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Paula J. Birnbaum

CHANA ORLOFF

A modern Jewish woman sculptor of the
School of Paris

Chana Orloff (1888–1968), a Ukrainian-born artist who emigrated to France in 1910 by way of Palestine, was one of the most important Jewish artists of the School of Paris and a pioneering woman in the early Israeli art world, yet her story has been marginalized in both the narratives of European modernism and the history of Israeli art. I propose that Orloff's biography and artistic production, particularly her sculpted portraits of Jewish friends and colleagues in Paris between the two World Wars, demonstrate how diaspora, gender, and displacement play a critical role in a revised narrative of twentieth-century modern art. I argue that Orloff's work offers a compelling visual counter-discourse to prevailing negative stereotypes of Jewish identity in European visual culture. During a time when many émigré artists wished to distance themselves from their Jewish identity in light of widespread anti-Semitic and xenophobic beliefs that their work contributed to the “decline” of French culture, Orloff proudly did just the opposite.

Chana Orloff (1888–1968) was one of many Jewish émigré women in the arts who came to Paris before the First World War, from the iconic Gertrude Stein and Sonia Delaunay, to lesser-known painters, Alice Halicka and Mela Muter, among others, and contributed to the development of a new category of the *modern Jewish woman artist*. She became an important artist of the international *École de Paris* and the early Israeli art world, yet her story has been marginalized both in the narratives of European modernism and the history of art in Israel. A prolific sculptor who produced more than 500 documented sculptures in a range of materials (from wood to plaster, marble, and bronze), she was a central figure in the inner circle of the Italian Jewish painter, Amadeo Modigliani and a vital contributor to the diaspora culture of Jewish artists and intellectuals in Paris. Why has the discipline of art history since overlooked her, along with so many other prolific artists, female and male, from this period? Was it because of her gender, her transnational status, her Jewishness, or that her diverse body of work did not fit neatly into a single “national” school nor one of the avant-garde “isms” canonized after the Second World War? Her work did not conform to the tenets of modern art established by émigré scholars in the United States at this time, where non-objectivity was valued as a means of avoiding the ideological and political functions of art supported in Nazi Germany (Mansbach 2008). While curators in France and Israel remained

interested in Orloff's work through the 1960s, by that time figuration was widely regarded as less important than abstraction, and so her critical reception was not as strong as it had been during the interwar years.

Of the approximately 500 Jewish émigré artists of the cosmopolitan *École de Paris* during the interwar years, many wished to distance themselves from their Jewish identity in light of widespread anti-Semitic and xenophobic beliefs that the work of "Jewish" and "foreign" artists contributed to the "decline" of French culture (Golan 1985, 1995). As immigrants to France, a condition of their naturalization was the expectation that they disavow their ethnic, cultural, and religious identities and embrace the French Republican ethos, and for some, the result was what Sander Gilman has described as "Jewish self-hatred" (Gilman 1986; Birnbaum 1999). Chana Orloff had different objectives: she was committed to developing her own practice of Jewish portraiture and a positive representation of the Jewish body, while she simultaneously sought out and received strong critical endorsement of her work, followed by French citizenship in 1925. However, none of the literature on Orloff has investigated the question of how Jewishness and gender together form an important double lens through which to explore the multilayered struggle around identity and self-representation.¹ Orloff's biography and artistic production, particularly her sculpted portraits of friends and colleagues in Paris between the two World Wars, demonstrate how diaspora, gender, and displacement play a critical role in a revised narrative of twentieth-century modern art.

Diaspora: from the Ukraine to Palestine to Paris

In order to understand how Orloff navigated the social constructions of gender, Jewishness and Frenchness in her portraits of colleagues during the interwar years, some biographical background is in order. Born in 1888 in the Ukraine, her father was an observant Jew and ardent Zionist who chose to emigrate to Palestine in 1905 in response to the rapid rise of anti-Semitism and brutal pogroms in which thousands of Jews were killed. A great admirer of Theodor Herzl, he endorsed the belief in the impossibility of Jewish assimilation and the crucial need for a "promised land." The Orloff family settled in Petah Tikva, the first Jewish settlement in Palestine located just outside the future city of Tel Aviv. Rather than following the typical path of women of her mother's generation, who pursued a life devoted to agricultural labour, early marriage, and prolific motherhood, Orloff made unusual choices. She attended a sewing school as a teenager in the Ukraine and helped to support her family in their first years in Palestine by working as a cutter and seamstress. Eventually she moved to Neve Tzedek, the first Jewish neighbourhood in the "new" city of Tel Aviv, outside Jaffa, where she created dresses for local women and encountered artists and writers including future Nobel prize laureate author Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the author Yosef Brenner, and artist Nachum Gutman. After being offered a position as a sewing teacher at a girls' school, Orloff decided in 1910 at age 22 to move by herself to Paris to work in fashion and pursue a formal education in design.

In Paris, Orloff began as an apprentice at the House of Paquin, run by the formidable Madame Jeanne Paquin, the first woman to play a leading role in French *haute couture*. Jeanne Paquin had established a reputation for creating dresses that could be

worn both during the day and for informal evenings, as well as “hobble skirts” with hidden pleats that made it easier for women to walk. After working there for almost two years Orloff chose to transition from the world of fashion design to fine art. She pursued a degree in sculpture from the *École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs*, taking classes for young women at the *Petite École*, where she studied art history, drawing, anatomy, and regularly copied canonical works of European art in the Louvre, while simultaneously learning French. Orloff also explored avant-garde styles of art-making at Marie Vassilieff’s “free” Russian Academy (Vassilieff 1995). Vassilieff, who emigrated to Paris in 1905 and studied briefly with Matisse, was an independent woman only slightly older than Orloff who had opened her academy in Montparnasse in 1909. It was there that Orloff became friends with notable Jewish émigré artists including Modigliani, Chaim Soutine, and Jules Pascin. She found herself straddling two worlds between the conservative *Petite École*, where she was taught to emulate works by French academic sculptors like Antoine Bourdelle, and the more progressive spirit of avant-garde experimentation at Vassilieff’s Russian Academy. It took less than 10 years for Orloff to establish a reputation as a prolific creator of sculpted portraits in Paris.

By 1920, her friends and sitters included an international cast of now famous artists and writers who frequented the Montparnasse quarter—Guillaume Apollinaire, Natalie Barney, Claude Cahun, Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, Diego Rivera, and many others. She also regularly exhibited sculptures depicting mothers and children, female and male nudes, dancers, and animals in a variety of venues relevant to her modern Parisian and Jewish identities. For example, in 1916 her work was featured in a group exhibition at Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, alongside artists including Henri Matisse, Georges Rouault, and Kees Van Dongen. The Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, owned by a French Jewish family, played a prominent role in marketing modern art in Paris. Their support of Orloff’s early work helped to launch her career and the endorsement of the esteemed writer and critic, Félix Fénéon, who was the new artistic director of the gallery at the time, was critical to her success. Cognizant of the styles prevalent in Paris just before and after the First World War, her early works recall the massive forms and abstraction of the early Alexander Archipenko and Jacques Lipchitz, but she developed her own unique approach to representing the power of both female and male bodies. Orloff’s work is particularly compelling in its bold, monumental treatment of domestic themes such as pregnancy and motherhood, and challenges stereotypes often associated with both women’s art and Jewish art.

The two Jews

A photograph of the 24-year-old Orloff, taken in 1912, sheds light on the artist’s emerging self-image as a *modern woman artist* with a strong sense of pride in her Jewish identity (figure 1). She sent the image back to her family in Palestine—with an inscription in Hebrew on the back, stating, “Chana at work” (Birnbaum 2011, 150–151). She wears a non-descript black shirt and appears to have covered what she lamented in her memoirs as “her prominent forehead” with thick, dark bangs, a recognizable sign of the modern, economically emancipated French woman of the period. This stylish cropped coiffure would become associated a decade later with the popular image of



FIGURE 1 Chana Orloff, posing before *The Two Jews*, 1912. Private Collection, Chana Orloff Estate, Paris. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

the *garçonne*, the sexually liberated professional woman made famous throughout Europe by Victor Marguerite’s best-selling and controversial novel of that title (Roberts 1994). The photograph shows the artist’s imposing physical presence and strong and muscular body type, clarifying that she was not attempting to conform to stereotypes of bourgeois femininity. Orloff poses proudly before *The Two Jews*, her relief sculpture in plaster from 1912 (now missing) depicting a young Jewish couple from the neck upward in profile, dressed for prayer. The male figure wears a yarmulke on top of his curly, matted hair, and the woman’s head is covered by a prayer shawl, her bangs echoing the artist’s modern hairstyle. The figures’ features are highly stylized, their noses aquiline and reminiscent of regal portraiture from both Egyptian relief sculptures and Roman coins that the artist would have seen at the Louvre. Orloff seems to have intentionally idealized and classicized the couple’s facial appearance and physiognomies, emphasizing identically shaped, long noses and angled profiles with brows in high relief. Her own facial features stand out in dialogue, as if asking her audience: what does it mean to represent a Jewish face, a Jewish body, or to create a Jewish portrait and to be a *modern Jewish woman artist* in diaspora?

In her unpublished memoirs, Orloff describes how she felt like an outsider during the years following her arrival in France, when this photograph was taken, due to her *émigré* status: “At the time I was still considered as a foreigner-immigrant. I hardly penetrated the essentially closed French society, which is usually estranged towards its foreigners and immigrants. . . .” (Orloff and Katznelson 1957, 55–57) The 1912 photograph juxtaposing her own powerful self-image with *The Two Jews*, suggests the artist’s desire to show her family back home her own dual identities as modern Parisian woman and Jewish *émigré* artist from a Zionist background with deep ties to Palestine. By making a plaster relief that highlights “Jewish features,” Orloff was invested quite early in her career in articulating a strong and positive iconography of the modern Jewish man and woman in diaspora.

The following year, three years after her move to Paris and after only one year of full time study of art, Orloff exhibited her work publicly for the first time at the Grand Palais at the 11th annual Salon d'Automne of 1913, a prestigious showcase for the artists of Montparnasse and other supporters of the avant-garde that was established as an alternative to the more conservative exhibitions associated with the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. One of her two entries was entitled *Bust of a Jewish Adolescent*, 1913 and was praised by critics for its “strength.” While this work—pillaged by the Nazis during the Second World War when they ransacked her studio and stole over 100 sculptures and vandalized many others—is also missing and not available in photography, we do know it was a portrait of a young Jewish male figure and it was likely created in dialogue with the *The Two Jews*. Orloff’s early visual representations of the theme of Jewish masculinity would have countered the many negative stereotypes of the Jewish body that circulated in French popular culture and in Europe at large in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, which continued from 1894 on throughout the first decades of the twentieth century (Kleeblatt 1987; Nochlin and Garb 1996). Scholars have shown how the debate surrounding the controversial trial of the Jewish Captain Alfred Dreyfus in Paris in 1894 for treason resulted in the production and wide dissemination of popular imagery promoting long-lived stereotypes of Jews in France. Males were commonly portrayed as either weak and emasculated, or avaricious and conniving, and females as overweight and overbearing maternal figures, or hyper-sexualized *femmes fatales*. It was common in the 1890s, 1900s and 1910s in Paris to see caricatures of European diaspora Jews with “Orientalizing” facial features as a way of marking non-white difference and questioning just how far east the racial origins of Jews in fact extended (figure 2). The relationship between the Orientalist and anti-Semitic discourse in France is a complicated one, and Orloff’s early imagery of the Jewish body clearly offers a powerful point of intervention. She nonetheless relied upon the logic of physiognomy to counter popular negative stereotypes of Jews that circulated in France during the first decades of the twentieth century by creating her own new visual archetypes in works such as *Two Jews* and *Bust of a Jewish Adolescent*.

Given that Orloff came from a Zionist community in Palestine that endorsed the writings of Theodor Herzl, it is not surprising that she was interested in presenting a counter-image of the “New Jew” or Herzl’s “authentic Jew” (or Max Nordau’s “muscular



FIGURE 2 Charles Huard and Jean Mably, *En Israel* (*In Israel*), 1899, lithograph. Paris. Photograph by the author.

hero”) that emerged in early-twentieth-century European culture as strong, brave, and admirable, in direct opposition to the anti-Semitic stereotypes of weakness and corruption that surrounded popular images of European diaspora Jews (Hyman 1979, 1995; Meyer 2000; Manor 2005, 2015). The leader of political Zionism, Herzl was one of many initial promoters of a new model for healthy Jewish identity to which Orloff would have been exposed. While countering the anti-Semitic representation of the Jewish body as deformed, she also creates her own positive “Jewish types” in such works. Let us now consider how Orloff embraced the art of sculpted portraiture as a powerful vehicle from which to invest in a deep exploration of modern Jewish subjectivity and the transaction between émigré artist, sitter and audience by exploring several portraits produced in Paris in the 1920s.

Avant-garde allegiances and modern Jewish portraits

The genre of portraiture is rarely considered central in modernism, particularly that of the sculpted portrait bust, and yet for Orloff and her circle of friends, and for many modern Jewish women artists of this period making portraits of one another became



FIGURE 3 Chana Orloff, *Portrait of Reuven Rubin*, 1926, bronze. Inv. #MAHJ98.6.3. Photo by Jean-Gilles Berizzi. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme, Paris, France. © RMN-Grand-Palais/Art Resource, NY.

an essential means of forming identities and allegiances (Corn and Latimer 2011). Of the approximately 500 sculptures by Orloff, 187 are portrait busts of friends, colleagues, and clients, and another 72 depict full-length or partial body portraits of identifiable individuals. Many of her friends were also émigré artists, writers, and intellectuals who likely realized the ability of her sculpted portraits to shape their reputation and public identity, including Reuven Rubin (figure 3), the popular Romanian-Israeli painter. Orloff's portrait of Rubin emphasizes an elongated face and neck, refined features, and a neo-Byzantine style. Her style of portraiture echoes Rubin's own Orientalizing treatment of the figure in his painted self-portraits of the period. Orloff also created portraits of Chaim Nachman Bialik, 1926, known as the "father" of Hebrew poetry, and the actress Hanna Rovina, 1935, known as the "first lady" of Hebrew theatre. Throughout the interwar years, Orloff's portraits of Jewish friends and colleagues circulated widely in exhibitions and were reproduced in a variety of newspapers and magazines throughout Europe, the United States and Palestine.

Orloff's sculpted bust in bronze entitled *The Jewish Painter*, 1920 (figure 4), is emblematic of her work from the years between the two World Wars. Identified as most likely



FIGURE 4 Chana Orloff, *The Jewish Painter*, *Reisin?* 1920, bronze. Inv. #MAHJ98.6.1. Photo by Jean-Gilles Berizzi. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme, Paris, France. © RMN-Grand-Palais/Art Resource, NY.

a depiction of her Polish émigré painter friend, known simply as Reisin, the artist explicitly chose to name the piece *The Jewish Painter*, suggesting it was a portrait of a “type,” a Jewish émigré artist in diaspora in Paris, rather than a specific individual. Orloff exhibited *The Jewish Painter* at the *Salon des Indépendants* in Paris in 1921 and it was reproduced in several articles about her work throughout her career. The middle-age male figure assumes a pensive, melancholic pose, his chin resting upon his palm, graced by a fan of long, cubist-like fingers. His facial expression conveys weariness and resilience, the long nose, beaded glass eyes, furrowed brow, and receding hairline suggesting the popular stereotype of the *Wandering Jew*. Cultural historians Sander Gilman and Jay Geller have historicized how the physiognomic “type” of the wandering Jew “underwent a series of metamorphoses” in the nineteenth century, and for many, including the French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot—the long nose, and in some cases other body parts including feet and voice—were psycho-pathologized and identified in the literature of eugenics with the deformity of the entire Jewish “race” (Gilman 1991, 72–75; Geller 1992, 255). Orloff would have been aware of the prominent role of the nose as “one of the central loci of difference in seeing the Jew” in the history of both popular and medical imagery in Europe (Geller 1992, 247). By focusing on the intensity of the figure’s physical gesture and facial expression, Orloff’s *Jewish Painter* contributes to the artist’s larger project of Jewish portraiture, which often involved countering such stereotypes at the heart of modern anti-Semitism. By creating a new and stronger image of her Jewish friends and colleagues, Orloff promoted her own unique visual “types” as a means of building a pantheon of modern Jewish émigré artists, writers and intellectuals with whom she associated in the first half of the twentieth century.

Orloff’s *Jewish Painter* and its portrayal of modern Jewish artistic identity likely related to the artist’s own direct experiences of anti-Semitism within the Parisian avant-garde. For example, she describes one such incident that occurred in 1920 in her memoirs, the same year she created the portrait. Orloff had been invited to participate in the group of Russian artists known as *Mir Iskusstva* (The World of Art), which was originally formed in 1898 in St. Petersburg by Leon Bakst and Sergei Diaghilev as a journal and movement aimed to educate the Russian public about new trends and issues in Russian visual culture. (Winestein 2008) The group had several phases and when Orloff joined in Paris, many of the participating artists had just emigrated to France after the Russian Revolution, including the painters Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, and Boris Grigoriev. Orloff described herself as one of several Jewish artists participating in the group in Paris in 1920, when one day at a “general assembly” meeting, a non-Jewish colleague made an anti-Semitic remark. Orloff proudly narrates how she “jumped up furiously, banged the table powerfully and yelled at him with the full strength of my lungs: ‘Don’t you know that I am a Jew?’ . . . ‘I am leaving this group right now’” (Orloff and Katznelson 1957, 73).

As a means of asserting loyalties and shared identities, Orloff sometimes traded works of art with Jewish friends and colleagues, including Modigliani, beginning early in her career. In 1915, Modigliani created a quick facial portrait in charcoal of Orloff on the back of an envelope (figure 5), inscribing it in both Roman and Hebrew letters, “to Chana, daughter of Raphael” and offered it to her as a token of his appreciation of their friendship. This inscription makes a pun on Orloff’s father’s name, Raphaël, that links both artists to the Jewish tradition—Raphael, one of the



FIGURE 5 Amadeo Modigliani, *Portrait of Chana Orloff*, ca. 1915, drawing. Private Collection, Chana Orloff Estate, Paris.

angels—was also the name of the classic Italian Renaissance painter. The drawing acknowledges Modigliani’s awareness of their connection as young Jewish émigré artists beginning their careers Paris, both seeking to make names for themselves in the contemporary Parisian art world (Pollock 2004).

Orloff also played a prominent role during the years leading up to the First World War in avant-garde literary movements in Paris. In 1917, she married Ary Justman, a Polish-Jewish poet and friend of Modigliani and Guillaume Apollinaire, with whom she collaborated in several avant-garde journals. Orloff reproduced her work in a compilation of Justman’s poems entitled *Réflexions poétiques* (1918). The couple contributed regularly to the Parisian avant-garde journal, *SIC*, edited by the French avant-garde poet and dramatist Pierre Albert-Birot (1916–1919). By participating in *SIC*, one of the most important of the early modernist reviews, Orloff was at the centre of a showcase for the Cubist poets (Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, André Salmon, Blaise Cendrars), the nascent Dada and Surrealist movements (Louis Aragon, André Breton, Francis Picabia, Pierre Reverdy, Philippe Soupault, Tristan Tzara), and Italian Futurism. She created woodcut portraits of her avant-garde friends and colleagues for the journal, in addition to nude figures and more symbolic works, including a striking cubist rendering of *Judith* (July/August, 1917), the Old Testament Jewish heroine, reflecting the contemporary German models of *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion* in the juxtaposition of text and

original woodcuts that used the grain of the wood in innovative ways. While immersed in this collaborative avant-garde activity with Justman, Orloff gave birth to their son, Élie, whom they called Didi, in 1918. Justman left home soon afterward to serve in the Red Cross during the First World War and died tragically in 1919 of the Spanish



FIGURE 6 Chana Orloff, *Portrait of the Artist*, 1919, woodcut (from the series *Bois gravés de Chana Orloff*, Paris: D'Alignan, 1919). Inv# EMORLOFF11. Photo by Martine Beck-Coppola. Bibliothèque de l'INHA, Collection Jacques Doucet, Paris, France. © INHA, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.

influenza. Orloff, now age 31, was presented with yet a new and unexpected challenge: she was left to raise by herself her one-year-old son, who suffered from physical disabilities caused by polio.

As she rebounded professionally, Orloff created a powerful series of 11 large folio woodcut portraits of women, some of them Jewish friends and colleagues, bound as a soft-cover volume entitled *Bois Gravés de Chana Orloff*. The volume was published in May 1919, just a few months after Justman's death, by the editor D'Alignan in Paris in an edition of 100, with each print signed individually. The series included a haunting self-portrait as a veiled widow (figure 6) in which Orloff used the grain of the plank as part of the design; her round face stands out amidst a sea of black cloth covering her body and head. Orloff described this period of personal and economic hardship: "I had accumulated several handicaps: foreigner, Jew, artist, woman, and now widow and mother" (Tamir 2012, 24). As a single parent and Jewish émigré, she rose to the economic challenge of supporting herself and her young son by immediately recognizing the need to build her clientele. A host of prominent critics praised the series of woodcuts and helped to promote Orloff's reputation. Kahn (1922, 232) wrote of the series: "Madame Orloff's drawing is expressive. She gives value to her woodcuts, which are very robust and do not leave out any unnecessary detail to capture the character of her models. They are desperate for truth." Orloff's friends from SIC also supported her, leading to another commission, also in 1919, by the same editor to illustrate a volume of portraits of drawings of 41 prominent contemporary artists and writers, entitled *Figures d'aujourd'hui: dessins de Chana Orloff* (Paris: D'Alignan, 1923) accompanied by poems by the poet, Jean Pellerin, and novelist and literary scholar, Gaston Picard. The list of artists who sat for portraits reproduced in the volume include: Picasso, Georges Braque, Jean Cocteau, Max Jacob, Diego Rivera, Natalia Goncharova (a member of the *Mir Iskustva* group with whom she remained connected).

Many critics writing about Orloff during the 1920s and 1930s infused their descriptions of the artist and her work with their own ambivalent attempts to reconcile the artist's identity as a woman, a Ukrainian-born Jewish émigré in France who had lived in Palestine, and also a mother and a widow (Birnbaum, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). In an illustrated feature article that appeared in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* in 1924, the German critic Powel Van Barchan began by exclaiming:

Chana Orloff is a Jewess. She herself seems to place considerable weight on this fact. Yet the Semitism of the Russian Jew is a problematic matter ... One look at a photograph of Orloff suffices for the viewer to notice: "There is a little Russian peasant mama!" (1924, 285)

Initially, negative stereotypes about working-class, Russian-Jewish motherhood serve to shape the public's attitude about Orloff and her work by downplaying her professionalism as a successful Parisian artist. Yet further consideration of this text reveals Barchan's more complicated critical perspective: while "French schooling is also unmistakable in her," he focuses on two primary influences: "national primitive humor" linked to Russian folklore (evidenced by her facility in working with wood), and the pervasive influence of "motherhood" ("Of motherly thoughts conceived, of a motherly hand created"). Barchan describes Orloff's sculptures as "of a manly character," in contrast to widely-held stereotypes about the work of women artists as "sentimental," "always imitation, always

jarring. . .” and concludes by complimenting the artist on her “motherly craftiness” (1924, 285–291).

While this review may seem to support my larger claim that Orloff devised an artistic strategy to make her identity as a Jewish woman émigré artist legible, it also reveals an ongoing critical fascination that mixes gender stereotyping, philo-Semitism, and its apparent opposite, anti-Semitism, in response to her work produced in the 1920s. It has been well documented that a group of conservative Parisian critics writing at this same time believed that the many émigré and Jewish members of the *École de Paris* had “infected” the purity and realism of French art in contrast to the work of the native-born artists of the so-called *École Française* (Golan 1985, 1995). While Barchan is more positive in acknowledging and exploring Orloff’s various identities (woman, Jew, mother, widow, Ukrainian, French, etc.), the manner in which he and other critics read them into her work nonetheless suggests the continuation of problematic stereotypes of gender, nationality, and ethnicity. In contrast, it is worth noting that in response to Picasso’s painted and sculpted portraits of children and pregnant-looking female nudes created in the 1930s and 1940s, critics did not excessively discuss his Spanishness, paternal status, or personal relationships with women. While an in-depth analysis of the range of Orloff’s critical reception is beyond the scope of this study, suffice it to say that there was a significant critical support for Orloff’s sculptures in Paris by 1920 and her work was reviewed in a broad range of daily newspapers,



FIGURE 7 Chana Orloff, *Portrait of Edmond Fleg*, 1922, wood. Private Collection, Chana Orloff Estate, Paris. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.



FIGURE 8 Chana Orloff, *Portrait of Madeleine Fleg*, 1920, bronze. Photo by Laurent Sully-Jaulmes. Private Collection, Chana Orloff Estate, Paris. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

weekly and monthly international art journals as well as Jewish periodicals (Pappas 2002).

Interwoven French and Jewish identities

By 1920 Orloff began to receive regular commissions from many of her contemporaries to create their sculpted portraits or those of their family members. Orloff's portraits of her close friends the writer, Edmond Fleg, 1922 (figure 7) and his wife, Madeleine Fleg, 1920 (figure 8) shed light on the issue of hybrid French and Jewish identities in Orloff's early work. Edmond Fleg (born Flegenheimer) was a Swiss-born French poet, essayist, dramatist, and theatre critic whose outlook was deeply affected both by the Dreyfus Affair and the first three Zionist congresses in Europe (1897–1899). Best known as the author of *Hear Israel* (*Écoute Israël*, 1913–1921) and *Why I am a Jew* (*Pourquoi je suis juif*, 1928), Fleg's writing exemplifies the philosophy of modern Judaism in the pre-Holocaust era in Europe. It was rooted in the desire to forge connections between Jewish and Christian texts “through which he proposed an expansive notion of ecumenism” (Charnow 2013, 557). Like Orloff, Fleg's Jewish identity was “interwoven with his

European, or more specifically, French, identity, and this hybridity constitutes his primary contribution to and vision for Jewish literature” (Grey 2007, 303). Orloff became intimate friends with the Flegs in the teens and twenties and shared with Edmond a desire to become a French citizen in compliance with the norms of the Third Republic (Orloff became a citizen in 1925, the same year she was awarded the title of Chevalier of the Legion of Honour). In 1926, she commissioned the prominent architect, Auguste Perret, one of Le Corbusier’s teachers and an icon of French modernism, to build her a combined studio and living space in Montparnasse, attesting to her success as a “French” artist. However, also like Fleg, she wished to incorporate her Jewish identity into her public persona as a French artist. Orloff’s portraits of both Edmond and Madeleine Fleg offer striking examples of her early bust portraits where she distils the facial features to create an intimate portrait of two friends in her social circle. She first exhibited the portrait in wood of Madeleine Fleg at the 1920 Salon des Indépendants in Paris, where critics admired the simplicity of the abstracted form and self-contained expression, and the sitter’s eyes seemingly closed to the outside world. Clearly influenced by cubism and its investment in African statuary through her association with Picasso, Braque, and many others in the cubist circle, Orloff nonetheless departs from cubist abstraction by emphasizing the individual features and humanity of her sitters. The portrait of Madeleine Fleg was widely reproduced in notable French art journals, appearing on the front page of the prominent critic Robert Rey’s article on Orloff in *Art et Décoration* (1922) and was mentioned in two short monographs published in Paris in 1927 (Courières 1927; Werth 1927). American audiences were introduced to the work in 1922 when the editor of *Vanity Fair* (October 1922, 52) reproduced the portrait with the following caption: “It is deemed, by some European critics, her best feminine portrait” by the “Russo-French Sculptress who is heading the recent revival of portrait carving in wood.” Hence, the exhibition and circulation of these portraits in the 1920s helped to shape Orloff’s and the Flegs’ public identities as *both* French and Jewish artists and intellectuals in Paris.

Gender and the modern Jewish woman artist

Orloff also moved in the circle of modern Parisian women artists during this period. Edmond and Madeleine Fleg introduced her to the American expatriate writer and salon organizer, Nathalie Clifford Barney. Barney commissioned her own portrait, along with that of her lover, the painter, Romaine Brooks. Orloff also created sculpted portraits of the lesbian Surrealist, Claude Cahun, the writer Anaïs Nin and many others who are celebrated today as modern women of the period. In each sculpted bust, Orloff chose to offer recognizable facial portraits, yet distilled her models’ features down to highly stylized, abstracted forms in order to create the look of the modern woman. In this body of work Orloff created a pantheon of well-known Parisian women artists and writers who were themselves focused in their work upon the representation of modernity and sexual agency, and in some cases, Jewish identity. In making sculpted portraits of her female friends and colleagues, Orloff commented on each sitter’s own complicated relationship to gender, and sometimes, Jewish identity.

By looking closely at two of Orloff’s sculpted portraits of modern women who were lesbians—Nathalie Barney and Claude Cahun—we can learn more about how she



FIGURE 9 Chana Orloff, *Portrait of Natalie Barney*, 1920, wood. Private Collection, Chana Orloff Estate, Paris. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

negotiated their unique relationship to both gender and Jewish identity. Orloff created both plaster cast and wood portrait busts of Barney in 1920 (figure 9), and plaster, wood and bronze portraits of Cahun, in 1921 (figure 10). Cahun's portrait was exhibited at the Salon d'Automne that year, and both works were reproduced in the October 1922 edition of *Vanity Fair* in New York as well as in the widely read Parisian avant-garde journal *Le Crapouillot*. Both women identified publicly as lesbians, and both were part Jewish, Barney on her mother's side, and Cahun on her father's side. Barney and Cahun had different relationships to their Jewish family backgrounds. Barney, who was known to be profoundly anti-Semitic and supported the expulsion of Jews from Europe in the 1930s may seem like an odd choice for Orloff to befriend and sculpt (Souhami 2005; Linett 2007, 119–139). In spite of her own family background and the fact that her sister was married to a Jewish man, Barney declared her intolerance of Jews and was in fact committed to the “solution” of a Zionist state. Perhaps Barney's stature as one of the most prominent modern expatriate women writers in Paris at the time overrode Orloff's interest in Jewish identity. In contrast, Cahun, who had changed her name from Lucy Schwob in 1918, was known to have identified strongly with the Jewish side of her father's family (Leperlier 1992, 2006; Leperlier and Lebovici 1996; Gravano 2009; Shaw 2013). Cahun's father, Maurice Schwob, born Jewish, was an atheist who strongly opposed the Church's involvement in government. Her mother was a Christian whose family was anti-Semitic. The artist's chosen name, Cahun, a French version of Cohen, was her paternal grandmother's maiden name. She



FIGURE 10 Chana Orloff, *Portrait of Claude Cahun*, 1921, bronze. Private Collection, Chana Orloff Estate, Paris. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

identified with her great uncle Léon Cahun, Curator at the Bibliothèque Mazarine, writer, and an advocate of symbolist literature and art.

Orloff was friends with these radical women of the Parisian avant-garde; she visited Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks at their country home in Beauvallon, France, near Saint Tropez, and Barney inscribed Orloff's name in her maze-like diagram of the names of the many colleagues, friends, and lovers who regularly attended her Friday afternoon salons in Paris in what Barney referred to as "the Grecian Temple of Friendship." This drawing is famous for including the well-known expatriate "women of the Left Bank" celebrated by scholars Sheri Benstock (1986), Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace (1994), Tirza True Latimer (2005a, 2005b), Whitney Chadwick and Latimer (2003) and others. Barney took the poet Sappho as a model in creating a community of women who were artists, colleagues, friends, and lovers. Orloff, who identified as heterosexual, was nonetheless included in this milieu and had achieved a reputation as a worthy portraitist of this elite group of creative women. Barney commissioned Orloff to create a sculpted relief portrait that celebrated the attributes of the *Amazone*

(also the title of the work), Barney's alter-ego for many years, dressed in a prominent Western-style riding hat. Barney developed different personas that she would stage in both her poetry and in her personal relationships; "the Amazon" was an identity she developed in a collection of poetry published that year—*Thoughts of an Amazon* (1920). The American expatriate painter Romaine Brooks also created a portrait of her lover, Barney, as an Amazon in 1920, replete with model horse to hand. Like Brooks, Orloff was actively engaged in producing portraits of self-determined women, focusing on an elite circle of artists and intellectuals of the period. Orloff produced an earlier piece entitled *The Amazon* in 1916, a large sculpted piece in wood portraying an abstracted and unnamed woman riding a horse, and chose to exhibit it at the Salon des Indépendants in 1920, the same year she created Barney's portrait. Unlike Barney and Brooks, however, Orloff was not affluent in 1920, so we must consider how her practice as prolific portraitist of this elite group of Parisian women fitted into the larger economic needs of her career.

Claude Cahun commissioned Orloff to make her sculpted portrait during the same period as Barney, and in this case Orloff entitled the work by the artist's given name, *Lucette Schwob*. The two women were mutual friends of Pierre Albert-Birot (founder of SIC) and Cahun posed for Orloff over a period in 1920–1921 and also dedicated an essay she wrote on "Sappho" in her manuscript, *Heroïnes* (1925) to Orloff (Leperlier 2006, 63). As in the portrait of Barney, Orloff portrays Cahun's facial features as strong and angular, the prominent profile echoing Cahun's own photographic self-representation. Orloff chose to represent her sitter's signature crew-cut style hair, a marker of her identity as a modern woman who was even more radical than the media image of stylish Parisian *garçonne*. In both this work and her portrait of Barney, Orloff chose to exaggerate the prominence of her sitter's noses as a marker of Jewish identity that would have been identifiable to her public. Many Jews at this time began to engage in rhinoplasty to reduce the size of their noses in response to widespread anti-Semitism. Perhaps in response to public desires to make Jews less visible, Orloff chose to do just the opposite in her portraiture, amplifying the noses of her sitters, Barney and Cahun, as a means to accentuate their shared identities as modern Jewish women artists. Her portraits of them embody the tension between her investment in Jewish and assimilated French identities.

Cahun herself wrote repeatedly about what she called her "curlew" nose, and her first pseudonym was Claude Courlis, French for curlew, the species of birds with long slender, downturned bills. No other contemporary artists created portraits of Cahun at this time, except the self-portraits that she produced collaboratively with her life partner, Marcel Moore. It is productive to compare Orloff's sculpted portrait of Cahun to one of the latter's collaborative works with Moore from circa 1928, the year of Cahun's father's death. In this photograph Cahun posed in a corduroy jacket resembling one worn by her father and emphasized her own angular facial profile as an attempt to mimic a 1917 photograph of him in profile. Scholars have argued that Cahun was attempting to connect as an artist in this work both to her father's "masculine" and "Jewish" facial features and bodily identity (Gravano 2009, 359–360). By engaging in a dialogue with these specific features from Cahun's practice and then exhibiting the piece at the Parisian Salon d'Automne, Orloff shows her deep investment in shaping the production and legacy of public imagery of the modern Jewish woman artist.

The identities that Orloff shared with some of her sitters and friends like Cahun and Barney—“woman,” “Jewish,” “modern,” “artist”—would eventually make them targets of the Nazi atrocities. Orloff seemed to recognize that these labels were in fact socially constructed through ideological terms and structures, and by creating new archetypes of the empowered modern Jewish woman artist, her portraits of her friends and colleagues acknowledged this dialogue. After having been hunted down and identified as Jewish lesbian artists during the Second World War, Cahun and Moore were arrested in 1944 and imprisoned by the Gestapo. When the Nazis invaded their home on the Channel Island of Jersey, they vandalized this piece by breaking off the prominent nose.

From displacement to commemoration

Orloff showed great perseverance and made tremendous sacrifices during the period leading up to the Second World War, when she narrowly escaped the Nazi *Vél d'Hiv* roundup of the Jews in Paris in July 1942, after being warned by the founder who cast her bronze sculptures, Alexis Rudier, and his friend who was a high level officer in the French *Préfecture de Police* that she would be arrested (de Bastier 2009). She had managed her life and career under Nazi Occupation in Paris for two years, when she was among the many French and foreign-born Jews banned from public spaces, forced to observe a curfew and wear the yellow armband with the Star of David and the word *Juif* written on it. Professionally stifled and prohibited from exhibiting or selling her work, during this period of occupation, Orloff strategically created what she called *sculptures de poches* or “pocket sculptures,” that could easily fit in her pocket. Her tenacity led to her difficult escape from Paris, fleeing first to Grenoble, then Lyon, and then Geneva, with her son, Élie, who was now a young adult whose physical disabilities made the travel difficult. Orloff alerted several clients in Geneva of her situation and they arranged for her lodging, provided her with studio space and materials and introduced her to collectors to help her earn an income. In spite of the great difficulties of this forced exile lasting nearly three years Orloff, remarkably, was able to produce more than 50 sculptures and hold a successful exhibition in 1945 at the Moos Gallery in Geneva. When the War ended and she returned to Paris, Orloff discovered that the Nazis had ransacked her studio, stolen much of her work, and brutally vandalized what they left behind. While her family tried to convince her to relocate to Palestine, she nonetheless was determined to rebuild her career in France. She created powerful works during this period, notable among them, a large sculpture entitled *The Return* (1945) that confronted the horrors of war and dislocation of the Jewish people.

Throughout her life, Orloff maintained close ties with Palestine and later Israel, which became her second home. For the last two decades of her life, she played a major role in giving visual form to the heroic national identity of the new Israeli state by creating monuments to fallen soldiers and portraits of important political and cultural figures. While she continued to accept commissions from her collectors for portraits and also created personal works depicting her own family members, she was most engaged during her final decades with public work in Israel. As an established international Jewish artist who was 60 years old in 1948, when the State of Israel was declared, she was well positioned to play a leadership role in the construction of a new



FIGURE 11 Chana Orloff, *Portrait of David Ben-Gurion*, 1949, plaster. Private Collection, Chana Orloff Estate, Paris. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

national artistic culture (Ofrat 1990). Orloff travelled frequently to Israel and purchased an apartment in Tel Aviv, where she met regularly with friends and family and made plans for several large exhibitions, monuments, and portraits of prominent figures in the early history of the state. Among these was a bust of David Ben-Gurion, 1949 (figure 11), first Prime Minister of Israel. She emphasizes the heroism and patriarchal authority of the legendary leader by means of the intensity of his facial expression and furrowed brow. Orloff also sculpted numerous portrait busts of other important political and military figures, including future Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, and Yitzhak Sadeh, 1951, the commander of the *Palmach* and one of the founders of the Israel Defense Force at the time of the establishment of the state. Resorting to traditional styles of commemoration in such works, emphasizing masculinity and heroism associated with Zionist constructions of the New Jew (Manor 2005), Orloff joined a large artistic movement of Jewish artists in Israel and Europe.

As an Israeli artist Orloff identified with the new state and played a vital role in making some of its earliest official and commemorative works, some of them influenced by Soviet memorials (Azaryahu 2003). I have written elsewhere (Birnbbaum 2012a) how such monuments honouring Jewish women and the Jewish underground, created in Israel after the Second World War recall Orloff's classically-inspired sculpted images of motherhood produced in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s that appealed to French critics influenced by the *rappel à l'ordre* or *return to order*, a cultural and political campaign to repress the traumas of a war-torn French state that impacted many immigrant artists in Paris. In response, many artists felt that they had no choice but to participate in a

widespread interest in a “Classical” revival that focused upon the maternal body as a site of cultural rejuvenation and national stability. By focusing later in her life on commemorative sculpture and warrior figures (both female and male) as mythological symbols of Jewish nationalism, Orloff’s work came full circle from her earlier practice as an émigré in Paris, when she depicted positive Jewish representations that were nonetheless connected to stereotypes.

The tension between Orloff’s proud Jewish and Zionist identity and her assimilated French identity persisted throughout the artist’s life and career, and is a fundamental aspect to my critical analysis of her work. When asked in 1965, three years before her death, by an Israeli journalist, “Where is your home, essentially, here or in Paris?” Orloff responded:

Oh! You caught it! This is indeed the drama of my life! I have a wonderful house in Paris and plenty of friends, but whenever I am in Paris I long for Tel Aviv, and vice versa. Such is life. [...] (Bashan 1965, 5)

Earlier in this same interview, the artist elaborated, “. . . . French friends and police officers, who helped me hide during the war, surely did so because they thought I am a good and proud Jew, who is not ashamed of her people!” (Bashan 1965, 3). Orloff’s pride in her dual identities and awareness of her own hybridity as a Jewish artist in diaspora was indeed a strength, and constituted a powerful, complex voice that enabled her to speak from multiple subject positions to diverse audiences over the course of her long and prolific career. Through her sculptural practice, she worked to change the look and shape of Jewish identity in the arts in interwar France. She used similar visual strategies to contribute to the Zionist history of art in Israel. As one of the several missing, non-canonical artists of the School of Paris who migrated between continents and forced exiles, Chana Orloff embraced disparate cultural and geographical perspectives as the basis of a complex identification not limited by the concept of a nation-state. In this article I have demonstrated that Orloff was a politically engaged international artist who, through her practice of sculpture—both portraiture and later monuments—showed her commitment to a wide range of representations and critical attitudes about gender, Jewish identity, and nationalism throughout her career.

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1. The literature on the artist is limited to several early monographs (Courières 1927; Werth 1927; Luzzatto 1933; Gamzu 1951; Talpir 1951), two catalogue raisonnées (Coutard-Salmon et al. 1980; Marcilhac 1991), summary essays in museum exhibition catalogues (Cassou 1961; Gamzu 1969; Cogniat 1971; Kofler 1993), two unpublished dissertations (Coutard-Salmon 1976; Grossman 1998), and a limited number of scholarly articles (de Bastier 2009; Birnbaum 2012a, 2012b; Birnbaum and Novakov 2009).

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