## A Spiritual Embrace

BY KATHERINE FRENCH

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Hyman Bloom began painting rabbis at the end of the nineteen thirties, using them as a metaphor for his own spiritual questioning. They confront the viewer with wide, expressive eyes. Their arms encircle the Torah, holding it close to the chest. "I decided to paint what I knew," Bloom observes, shrugging off the irony that he would make what *might* be considered religious art. "It was a good subject to paint. I don't think anyone else has painted this subject from the imagination. As far as I know, nobody has painted them from memory."[1]

Hyman Bloom's memories are complex, shaped by history and circumstance. Growing up in a Lithuanian village, which experienced the effects of WWI and the Russian Revolution, he forever held the anxious fear that evil could appear without warning. One day while sitting on the front step of his house watching the retreat of Cossacks, his mother pulled Bloom inside, afraid the soldiers might shoot him "just for practice."[2] Whether as a direct result of this incident, or hearing about the murder of the family's landlord by revolutionaries, the child later dreamed that the devil was staring into his bedroom window at night. The last sound he remembers on the day his family immigrated to America was the cry of a slaughtered animal. Life was dangerous and unpredictable within the Pale of Settlement, but orthodox families believed in the promise of tradition. This might not protect them from danger in this world, but would surely provide comfort and reassurance.

"I was the only one in my family who wanted to be an American,"[3] says Bloom in describing his boyhood in Boston's old West End. At home, he spoke Yiddish with his parents. At school, he was surrounded by other children like himself, first generation immigrants eager to speak English and embrace whatever opportunities their new country had to offer. Recognized as an excellent student and talented artist, Bloom was given a scholarship to the drawing classes at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He also studied drawing at the West End Community Center, one of the many settlement houses dedicated to educating recent immigrants. It was there he came into contact with Harold Zimmerman, an influential teacher who connected him with another talented student from the Jewish settlement house in Roxbury, Jack Levine.

Through Levine, Bloom and his teacher came to the attention of Harvard professor Denman Ross, who took the young men under his wing in order to test his theories of art education. Ross arranged for all three to have their own studios. He gave Bloom and Levine a stipend to pursue their art, which included private classes and free run of the Fogg Art Museum. High quality instruction, as well as access to one of America's best art collections, had the expected effect. By the age of twenty, Bloom and Levine were sharing a studio in Boston's South End, pursuing their own careers as independent artists.

Bloom knew where he came from, but didn't want to stay there. Following his bar mitzvah, he relates that he "threw my cap on the ashcan," becoming "responsible for my own sins."[4] He demanded to know why his mother thought the Jews were a Chosen People, and

why she was so determined to remain separate in the choice of clothes she wore, and in the food she ate. These were distressing questions for an Orthodox woman with a memory of violent pogroms. For her, an adherence to Chassidic tradition was an act of survival. Like many of her generation, Bloom's mother believed that "if they did not remain separate, the Jews would be lost forever."[5]

But Bloom belonged to a new generation, unhampered by the same sense of religion and social obligation. In Russia, he would have been denied an education, or the right to choose a profession. In America, it was possible, almost required, to become part of the greater world. Following the Second World War, Jewish writers, musicians and artists enjoyed an intense flowering of creativity. Mordecai Richler, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth were central to a literary renaissance. Copeland and Bernstein were renowned composers. Bloom was one of many prominent artists. Yet, for this first generation of "mass secularists in the history of Judaism," it was ironic that their "renunciation of orthodoxy and dogma went hand in hand with a persistent identification of the self as Jewish."[6]

Work by many Boston artists reflected the inevitable struggle against the beliefs of their parents' generation. As the son of a rabbi, David Aronson shocked the religious community by making paintings depicting the young Christ. After the death of his father, Jack Levine painted rabbis and Jewish kings – perhaps as a way of compensating for his refusal to have a bar mitzvah. Bloom had thrown "his cap on the ashcan" and begun calling himself a secularist, yet his first mature work was deeply engaged with religious subject matter. Like so many artists before them, these men needed to find their own voice – to grow beyond the past, while still embracing it.

Working in his own studio, the painter began an exploration of memory. *The Synagogue* (c.1940) depicts the Orthodox shul of his Boston boyhood, lit by flickering candles and swaying chandeliers. An ecstatic congregation surrounds the cantor. Although Bloom had stopped attending regular services, he still followed liturgical singing and found the theatrical performance of Pierre Pinchik particularly moving. "The singing in the Synagogue inspired him," observed his friend Dr. Al Stone Freedberg. "When Hyman was young, the really great cantors would stop in Boston for high holidays to sing at the Crawford Street shul in Roxbury. Hyman would buy tickets just to listen to these cantors sing."[7]

This extreme pathos and emotion could also be found within the act of painting. One night in the fall of nineteen thirty-nine, Bloom was alone in his studio and felt transported by a cosmic sense of color. "I had a conviction of immortality, of being part of something permanent and ever changing, of metamorphosis as the nature of being."[8]

This visionary experience opened the floodgates on a body of work, which used abstraction to represent memory. Color and light became the subject of Bloom's paintings. Instead of swaying over the heads of the congregants in the Synagogue, the chandelier fills the canvas. In *Chandelier II* (1945) the viewer feels moved by the strokes of color that radiate from the center, held by a light contained within crystal prisms. These same expressive colors had previously appeared in *The Christmas Tree* (1938-39). Leaving behind an obvious reference to Christianity, Bloom calls up an idea central to Jewish mysticism, that of Moses and the Burning Bush, the voice of God embodied within the flame.

Jewish and Christian tradition concretely states that God created heaven and earth. However, Bloom was enticed by the idea that there *was* no beginning and no end, and that the universe was held together by a continuous vibration. He embraced eastern mysticism and the raga music of Southern India, teaching himself to play many different instruments, including the sitar. Raga means color in Sanskrit, art historian Isabelle Dervaux points out. Within those ragas she observes that Bloom recognized the *sound* of color – the same "range of hues and tones he explores in his paintings."[9]

Bloom also recognized a painting's ability to provoke an hypnotic response. His interest in a transcendental experience coincided perfectly with his involvement with another kind of spiritualism – the belief that spirits could be conjured. In the late nineteen thirties, Bloom responded to a leaflet blown across his path on a Boston street inviting him to attend meetings

*Chandelier II*, 1945 (cat.29)

*Séance*, c.1940 (cat. 28)

*Séance II*, c.1955-57 (cat. 34)

of the Order of the Portal. Like many others, he was curious about alternative religion and psychic research. Bloom attended meetings at the Spiritualist Church, the Psychical Research Society and the Vedanta Center. He also read *The Secret Doctrine*, by Helena Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society. He was a regular participant in séances around Boston.[10]

For a young painter trying to make sense of his spiritual concerns, theosophy offered a perfect mix of religion and the occult. Blavatsky surmised that one achieved spiritual enlightenment through a process of reincarnation over many lifetimes. In his séance drawings and paintings, it is possible that Bloom considered himself a skillful medium, able to reach an essential truth through art. "The artist is a channel," he said. "In working on a painting over a period of time he creates a painting out of concentration and an inner directed search, allowing it to become manifest through intensity of focus. The artist's reward is pleasure, ecstasy from contact with the unknown…"[11]

Belief in spiritualism was wide spread across the United States and Europe between the two World Wars. This was particularly true for the German Expressionists. Kirchner wrote "the great mystery that lies behind all events and things sometimes becomes spectrally visible."[12] Kandinsky, along with many in der Blaue Reiter, was a Theosophist. His early work explored a world of dreams and imagination. His book *Of the Spiritual in Art*, grew out of Theosophist belief. "Kandinsky's early work brought together all aspects of life," said Bloom in speaking of his weekly discussions with other Boston artists. "We were all interested in Theosophy."[13]

Theosophists believed in heaven and hell, with various levels of purgatory existing between the two. Here, one could begin the spiritual journey toward the evolution of consciousness. During the mid-nineteen sixties, Bloom made large charcoal drawings in which monsters surround individuals who have entered the astral plane through meditation or physical death. In one, Bloom's face emerges from beneath the legs of a spider holding him down, a frightening comment on what Bloom describes as "an area of dreams, nightmare, unhappy emotional states, an indivisible world of suffering…" In all the astral plane drawing, Bloom only chose to depict the first level filled with threatening, fiendish creatures, commenting that "you draw your experience."[14]

Bloom's belief in Theosophy was not artistic conceit, but rather a deeply held conviction. When he began painting corpses and autopsies, many saw the paintings as horrendous and grotesque. Done so close to the end of World War II, some interpreted these works as a response to the Holocaust. But Bloom searched for beauty in decomposition and decay. Death was only part of the journey towards a greater spiritual understanding. The drawings of the Astral Plane show "an important side of Hyman," observes his friend and former wife Nina Bohlen. "He started out a young man doing what many wait until they are old to do – questioning what happens after death."[15]

Bloom had been trying to make sense of death from a very early age, perhaps because of the violence he had witnessed before leaving Russia. In sixth grade, he became fascinated with a copy of a Dürer print hanging on the wall of his classroom. In the famous image *Knight, Death and the Devil*, death is a decomposing corpse, whose flesh is being devoured by snakes that encircle his neck. The devil is a horned and troublesome spirit, but the armored knight is strong enough to overcome both. Bloom later remarked that this print "should be on everyone's classroom wall," yet he would not say the same for his later encounters with death.[16]

In nineteen thirty-nine, he was called to a morgue to identify the body of a close friend who had committed suicide. Four years later he and the artist David Aronson went to another Boston morgue to make drawings. News of the European Holocaust was just beginning to filter back to Jews in the United States, and the sight of a dead body horrified Bloom. This was partially mitigated by a Theosophical belief that life continued after death. Bloom "felt the possibility of opening a door into what is beyond, to see the mystery behind the partition."[17]

Bloom began a series of corpse paintings that focused on decaying flesh. The idea of metamorphosis provided hope "as the living organisms which inhabit the body in death transform it into life in another form."[18] This

idea is most clearly seen in *Melting* (1974), which incorporates a decomposing leg into an apocalyptic landscape of a setting sun. Bloom envisions a swarm of iridescent maggots and flies, which help complete the transformation of one life form's return to nature, a vision that is both reassuring and chilling. In a large charcoal drawing entitled *The Cure* (1968), Bloom foretells a nuclear holocaust. Tombstones stand in front of his decomposing leg, as a mushroom cloud rises above. "I can see no other way,"[19] he once remarked when contemplating a similar work. The apocalyptic vision might represent a cure for evil. The complete destruction of one world might make way for the next.

Since 1985, Bloom has created more than forty paintings of rabbis. Working on them simultaneously, he evokes the remembered world of the shtetl, where orthodox learning offered salvation. "People here don't know the honor that was accorded a rabbi,"[20] said Bloom. "He was practically a miracle man." But these late rabbis are the *alte Stil* of a man informed by history. Gone are the expressive young Jews painted before the Second World War, as well as the monumental rabbis of the mid-nineteen fifties. Solid authority gives way to a frail infirmity of age. These rabbis seem weaker, with a more tenuous hold on the Torah. "People like my mother believed rabbis had magical powers," says Bloom. "But they were victims, along with all the other Jews."[21]

Before he left Russia, Bloom's rabbi asked the young boy what he would do in America. Bloom answered that he would become a rabbi, but a secular education and unresponsive religious tutor set the boy firmly on the path of self-discovery through art. In classes at the Boston Museum, he had been encouraged to draw plaster casts from observation, a fairly standard technique used in the French Academy. Denman Ross taught a rigorous academic approach to color and design based on his love of Impressionist painting But Zimmerman insisted that Bloom draw from imagination. An image would be evoked from within the self. As the picture evolved, he would find direction.

Bloom not only influenced other painters, but also helped lay the basis for Abstract Expressionism. When artists viewed the chandeliers and Christmas trees exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art's *Americans 1942* exhibition, they saw a way to get beyond mythic symbolism employed by so many New York artists. DeKooning later said that he and Pollock considered Bloom to be "the first Abstract Expressionist artist in America."[22] But Bloom backed away, seeing abstract expressionism as "emotional catharsis, with no intellectual basis."[23] Although his experience with the world was visionary, he never gave up trying to paint that experience in a representational way.

If the critical imagination of the mid-twentieth century had not been so engaged with Abstract Expressionism, Bloom might now be seen in a different light. Unlike many artists who followed his lead, he never worked from observation. Bloom painted an interpretation of observed fact – not the fact itself. Nina Bohlen described his masterly process "of working wet into wet, of scraping, adding and then taking away" and then putting "one color on one side of the brush, another on the other side, twisting to create marvelous effects."[24] This put him at odds with the uncontrolled impulse he saw in the action painting of Jackson Pollock. Instead of experimenting, Bloom wanted to create "a complex picture in the classical sense; a work with depth and subject matter that was readable and over which I had exerted control."[25] Pollock, he dismissively told art historian Dorothy Thompson, didn't even have "a foot on the ladder."[26]

Bloom has said that modern painting went against the Torah by refusing to tell an inner truth.[27] In the portraits of rabbis that have populated Bloom's studio for the last 10 years, the painter has been relentlessly honest. Noting that some faces resemble Bloom, a friend asked whether they could be self-portraits. Bloom answered with a characteristic question. "When did I ever paint anything else?"[28] In an earlier conversation, he uses the word 'beggar' to describe artists and rabbis, who both must depend on society to make their living. "Rabbis were the aristocrats of learning," he says, deeply respectful of a knowledge acquired through diligent study. "But rabbis had to live through the help of rich people. They did the service, but they had to beg for everything to be supported."[29] The connection between the painter and his chosen subject is clear.

*Conversation by Candlelight*, 2006
(cat. 23)

But these rabbis are not merely good subject matter. Bloom presents the viewer with an understanding of what it is to paint, scraping away at the surface, changing the placement of the figure, and drawing over what seems to be a finished work. He believes in the power of art to triumph over death, a power derived from a spiritual embrace of memory and imagination. It is this imagination that refuses to let Bloom stop questioning the nature of things, that causes him to hold tightly onto painterly and religious tradition – and not let go.

*The Séance*, 1954 (cat. 5)

page 17 (left to right)
*On the Astral Plane: Cold Anger*, 1966 (cat. 8)

*On the Astral Plane: In a Cave*, 1965 (cat. 7)

**Endnotes**

[1] Hyman Bloom in conversation with the author, May 9, 2006.
[2] Dorothy Abbott Thompson, *The Spirits of Hyman Bloom: The Sources of His Imagery* (New York, NY, Chameleon Books, Inc. in association with the Fuller Museum of Art, 1996), p. 14.
[3] Hyman Bloom in conversation with the author, May 9, 2006.
[4] Hyman Bloom in conversation with the author, May 9, 2006.
[5] Hyman Bloom, interview by Dorothy Thompson, quoted in Dorothy Abbott Thompson, *The Spirits of Hyman Bloom: The Sources of His Imagery* (New York, NY, Chameleon Books, Inc. in association with the Fuller Museum of Art, 1996), p. 30.
[6] Dorothy Abbott Thompson, *The Spirits of Hyman Bloom: The Sources of His Imagery* (New York, NY, Chameleon Books, Inc. in association with the Fuller Museum of Art, 1996), p. 3l.
[7] Dr. A. Stone Freedberg in conversation with the author, September 19, 2006.
[8] Dorothy Abbott Thompson, *The Spirits of Hyman Bloom: The Sources of His Imagery* (New York, NY, Chameleon Books, Inc. in association with the Fuller Museum of Art, 1996), p. 28.
[9] Isabelle Dervaux, *Color and Ecstasy in the Art of Hyman Bloom* (New York, NY, The National Academy of Design, 2002), p. 27.
[10] Conversation with Arthur Polonsky, October 24, 2006.
[11] Hyman Bloom, interview by Dorothy Thompson, quoted in Dorothy Abbott Thompson, *The Spirits of Hyman Bloom: The Sources of His Imagery* (New York, NY, Chameleon Books, Inc. in association with the Fuller Museum of Art, 1996), p. 49.
[12] Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, quoted in Franz Roh, *German Painting in the Twentieth Century* (Greenwich, CT, The New York Graphic Society, 1968), quoted in Judith Bookbinder, *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism As Alternative Modernism* (Lebanon, NH, University Press of New England, UNH Press, 2005), p. 159.
[13] Hyman Bloom, interview by Judith Bookbinder, April 18, 1996, quoted in Judith Bookbinder, *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism As Alternative Modernism* (Lebanon, NH, University Press of New England for UNH Press, 2005), p. 157.
[14] Hyman Bloom, interview by Isabelle Dervaux, February 9, 2002, quoted in Isabelle Dervaux, *Color and Ecstasy in the Art of Hyman Bloom* (New York, NY, The National Academy of Design, 2002), p. 26.
[15] Nina Bohlen in conversation with the author, October 23, 2006
[16] Dorothy Abbott Thompson, *The Spirits of Hyman Bloom: The Sources of His Imagery* (New York, NY, Chameleon Books, Inc. in association with the Fuller Museum of Art, 1996), p. 18.
[17] Hyman Bloom, interview by Judith Bookbinder, April 18, 1996, quoted in Judith Bookbinder, *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism As Alternative Modernism* (Lebanon, NH, University Press of New England, UNH Press, 2005), pp. 138-139.
[18] Hyman Bloom, interview by Judith Bookbinder, April 18, 1996, quoted in Judith Bookbinder, *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism As Alternative Modernism* (Lebanon, NH, University Press of New England, UNH Press, 2005), p. 140.
[19] Hyman Bloom, quoted in Sigmund Abeles, "The Drawings of Hyman Bloom: An Artist's Appreciation," *Color and Ecstasy in the Art of Hyman Bloom* (New York, NY, The National Academy of Design, 2002), p. 27.
[20] Hyman Bloom in conversation with the author, May 9, 2006.
[21] Hyman Bloom in conversation with the author, October 10, 2006
[22] Willem DeKooning, quoted by in Bernard Chaet, "The Boston Expressionist School: A Painter's Recollection of the Forties," *Archives of American Art Journal 20*, no. 1 (1980), pg. 25, quoted in Judith Bookbinder, *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism As Alternative Modernism* (Lebanon, NH, University Press of New England, UNH Press, 2005), p. 125.
[23] Hyman Bloom, quoted in Judith Bookbinder, *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism As Alternative Modernism* (Lebanon, NH, University Press of New England, UNH Press, 2005), p. 126.
[24] Nina Bohlen in conversation with the author, October 13, 2006.
[25] Dorothy Abbott Thompson, quoted in Judith Bookbinder, *Boston Modern: Figurative Expressionism As Alternative Modernism* (Lebanon, NH, University Press of New England, UNH Press, 2005), p. 159.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Hyman Bloom, quoted by Rabbi David Sears in conversation with the author, October 13, 2006.
[28] Hyman Bloom in conversation with Iso Papo and the author, October 10, 2006.
[29] Hyman Bloom in conversation with the author, May 9, 2006.