

Understanding the Artistic Language of Crypto-Jews

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Since the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions of the fifteenth Century, the group interchangeably known as Marranos, Conversos, new-Christians, crypto-Jews, or simply *Gente da Nação* has had significant representation within the Arts. By observing the depictions made by crypto-Jewish artists, their descendants, or by non-Jewish creators who featured them as subjects (as sitters, muses, or models), one may find a vocabulary, which forms the basis of a crypto-Jewish artistic language. Thus, the purpose here is to further observe, hypothesize, and understand the nuances of crypto-Jewish language and representation in the Arts.

Perhaps one of the earliest art forms to adopt the role of the Iberian Jew among its cast was Literature and Theater. Here, the forcibly-converted Sephardic Jew was often featured as an introspective, worldly, disturbed, and often vengeful character. This type of representation has made an appearance through old and new characters as in the iconic Shylock (from Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), the crypto-Jewess Dona Branca Dias (in the Brazilian play *O Santo Inquerito*, by Alfredo de Freitas Dias Gomes, 1966), Antonio Jose da Silva (in the Portuguese drama *O Judeu*, by Jom Tob Azulay, 1995), and Borgia, as the converso family who took over the Roman Papal seat (in the French hit series *Borgia: Faith and Fear*, by Tom Fontana (2011).

Hidden Jews have also been speculated to be featured in a number of well known narratives, often serving as romantic observations of an author's own Marrano heritage. For instance, Don Quixote has long been theorized to be about Cervantes' own suspected crypto-

Jewish roots (The Forward, Web). The same may be said about the legend of *El Zorro*, who is partially based on an individual named Lamport, who spent seven years in the chambers of the Mexican Inquisition where he became well acquainted with “prisoners who were mostly Jews or converted Jews.” Lamport became the inspiration for the masked hero as he “...managed to escape from prison on the 26th of December, 1650...plastering the city walls at night with posters denouncing the crimes of the Inquisitors.” As Lamport was captured again, he “wrote many pamphlets in Spanish attacking the Inquisition..., [until] he was condemned to burn at the stake in the auto-de-fe of the 19th of November, 1659” (Ireland, web).

Although the converted *Djudios* are often featured in overly romanticized ways, fictional crypto-Jews seem to also have seeped into America's top Sitcoms as clannish, and sometimes provincial, individuals. Ellen Sandler from the *Jewish Journal*, for instance, suggests that American franchises like *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Seinfeld* are, in fact, strong portrayals of crypto-Jewish behavior in contemporary America.

When you watch "Everybody Loves Raymond," you take it for granted that the Barones are Italian, right? But...is Raymond a crypto-Jew? Back in the old days, in the Hollywood created by the founding fathers, Goldwyn, Mayer and the Warner Bros., there were no Jewish characters on screen, only idealized white Christians...As Hollywood grew and flourished, television and films began to be populated by what seemed to be Jewish characters: They spoke like Jews, joked like Jews, ate like Jews...but were they Jews? They were hidden Jews, crypto-Jews..."Seinfeld" [for instance] was a veritable hive of crypto-Jews. Jerry himself was, of course, openly Jewish, but what of the supporting cast? Anyone who wanted to could recognize that George, Elaine and Kramer were Jews. They were based on real people, all of whom were,

in fact, Jewish, but on the show they were not....Are the Barones Marranos?...The characters on the show are named Barone, generally viewed as an Italian name, but in Italy, it is, in fact, a Jewish name” (Sandler, web.)

Crypto-Judaic presence in the past and in contemporary Art is indeed a fact, however, the reason for such is still an unknown variable worthy of examining. Perhaps by observing the crypto-Jews of the avant-garde, one may find overlapping characteristics in their social, religious, and psychological profiles, which might have influenced the portrayal of their arts and lives perpetually. As it is the case with most things pertaining to crypto-Jews, Inquisitional files from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries provide the best observation of their *modus vivendi*, showing some of the aspects that artists may also have found compelling to immortalize. For instance, it is notable that the *conversos* interrogated by the Inquisition between 1495 and 1500 were mostly city-dwellers, not “directly connected to the cultivation of the land.” These individuals were commonly found within the cosmos of the city, as “middling artisans, often in textiles, such as tailors, weavers, dyers and old-clothes dealers.” Many were blacksmiths and shoemakers. Another significant portion of the community was of prosperous jewelers and silversmiths, “who sometimes acted as money-lenders” (Alpert, p. 21).

Religiously speaking, crypto-Jews were, at best, a complex sight to observe. Catholics saw them as new-Christians (despite the conversions being forced), who had an obligation to hold true to the canons of their new faith. Meanwhile, rabbinical opinion held that “most of the converts were to be classified in terms of Jewish law as *Anussim*, or “as having been forced to accept Christian baptism and thus be treated as full Jews living in error against their will.” Hence, the marrano mentality, along with their strong penitential aspect, may be said to have

risen “out of their sense of guilt for not completely obeying Jewish religious law, and...for not being faithful to the teachings of the Church. They have very accurately been called “Souls in Conflict” (Alpert, p. 203), and such dramatic condition may have left a mark in their artistic representation.

One of the most artistically featured communities within the crypto-Jewish midst was the one formed by Portuguese migrants to Amsterdam at the end of the seventeenth century. These Conversos, after having lived under Catholicism since the late 1400's, succeeded in making a full return to normative Judaism in the 1650's as a unified community. Perhaps this process of death and rebirth (referred to as the Phoenix of Abraham) may have been pivotal to bring Rembrandt's attention to the Portuguese Jewish returnees. After all, rare are the cases in history in which entire communities recover their ethnic, religious, and linguistic roots after centuries of duress, limbo, and persecution (Liberia and the modern State of Israel being uncommon examples).

A well known painting by Rembrandt is that of Manuel Dias Soeiro, also known as Rabbi Menashe ben Israel, born in the Madeira Island in 1604 from converso parents who escaped the Inquisition from mainland Portugal, and who settled as Jews in Amsterdam in 1610. Among Rembrandt's other sitters of Marrano stock were the young Abigail de Pina (wife of the Marrano poet Miguel de Barrios), the family of Daniel Levy de Barrios, Rabbi Saul Levy Morteira, Spinoza (supposedly as the model for the piece titled *The Man With the Magnifying Lens*), and the medical doctor Efrain Bueno, to name just a few (Böhm). Was this saga of escape and return, death and rebirth, what enticed Rembrandt to repeatedly portray the

Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam? Rembrandt had known many of these people personally, so one can only assume.

To further translate the captivation of artists with the crypto-Jewish reality, one must seek to understand how the Iberian World viewed its Jews. It is important to note that while religious extremism was the reality of Spain and Portugal during the fifteenth century, Iberian Jews had for 500 years already possessed an outstanding knowledge of mathematics, languages, the scientific method (Tokuhamo-Espinosa), astronomy, and trade routes. These skills not only made them time-tested cartographers, guides, and explorers, but also gave them the reputation of being wandering Jews, a People without a land, liberals, internationalists, and staunch adherents of a universalist worldview. This also may have struck an artistic cord among creative people who surrounded the Converso community.

Lavender, in his article subtitled *Ex Libris*, places universalism at the center of Jewish art, specially when the artist him/herself is of Jewish descent: “Universalism is an important aspect of...Jewish thought, and many Jewish artists... have expressed universalism, and hence their Jewish values, in many of their paintings” (Lavender, p.2). Indeed, history shows the ease with which many crypto-Jews fled or adapted to new realities when necessary. It may thus be said that the Converso's extensive internationalism gave way to the adoption of an universalist approach to life, clearly expressed in their politics, charitable acts, and relatedness to others.

But who were the main artists who most eloquently, knowingly or unknowingly, added to the repertoire of Crypto-Jewish art? And how did their artistic portrayals contribute to the further growth of a crypto-Jewish artistic language? Below are a few examples of the most intriguing individuals.

Although not of attested Jewish descent, perhaps the artist who took the most risk as a recorder of the plight of the persecuted by the Holy Office was the Spanish court painter Francisco de Goya y Lucientes. Goya, from his position of prominence in the late 1700's, saw up close the horrific acts of the Inquisition and recorded many visuals from autos-de-fe, where numerous crypto-Jews were burnt at the stake.

In *Los Caprichos*, the Spanish painter invariably took the side of the persecuted, and strongly criticized the brutality of Spanish society. For instance, in his piece titled *Those Specks of Dust*, Goya dealt directly with the Inquisition by boldly attacking “its arbitrary justice...by depicting the plight of a known personality of the day. The prisoner on trial is Perico..., as she appears in front of a mob of officials robed in the typical penitential uniform called 'San Benito.' She sits hunched over, as if condemned in advance.” Goya then remarks in his writings: "Badly done! To treat an honorable woman in this way, a woman who for nothing served everyone so well and so usefully. Badly done!" (Norton Simon Foundation, web).

Among all creative people, however, few artists were as influential and inscrutable as the Baroque painter Diego Velazquez. Born in the late 1500's, the Andalusian painter was the son of Portuguese conversos João Rodrigues da Silva and Jeronima Velazquez, who belonged to the lower hidalgo class and taught Diego the fear of God.

There is perhaps no painting, other than *Las Meninas* by Velazquez which better exemplifies a very peculiarly crypto-Jewish element; the angst to belong, and the perpetual need to affirm oneself as a worthy member of society. In her essay titled *Velázquez and Las Meninas*, Madlyn Millner Kahr suggests that the enigmatic masterpiece was made with an ulterior motive in mind; that of granting Velazquez a “coveted title that would ensure him a

high place in society.” Besides suggesting a heavily Flemish influence in *Las Meninas*, Kahr's essay discusses “Velazquez’s desire for an aristocratic title greater than any single court position he could hold,” concluding that what the descendant of conversos really wished for was ennoblement.

In what seems to be an exemplary study of Velazquez’ psyche, Kahr analyses the disparate use of light in *Las Meninas*. Coming from a Master artist such as Velazquez, the use of light in this painting seems surprisingly confusing: “It appears to be coming from slightly above horizontal center and off to the right. The face of the princess is illuminated from up and slightly to the right. But since the part in the hair of the female dwarf is illuminated, and her right cheek is shadowed, and since the little boy’s face is totally in shadow, the light must be coming from slightly behind the plane that the dwarf is on. But if this is the case, it is difficult to explain how the mirror in the background seems so uniformly illuminated.” With that being said, Kahr then inadvertently reveals Velazquez's distorted issues of self-awareness; as the mirror “hints at Velazquez's own unreality” (Kahr, p. 243).

Another unparalleled contributor to the converso artistic language is artist Jacob Camille Pissarro, or Pissaro, as he was best known. Born in 1830, in “Charlotte Amalie...on the Caribbean Island of St. Thomas, then under Danish Control...His father was Abraham Gabriel Frederic Pissarro who was born in Bordeaux, France, which had long had a strong Portu-guese [and Spanish] Jewish community. [His family] had originated in Portugal, where for 300 years they had been ‘Marranos’....” But as one of the world's great Impressionists, Pissaro never once painted Jewish themes, for his family was skeptical of religion. However, critics of his time insisted that his art was inevitably Jewish, for “his Jewish—as well as his provincial—

background was always to play a role in his emotional make-up. They thought that his emphasis on sympathetic portrayals of poor people constituted his spiritual contribution. He early on developed a compassion for the exploited, and positive portrayals of peasants formed a major part of his paintings” (Shikes, etc., p. 18).

Therein lies the artistic voice of Pissarro as a descendant of crypto-Jews; he was an interpreter of the needy, and an enabler for social justice. Pissarro was constantly regarded as a Jewish artist by his peers, as Renoir...referred to him as ‘that Israelite Pissarro.’ And while one could say that Pizarro even attempted to hide his Jewishness, he was still thought of as Jewish by other contemporary artists who when “seeing him strolling down Paris streets with sketchbooks in hand, referred to him as ‘Moses with the Tablets of the Law’” (Shikes, etc., p. 6). Other attributes that were also thought of as irrefutably Jewish were his “universal inclinations, his belief that artists have social as well as aesthetic responsibilities, his eclectic ability to see different things, and his ‘bookish proclivities’ to read scientific literature on the diffraction of light. All were seen as part of his long-term Jewish tradition of textual focus” (Lavender, p. 5).

Another riveting character of Converso descent is the Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani: “born in Italy in the Livorno ghetto, his father died young and his mother...encouraged her delicate son in his aptitude for art...Handsome, talented, sensitive, and extremely proud of his Jewish heritage, Modigliani became one of the most notorious characters in Montmartre...” (Cotter, p. 7). Modigliani’s mother claimed descent from Baruch Spinoza, but Spinoza had no known children and no scholar has found any evidence of any). Modigliani was famous for his

princely lifestyle even though he was always penniless, and for his belief in the artistic exceptionalism, as he viewed artists as special individuals with “different values [other than that of] normal, ordinary people.” Despite being eccentric, Modigliani displayed a truly converso trait as he became the leader of the School of Paris; his “subjective and expressive art revealed his basic dignity, his despair, and a feeling of haunting melancholy” (Cotter, p. 6). This melancholy, specifically found among Portuguese crypto-Jews, is the Saudades revealed in the Converso, which Modigliani seems to have inherited much of.

It may thus be concluded that a powerful but inconspicuous cultural heritage left by the *Nação Israelita* is the following: A verifiable artistic language that has strongly influenced western Art from the dawn of the fifteenth century to today. Their vocabulary has been revealed through iconic characters, as well as through their lives and artwork. Their highly nuanced language is, however, only observable if one is cognizant of their history, for it was by their arduous path that a distinguished means of artistic expression was formed.

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DaSilva-Benayon

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