

may start to consider letting their more visually attractive documents (providing they are stable) leave the confines of the stacks. The general public may even start to take note of their existence.

Regrettably, *Plain Truth* is currently slated to travel only to the Mackenzie Gallery (Regina) and the Glenbow Museum (Calgary). Most Central Canadian galleries (including both the National Gallery and the Canadian Museum of Civilization) passed on it. Another opportunity for other parts of the country to become familiar with Western Canadian history and art falls on deaf ears.

**Brock Silversides**

Saskatchewan Archives Board

*Facing the New World: Jewish Portraits in Colonial and Federal America.* JEWISH MUSEUM, New York, until January 1998; MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Baltimore, February – May 1998.

*Facing the New World: Jewish Portraits in Colonial and Federal America* was a well-conceived and intellectually challenging travelling exhibition of portraits of Jews in America. Consisting of works from the Colonial and early Federal period, primarily drawn from the American Jewish Historical Society of Waltham, Massachusetts, a little-known, but rich collection of American Judaica, and from the Jewish Historical Society of New York City, one of the major North American collections of Judaica, *Facing the New World* was the first major exhibition to present the history of the leading Jewish families of Baltimore, Charleston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Richmond from the 1700s to the 1830s. The rich display of beautiful portraits was accompanied by artifacts, archival documents, and a well-researched and written catalogue.

The main thesis of the exhibition was that Jews in early America were part of a diverse group of colonists all attempting to establish an “American” identity and, when they commissioned portraits of themselves, they chose to be depicted in the same way as others of their class. Although they maintained their strikingly different religious customs, this was not revealed in the portraits. One cannot look at a portrait of a Colonial Jew and say, “Ah, this person is Jewish.” As Ellen Smith, author of one of the essays in the catalogue, reminds us, the idea of “American” was only being developed at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, “as people of very diverse origins were slowly assimilated into a distinctive, yet open, society, which was constantly recruiting new members.”

The exhibition was a veritable who’s who of Jewish families and American artists. One of its most interesting components was the large number of portraits from some single families. In particular the Levy-Franks family has left

a rich collection of seven portraits documenting three generations, covering a date span of ca. 1720 to 1750. According to Smith, "The Levy-Franks portrait series captures [the] dilemmas and ambiguities of colonial American Jewish identity as they were lived. Two great portrait series survive of the family: a series of seven paintings of three generations of the clan, and a lively series of letters exchanged between Abigail Franks and her son Naphtali between 1733 and 1748." She continues, "The painted portraits, still in their original frames, are the oldest surviving portraits of colonial American Jews, and the oldest family-series portraits to survive in all of American painting." It begins with the portrait (c. 1720–28, attributed to Gerardus Duyckinck) of Moses Raphael Levy, the patriarch of the Levy family. This portrait serves as an icon of early American-Jewish culture. It is a superb example of a baroque portrait with a dog symbolizing marital fidelity and a window view of a sailing vessel which refers to Levy's status as merchant-trader and ship owner. The last portrait, dating from 1750 and attributed to John Wollaston, from the series is of Rachel Levy Sexias (Mrs. Isaac Mendes Sexias). Other wonderful portraits in the exhibition include Sarah Rivers Lopez and her son Joshua Lopez by Gilbert Stuart; the beautiful Rebecca Gratz by Thomas Sully; Rachel Machado Phillips Levy, attributed to Adolf Wertmüller; the charming Adolphus Simeon Solomons, Mary Jane Solomons, and exotic Mendes I. Cohen, all by unknown artists; and the brooding Nathan Hart by Philip Parisen. Fortunately, the exhibition was not restricted to oils, but also included silhouettes, physiognotracés and miniatures.

Although the portraits were beautiful to behold, the labels accompanying each work did not establish the context in nearly enough depth. The second thread of the exhibition thesis was only revealed in the essays in the catalogue. While these early American Jews were actively working on becoming assimilated into the mainstream of what was becoming American society (as demonstrated by their fashionable portraits by prominent artists), they were also actively and passionately remaining practising Jews at home. The labels proclaimed: "Look! They patronized the same artists as their Gentile counterparts. And they posed with the same conventions as their Gentile counterparts." But given their social status why would they not patronize the same artists as their non-Jewish counterparts? Does not assimilation mean striving to be the same as everyone else? There was no mention in the captions of the dichotomy in these people's lives.

It is the surviving letters and artifacts included in the exhibition, and the essays in the catalogue, rather than the portraits themselves, that drive home the point the exhibition tries, but fails to make. Abigail Franks' (of the Franks-Levy family) letters, for example, allow the viewer to understand the struggle to remain Jewish, to survive as a Jew, in an overwhelmingly Christian world. Some of the material items that have survived are remarkable for documenting how Colonial Jews adapted and adopted non-Jewish materials for the

practice of their faith. The Gomez family's mustard pot-*cum etrog* (a citron holder for Sukkoth, the fall harvest festival), provides an excellent example of adapting available materials to religious, ritual use. Other interesting objects included the Seixas family's circumcision set, one of two extant, made by the New York silversmith Myer Myers, an important and skilled colonial silversmith who was also Jewish and whose portrait was in the exhibition, Rebecca Hendricks' sampler of the 78th Psalm, and the small book *Prayers for Sabbath, Rosh-Hashana, and Kippur ...*, translated from Hebrew by Isaac Pinto in 1765–66.

The exhibition would have been outstanding had the well-written essays and entries of the catalogue been transferred to the labels and introductory panels. I do not subscribe to the philosophy that a visitor must rely on an accompanying catalogue to understand the context of an exhibition. An exhibition must stand on its own; the majority of visitors are there to see and learn, not to have their nose buried in a catalogue reading the essays as they walk through an exhibition. Indeed, a catalogue should augment the information conveyed by an exhibition, but the basic information must be in the exhibition.

Of particular interest, and as an added attraction to the travelling exhibition, the Maryland Historical Society displayed a portion of their rich collection of American Jewish artifacts from the Eleanor S. Cohen gift. As a former employee of this institution, I enjoyed seeing so many of Miss Cohen's gifts, but the materials were added on as an appendage to the travelling exhibition. I believe that they could have been better integrated, both to enhance the exhibition and to add a new layer of meaning to these objects.

And finally I had some minor quibbles with some of the labels. In several instances, contemporary portraits of Gentiles were juxtaposed with their Jewish counterparts to show how similar the portraits were. This made perfect sense. Several captions, however, suggested that the posing conventions utilized, followed, or directly copied, mezzotints of prominent Europeans. Where were the prints so that we could see for ourselves? Furthermore, a mezzotint was defined as a "printed reproduction of paintings" which significantly degrades this intricate printing process which may be original art, not just a reproduction of another work. In another instance, the label for a portrait stated that the traditional title for the work was *David and Phila Franks*, but there was evidence to suggest the true identity of the sitters. What evidence? Who are the actual sitters now thought to be? Only upon turning to the catalogue does one learn that "if a 1735 date is used, the children are more likely David (age fifteen) and Aaron (not quite three), or possibly Abigail (Pouer, birth date unknown)." Why not include this information in the caption instead of leaving the viewer hanging?

If this exhibition was intended to educate the public, Jew and Gentile alike, with regard to the divide between the Colonial and Federal American Jew's public image and their private life, then I believe it failed. One comes away

thinking that other than religion, upper class Colonial and early Federal Jews were not that different from their Christian counterparts. In talking with a museum colleague, who is Jewish, and who saw the exhibition both in New York and in Baltimore, I learned that he had the same "So what?" reaction. The catalogue has a very different conclusion. These early portraits, as actively and specifically created objects, reflect the desires of the sitters, and consequently their peers, to be part of the greater community, looking like everyone else where, privately, important cultural distinctions in fact remained. In Ellen Smith's words: "The portraits never sat placidly on the walls. They marked the changes, tensions, and the creativity exhibited by the American Jewish community in creating an evolving American-Jewish identity."

In short, the exhibition was beautiful, but needed better labels and introductory panels to explain what we were looking at, and fell short in educating the public as to the importance of the portraits. Fortunately, the exhibition catalogue provides the information necessary so that in the long run, it does serve the purpose of documenting the theories behind the actual show. The exhibition also serves as an important reminder that the European settlement and of the New World and development of American culture was not by Gentile alone. Would I recommend it? Absolutely, but read the catalogue first.

Catalogue: Richard Brilliant, *Facing the New World: Jewish Portraits in Colonial and Federal America* (Munich, 1997) ISBN 3-7913-1863-2, 112 p. \$25.

The Maryland Historical Society also published a small catalogue for the materials specifically from their collections: *Facing the New World. Jewish Portraits and Decorative Arts in Colonial and Federal America From the Maryland Historical Society* (Baltimore, 1998), 32 p. \$14 (if purchased from the MHS, this small catalogue is included in the \$25 for the main catalogue).

**Laurie A. Baty**

Editor, *View: The Newsletter of  
the Visual Materials  
Section of the  
Society of American  
Archivists*

**Aislin and Chapleau Caricatures.** McCORD MUSEUM OF CANADIAN HISTORY, Montreal, Quebec. 22 May 1997 – 20 September 1998.

Picture this: hundreds of frizzy-haired Jean Charest clones setting out on the political trail; a youngish Pope John Paul II gleefully playing the accordion;