

March 28, 2008
Art Review | Warhol's Jews

Funny, You Don't Look Like a Subject for Warhol

By [KEN JOHNSON](#)

What was [Andy Warhol](#) thinking? In 1980, when his critical reputation was at a low ebb, he produced "Ten Portraits of Jews of the 20th Century." The series of 40-inch-square silk-screened canvases appeared at the [Jewish Museum](#) that year, and critics hated it. A reviewer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* called it "Jewploitation." The *Village Voice* critic said it was "hypocritical, cynical and exploitative." Hilton Kramer of *The New York Times* wrote, "The way it exploits its Jewish subjects without showing the slightest grasp of their significance is offensive — or would be, anyway, if the artist had not already treated so many non-Jewish subjects in the same tawdry manner."

Warhol himself expressed little interest in the subjects of the series, which included [Sigmund Freud](#), [George Gershwin](#) and Golda Meir. He said he liked their faces. It wasn't even his idea; the art dealer Ronald Feldman had suggested it to him after an Israeli dealer asked for a series of portraits of Meir. And it was Mr. Feldman, in consultation with Susan Morgenstein, director of the art gallery of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington, who came up with the list of names. And yet, despite all that, the paintings were warmly embraced by Jewish audiences when they were exhibited in museums and galleries as well as synagogues and Jewish institutions around the country.

Now, 28 years later, the portraits are back on view at the Jewish Museum, in an exhibition called "Warhol's Jews: 10 Portraits Reconsidered." Organized for the museum by the art historian Richard Meyer, the show presents one of the five editions of the paintings that Warhol made, as well as silk-screened versions of each and several preparatory graphite drawings.

Much has changed since 1980. Warhol is now viewed by critics as one of the most important artists of the past half-century, and, according to the Web site [artprice.com](#), last year he eclipsed [Picasso](#) as the leader in total revenue generated by public sales of his work. So this would indeed seem to be a timely moment to reconsider the series that Warhol himself called "Jewish Geniuses."

What is remarkable about the paintings now, however, is how uninteresting they are. What once made them controversial — the hint of a jokey, unconscious anti-Semitism — has evaporated, leaving little more than bland, posterlike representations.

Warhol followed his usual procedure for portraits, silk-screening a photograph over previously applied colors and tracing crayonlike lines over the photograph's contours. The underlying colors are broken up into flat, geometric compositions, creating a mild tension between abstraction and photographic representation.

The paintings do have a certain visual panache; you could even call some of them jazzy. The portrait of [Sarah Bernhardt](#), in which her beautiful, ghostly face is layered over a square divided diagonally into blue and orange fields, with a tilting blue square floating in the orange area, is evocatively layered and disjointed. The overall impression of the series, however, is of generic illustration. (The bizarrely compacted installation, in which prints and drawings hang in cramped closet-size alcoves, does not help.)

But if the series seems superficial, a sympathetic interpreter might say that that is the point. It is an extension of Warhol's preoccupation with celebrity.

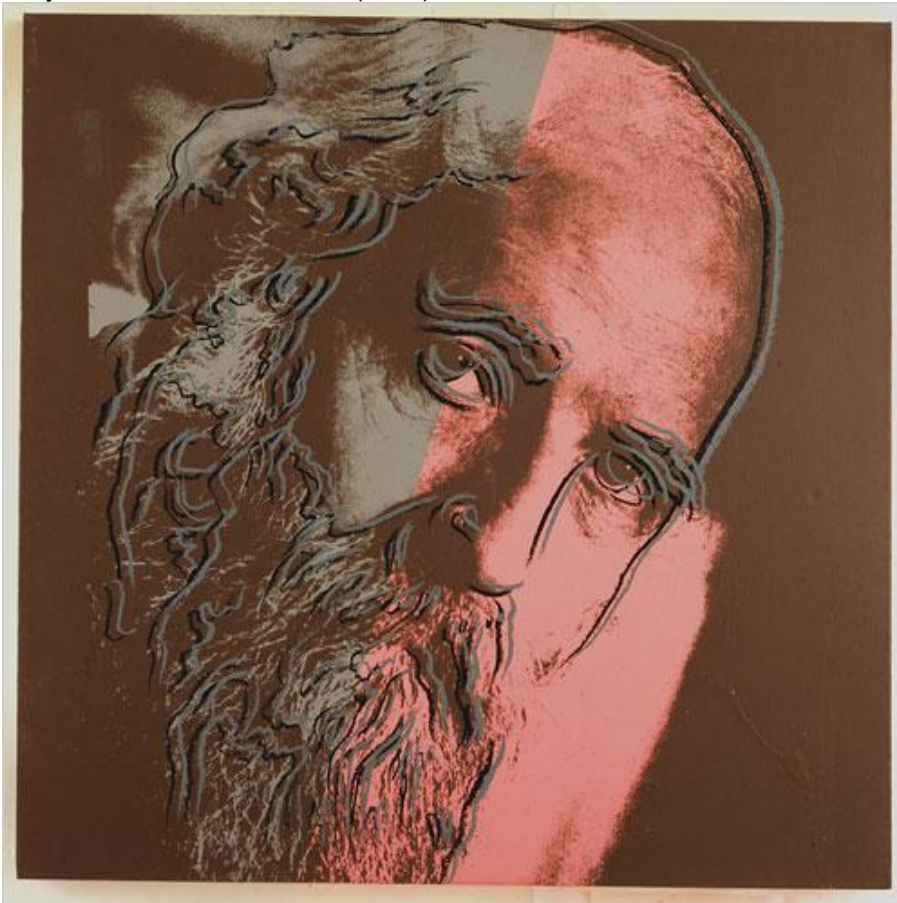
The subjects of the series were more than just celebrities. All were people of great accomplishment. Besides the four mentioned above, they include Louis Brandeis (the first Jewish [Supreme Court](#) justice); the theologian Martin Buber; [Franz Kafka](#); [Gertrude Stein](#); [Albert Einstein](#); and the Marx brothers Groucho, Chico and Harpo (making the 10 an actual dozen).

What the series reflects, however, is the distinctively modern experience of knowing many famous people but rarely knowing in any depth what they are famous for. Lots of people know the name Gertrude Stein, but how many have actually read anything she wrote? I'll bet Warhol himself never read Martin Buber or knew anything about Brandeis's legal philosophy. I wouldn't be surprised if he never read Kafka or Freud.

The issue for Warhol is not what his subjects did and not Jewishness in general. His real subject was fame. He was interested in famous people simply because they were famous. The difference between the 10 great Jews series and, for example, Warhol's 1964 series "Thirteen Most Wanted Men" is less significant than what they have in common. Both are, above all, about publicity.

"Warhol's Jews: 10 Portraits Reconsidered" runs through Aug. 3 at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92nd Street, (212) 423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org.

Andy Warhol's "Martin Buber" (1980), from "Warhol's Jews: 10 Portraits Reconsidered."



Courtesy of the Andy Warhol Foundation/A.R.S., Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Andy Warhol's "Sarah Bernhardt" (1980) from "Warhol's Jews: 10 Portraits Reconsidered."



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