Holocaust survivors who had made their way to Montreal. In effect, as an immigrant from pre-war Europe, Borenstein was finding items that belonged to his own past. His most noteworthy discovery, one that linked him to his childhood in Suwalki, was the two *pidyon haben* trays made in Poland that were part of Aron's original donation to the museum.

Under the guidance of Rabbi Stern, the central idea behind the Aron Museum was to show that humanistic ideals were compatible with Jewish beliefs. Although nearly all the objects in the collection had been salvaged from the synagogues and homes of destroyed Jewish communities, this was not how the museum was presented to Temple congregants and visitors. In a description of some of the "choice ornaments" in the museum, there was only one brief mention of the Holocaust: "varied types of Hanukkah Lamps; some salvaged from the holocaust of the burning synagogues in Germany" (Aron,

1960). It had been decided that rather than convey the tragedy of history, the museum would act as living proof of the positive universal qualities of humankind. The last sentence of the description states: "They reflect impressively the Jewish idea of life, namely its sanctity."

Borenstein's appreciation of the ritual objects was similar to the views held by Rabbi Stern and the Temple members. Though belonging to a synagogue and observing Jewish ceremonies and customs were incompatible with Borenstein's personal and social beliefs, he accepted that his background could only be understood in terms of a Jewish socio-historic reality. This acceptance was motivated by his belief in universal parallels, which was also a primary motivating factor in the art he produced from the late forties. In his Laurentian landscapes, he merged the particulars of the shtetl and the traditional Laurentian village with the cosmology of a perfect world. The expressive qualities of these paintings evoked a composite paradigm, wherein the memory of an ideal past was preserved in the humanistic values of the present. This is also true of the way he saw the Jewish objects at the Aron Museum. While his origins in eastern Europe led him to relate personally to the objects, Borenstein minimized the impact of the Holocaust in favour of an emphasis on universal and enduring truths.

Around the time Borenstein began trading in antiques and Judaica, he became friends with the founder of Canadian folklore studies, Marius Barbeau, who worked as an ethnologist at the National Museum of Man in Ottawa from 1911 to 1969. During his long career, Barbeau collected a vast archive of Native and French Canadian folk songs, legends and artifacts. He saw Quebec village life as the expression of a humanly satisfying and enduring national character and believed that traditional culture offered the basic materials for the originality of modern art. Even before meeting Barbeau, Borenstein had begun distancing himself from the subject matter of the city and concentrating on painting village scenes. The traditional architecture found in these villages had become one of the major wellsprings of

Borenstein's creative spirit. Like Barbeau, he was responsive to the cultural nuances revealed in the Quebec countryside.

Years later in 1965, summarizing a lifelong commitment to traditional French Canadian culture, Barbeau said, "folksongs and traditions (as collected today) are materials for the future arts of Canada; either musical, literary or plastic. They are the basic materials. The modern arts cannot develop in a way that reveals originality unless these are consulted and absorbed by the creators, the composers. If they don't do that, they miss the boat" (Nowry, 1995, p. 394). During his career, Barbeau had constantly promoted an aesthetic vision among contemporary Quebec artists that was linked to his own "extensive study of the folk technology and colonial arts and crafts of the ancient French colony of Quebec and surroundings" (Nowry, 1995, p. 270). In the paintings of these artists, he saw a "national consciousness" (Barbeau, 1946, p. 1) aroused by the folk arts created by French Canada's original settlers. Clarence Gagnon's paintings of "old wooden houses, with bell-cast roofs of lower Quebec, rambling village streets, ribbon-like farms, red or blue sleighs..." evoked nostalgia for pioneer and habitant life (Barbeau, 1946, p. 8). The old village of Sainte-Rose and its neighbouring parish inspired Marc-Aurele Fortin "as if they held a spell over him" (Barbeau, 1946, p. 14). Even André Biéler and Henri Masson, born outside Quebec, could be considered authentic painters of its culture. Barbeau emphasized that "it is not necessary to be born in a country to belong to it and appropriate it" (Barbeau, 1946, p. 24). Thus Borenstein, although he was an immigrant, could also be a Quebec painter, his images of rural stability and peasant-like simplicity rooted in a French Canadian past.

In essence, however, Borenstein's appreciation of Quebec rural culture was significantly different from what Barbeau had in mind. What he discovered in the Laurentian village, where houses lined the main road and a church was situated at its centre, was a pattern of country living that reminded him of his *shtetl* youth. In Lithuania and Poland, most of the

population had engaged in agriculture while the Jews dwelled in or near the towns and made a living in trade or crafts. Remembering Suwalki, Borenstein wrote, "Our house was situated about three miles from the city in a valley with an enormous flat field and ahead was a small city full of magic" (Borenstein, 1968).

In 1958, Borenstein rented and later purchased an old house situated a few miles from the village of Sainte-Lucie. Originally settled in 1875, the village was home year-round to about a hundred families, but in the summer the population grew through an influx of summer residents. Borenstein painted the village road again and again, linking his childhood memory of village life with the feeling of well-being he derived from Quebec's rural society. In this way, Borenstein's paintings of Laurentian villages were also an image of a distant time and place. For example, in *Sainte-Lucie in Winter* (fig. 4) he radically transformed the village into a vision of the lost *shtetl*. There are no cars or signs. The houses are close together; the buildings have been rearranged, and a man walks up the road. Here and in other paintings, Borenstein achieves the convergence of the French Canadian village and the *shtetl* of eastern Europe.

It is certain that two beliefs guided Borenstein's development as artist and art dealer. The first was that culture rather than religion was the conveyor of traditional values. The second was that the profound essence of a culture could be preserved despite terrible losses, and that this essence should be an operative concept in determining the creative forces of modern living. Borenstein expressed these beliefs by painting Quebec villages that evoked *shtetl* memories and by appreciating the aesthetic and ethical value of Jewish ritual objects of pre-Holocaust European origin.

## NOTES

[1] See the websites, *Judaic Art in Context* (http://collections.ic.gc.ca/art_context) and *Community Memories: Keeping the Faith: Judaica from the Aron Museum* http://www.virtualmuseum.ca), for an introduction to the Aron Museum.

[2] See Gutmann, 1970. In most western European countries Jewish ceremonial objects had to be commissioned from Christian craftsmen, because Jews were prevented from entering the guilds. The situation was different in eastern Europe, especially in Poland, where Jewish guilds existed and Jews could also practice in non-Jewish guilds.

[3] Judith Borenstein, in conversation with the author, May 15, 1996.

[4] Mrs. Ellen Samuel, a long standing Museum Committee member provided valuable recollections about the early years of the Museum's history. Mrs. Samuel is the Committee's correspondent and has maintained its records, a key source of information on the Museum's growth and development. Further information on the Aron Museum is in the Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom archives, located at the Jewish Public Library, Montreal.

[5] Polish-born Yehuda Elberg, an ordained rabbi, was actively involved in the Lodz and Warsaw resistance movements during the Holocaust. He is a Yiddish writer whose work documents *shtetl* life. Elberg gained recognition in the English-speaking world after the 1997 translation of two of his novels, *Ship of the Hunted* and *The Empire of Kalman the Cripple*. Elberg's *kiddush* cup is on view at the permanent exhibition of the Montreal Memorial Holocaust Centre Museum.

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