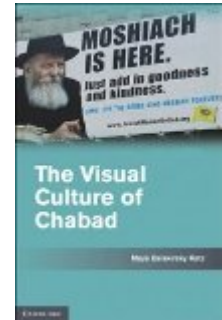


Maya Balakirsky Katz. *The Visual Culture of Chabad.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Illustrations. 264 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-19163-0.



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In *The Visual Culture of Chabad*, Maya Balakirsky Katz directs her perceptive scholarly gaze to the expansive field of visual culture that has come to mark the Hasidic movement of Chabad. Katz focuses on the array of images, personal portraits, and visual artifacts that so extensively permeate the public surroundings and daily experiences of those who encounter and participate within this global religious movement. Throughout the text, one is struck by Katz's attentiveness to phenomena that, pervasive as they are, might otherwise escape the eye or appear trivial. But nothing is trivialized in Katz's study of how Chabad has produced, consumed, and embedded itself within a rich, two hundred-year-old visual tradition. Rabbinical portraiture of the Chabad dynasty, the Chabad printer's mark, public menorahs, and replicas of "770" (the central headquarters of the Hasidic court, located at 770 Eastern Parkway in New York City), among other material expressions, are all examined within the pages of this book. In conducting such an examination, Katz successfully chronicles some of the yet un-

told aspects of Chabad's social history. Indeed, rather than only unpack the aesthetic choices and visual tastes expressed by Chabad, the book reflects a broader scholarly agenda—to "tease out how the social life of 'things' ... provides insight into Chabad's social life" (p. 227). Through both a careful historical excavation and a close reading of Chabad's visual productions, the author offers an insightful analysis of how individuals, organizations, and communities within Chabad learn to both make visible and perceive their religious worlds. Since these undertakings have made Chabad one of the most visible movements in the contemporary Jewish world, *The Visual Culture of Chabad* can be read as a book about the interrelated dynamics of visibility, public visibility, and religious piety. These dynamics reveal the extent to which there is more to Chabad's visual culture than meets the eye; Katz offers a multilayered analysis of how historical, social, and institutional forces have underwritten the visual engagements of the Chabad movement. These engagements, Katz argues, have played a constitutive role,

rather than solely a reflective one, in the development of religious ideologies and devotional practices among Chabad Hasidim.

The structure of the book conveys Katz's commitment to both visual culture and to her disciplinary orientations as an art historian. *The Visual Culture of Chabad* is organized along the thematic, material lines of visual culture; but Katz also temporally situates the objects investigated here with a historical analysis that unfolds both within and across chapters. The eight chapters are divided into two parts. The first part (chapters 1-4) focuses on rabbinical portraiture—from the portrait of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the late eighteenth-century founder of the Chabad movement, to the contemporary religious and messianic industry revolving around the image of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. The second cluster of chapters (5-8) focuses on material objects that take center stage in Chabad's public life, from the building of "770" and its replicas to museological displays. Though in these chapters Katz develops the structure of her text in relationship to a particular object, detailing in each case a nuanced historical narrative, the book avoids fragmentation into a series of isolated stories. The chapters, effectively framed by the book's introduction and postscript, coalesce to produce a dynamic and well-integrated account—one that is held together by the numerous analytical and methodological threads (dealing specifically with the intersection of visual culture and religion), which are skillfully woven through each chapter.

However, the strength of the book lies less in the novelty of these analytical and methodological threads than in the richness of Katz's account of Chabad's material trajectory. The author, for example, does not coin new concepts, nor does she problematize extant theoretical frameworks of visual culture. Also, while uniquely applying an analysis of the "sacred gaze" to a Jewish rather than Christian context, the author fails to explain what we might learn about Jewish visual piety

from the case study of Chabad. Finally, the structure of the book, particularly its division into thematic clusters of "the rebbe portraiture" (and thus of images of subjects) and "objects of Hasidism," would have been better reinforced if it had been grounded in the analysis of subject/object relations that is so prevalent in scholarly discussions of material culture.

These unexplored theoretical trajectories do not lessen the power of *The Visual Culture of Chabad* as a truly original work on the Chabad movement. In the context of a scholarly discussion that has predominately dealt with textual representations, Katz's analysis of the crucial role of visual material culture in the formation of the religious messianic movement that Chabad has become yields an especially innovative account. The perspective of visual culture not only allows Katz to employ a refreshing terminology (such as "Chabad image bank," "devotional portrait," and "visual messianism"), but also allows Katz to introduce new narratives about Chabad's development. Even if Katz is not the first scholar to refer to or engage with Chabad through the lens of visual culture (see, for example, Richard Cohen's epilogue in his *Jewish Icons* [1998], Jeffrey Shandler's chapter on Chabad in his *Jews, God, and Videotape* [2009], or Samuel Heilman's chapter in Jack Wertheimer's edited volume *Jewish Religious Leadership: Image and Reality* [2004]), she adds a number of new and valuable pieces to the discussion. Furthermore, while a book exploring the dynamics of a continuously evolving empirical field can never fully constitute, in and of itself, a comprehensive project, the book's breadth remains quite remarkable. The cover of the book—its own visual representation—appears to frame it as an analysis of Chabad messianism. After all, it features the face of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the celebrated icon of Chabad's messianic campaign, displayed on a New York highway billboard with a written message heralding the immanent redemption. However, by covering a range of themes, including institutional infra-

structure, leadership, and the movement's relationship with cultural Zionism, Katz's contribution to the literature on Chabad transcends the issue of messianism alone. Ultimately, the book offers new understandings of how Chabad has endured, and even thrived, despite numerous moments of crisis.

Take, for example, how Katz's analysis of photography during the tenure of Yosef Yitzchak, the geographically displaced sixth rebbe, (chapter 3) sheds light on the crucial function of this visual medium in the maintenance of leadership amid potential disruption. In particular, Katz shows how, through the production of the *rebbe's* photographs, as well as the circulation of photographs between the rebbe and devotees, Yosef Yitzchak established a virtual court in Poland, while maintaining authority and relationships in absentia. Or, consider how, as Katz shows, Chabad's visual program builds simultaneously on the tradition of interactive visualization of a rebbe (discussed in chapter 4) and an architectural infrastructure that detaches the Hasidic court from the person of the rebbe (discussed in chapter 6), thereby driving the movement's messianic ideology and enabling it to cope with the leadership void. Katz is at her best when she weaves her analysis of a particular visual tradition or object together with an ostensibly unconnected part of Chabad's history. The connections to which she draws attention are illuminating—such as the psychological and aesthetic connections she traces (in chapter 2) between the puzzling four portraits of Yosef Yitzchak, drawn by a woman artist in 1930s Vienna, and the experience with psychoanalysis of his father, and predecessor of the Chabad dynasty, the RaSHaB, in early twentieth-century Vienna.

Katz's position as a viewer calls for some commentary. There is no fascination, let alone adoration, in how Katz uses the lens of visual culture to describe Chabad. As she historicizes the devotional objects and sacred visual images with which Chabad identifies, she by necessity presents

the movement with an often challenging "textual portrait": she provides counter-narratives to some of its hegemonic myths and attends to objects from which the archival gatekeepers would have probably preferred she divert her gaze. At the same time, her critical, even daring, analyses are always sensitive, engaged, and empathetic, both reflecting and creating a close aesthetic distance. Neither a detached scholar nor admirer of Chabad's sacred material culture, the author positions herself at a critical distance from her objects—a position that allows her to zoom in and out in order to produce a convincing analysis. However, we know almost nothing about this position; while Katz writes on the visibility of Chabad Hasidism, she remains for the most part out of sight. We do know that the four portraits of Yosef Yitzchak were hung by her bedside table for two years; we know Katz engages with and even produces images of Chabad, as some of the photos included in the book are attributed to her private collection; and we even know that she is "one of David Berger's indifferent Orthodox Jews" (with regard to Chabad's disputed messianic theology) (p. 15). But we know hardly anything about her own modalities of seeing the world and especially the Chabad movement. Since the author does acknowledge in her analysis the implications of a "female gaze," it would have been helpful to locate her own perspective within the framework of gender politics—for example, as an orthodox woman who views and writes about portraits of (male) rebbes. To the extent that Katz adopts the idea that images should be treated "not only for what they depict but also for how they make us see"—and also that she works under the premise of "multiple visions"—it would have been constructive to know how the images of Chabad affected her own vision (pp. 10, 232).

The added value of a more reflexive positioning becomes apparent in one revealing moment in which the author does locate herself in relationship to her field of study. As she writes: "In the weeks after I lost my own mother prematurely

and inherited her precious family photograph albums that she spirited out of the Soviet Union in the late 1970s, I felt inexplicably moved by the gentle intimacy of Yosef Yitzchak's portraits. Although I had previously cynically dismissed the portraits' identification with RaSHaB as an attempt to alleviate the stigma of the female gaze, I came to see RaSHaB's presence as consciously inscribed in Yosef Yitzchak's portraits. In confronting photograph after photograph of my teenage self imitating what I always saw as my mother's larger-than-life beauty with the same pout and disinterested eyes I knew by heart from her family photographs, I could see RaSHaB's likeness posthumously embedded in the life portraits of Yosef Yitzchak" (pp. 60-61). This moment is memorable not only because it captures the author's own intimate reflections on the recent death of her mother, but also because it provides us with a glimpse of how Katz has come to change her view of a particular Chabad object. By utilizing her positionality in this way, she traces an unexpected layer of the object's already intricate aesthetics.

I hope this book will set an agenda for scholarship on both Jewish visual and material culture, as well as on the Chabad movement and the ongoing development of its visual world. While the book teaches us about the power of visual representations, its quality also reminds us of the strength of good textual representations.

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