

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## Art: Zoya Cherkassky

Smadar Sheffi, January 17, 2003

### Art

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Zoya Cherkassky Collectio Judaica, Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv

"Collectio Judaica" is not an easy exhibition, dealing as it does with the relationship between Jewish self-image and the European anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew

## Only in Israel

since the Middle Ages. Cherkassky spares no hooked noses or squinty eyes, yet the works on view are in no way caricatures.

The hardest work to stomach consists of three gold stars of David in a velvet jewelry box, placed in the gallery's display window. The stars evoke the yellow patches the Nazis forced Jews to wear during World War II (and earlier, in Germany itself). Each bears the word "Jude," in the familiar, stylized, Gothic script. Cherkassky takes the badge that once marked its wearer for persecution and murder and transforms it into a piece of jewelry.

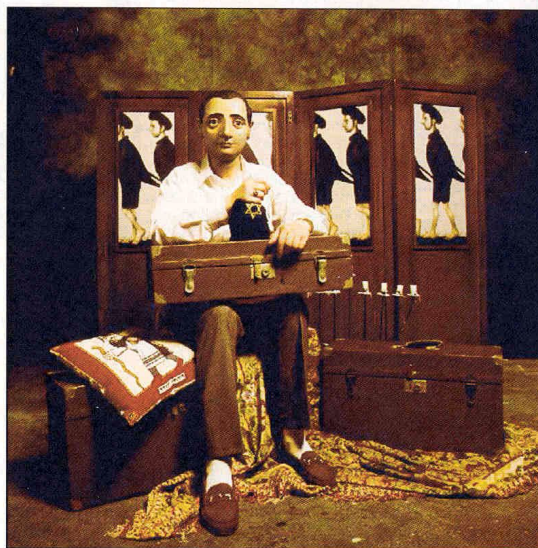
This inversion produces a strong sense of desecration of a sacred memory, even though no one can claim a monopoly on the memory of the Holocaust or on the appropriate ways to deal with it. The gold stars of David can be seen as provocative, but who is the target here? The survivors who were forced to wear the patch? Those who shape the national memory? The fact that these jewelry items are so beautiful confounds the viewer and provides an introduction to the works exhibited within the gallery itself.

Cherkassky's version of the Passover Haggada, the religious text that relates the founding story of the Jewish people – is spectacularly illustrated in red, white, black and gold, making her part of a very long artistic tradition. The pictures draw on both traditional and anti-Semitic images. Prominent among the latter are those in which the Jews have crow-like features. Cherkassky gives her Jews blood-red legs, curly sidelocks and fur *streimel* hats. In this the artist deliberately inverts the figures of the famous medieval German "Birds' Head Haggadah," with its human figures and heads of birds.

Two works, "The Wandering Jew" and two Seder plates, relate directly to anti-Semitic stereotypes. "The Wandering Jew" consists of a central photograph (of the artist's boyfriend), with a sculpted head in schematic outline. The figure, representing the "ultimate Jew," sits on a suitcase. The cushion next to him is embroi-

dered with the ugly, squinting figure of a Jew, wanderer's staff in hand. It appears at first like a blatant anti-Semitic stereotype, but is in fact based on a Chagall painting.

The Seder plates, like the Haggadah, relate to a long Jewish artistic tradition. A central plate is surrounded by small bowls bearing the names of the traditional components of the Seder plate. The former, on which the bowls



Star of David (above); "Wandering Jew."

are meant to stand, is decorated with an image of a bound infant and drops of blood. Cherkassky directly addresses the most debased and primitive form of anti-Semitism – the blood-libel. This is a very difficult work. Like the stars of David, it could only be acceptable in the context of an exhibition like this, by a Jewish artist, in a Jewish gallery in Israel.

The heavy screen is one of the most beautiful items in the exhibition. It is decorated with male yeshiva (Jewish seminary) students, whose faces resemble that of Cherkassky's boyfriend and whose bodies and clothes give them a bird-like appearance. The line of young men, fixed for eternity as walkers to an unknown destination, is another reference to the Wandering Jew and also to Hassidic stories of disciples following their rabbi or the genre of stories that begin with a journey from town to town, with all the travelers bound to each other. The curtain is not especially identified

as a Jewish object, yet here it is suddenly revealed as remarkably appropriate for the Jewish story: it is portable (like a carpet) and represents an impermanent division between different things or different worlds. The yeshiva students are not impervious to the outside world, and the Jews themselves cannot avoid assimilating anti-Semitic views.

Cherkassky joins a very long list of Israeli artists whose works employ Jewish motifs. There is a direct connection between this exhibition and that of David Wakstein (Tal Esther Gallery, fall 2002), which dealt with anti-Semitic caricatures in the Arab press. Cherkassky's exhibition is especially sharp because of its directness regarding symbols as well as the way it deals with objects that have a familiar and complex history. The fact that Cherkassky's figure of the Jew is based on someone close to her makes this excellent exhibition even harder for the viewer.

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