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## Antonietta Raphaël: The Transcultural Experience of a Litvak-Italian Artist

The aims of this paper are to approach Antonietta Raphaël's artistic production in relation to the experience of migration, which she underwent twice, and which influenced her life and creativity, and to try to answer some questions: How did the events of her life influence the modes or themes of her work? What is the role of memory and nostalgia in her work? What about her relationship with the past and her Litvak origins?

The case of Antonietta sheds light on the broader context of Eastern European Jewish migration from the former Russian Empire, with a specific focus on the migration of women to Western Europe in the early 20th century.

Keywords: Expressionism, Jewish art, Litvak, migration, mythology, sculpture, women artists

It is reasonable to assume that the experience of migration, which Antonietta Raphaël underwent twice, inevitably influenced not only her life but also the development of her art, as evidenced by certain recurring themes throughout her work.

Her case introduces us to the wider context of Jewish migration from the former Russian Empire; and, of course, to the particularities of female migration to Western Europe at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> It is also necessary to consider the artist's relationship with her past and her Litvak origins.<sup>2</sup> Born into a traditional Jewish family in

<sup>1</sup> That last has long remained unexplored even in academic studies – both in sociological and artistic fields – which favoured a male gaze and an androcentric approach. More about the relationship between emigration and Jewish women in Green (1981): 51–59; Green, (1991): 215–229; and Morokvasic (1986): 65–76. More about artists and migration in Nochlin (1996): 317–37, and in Miyamoto and Ruiz (2021).

<sup>2</sup> By *Litvak* we mean Lithuanian Jews, an ethnic group formed during the 16th and 18th centuries in the territory of present-day Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

Kaunas,<sup>3</sup> we can assume that if she had remained in Lithuania, she would probably not have become an artist.<sup>4</sup> As we can see in her work, she was deeply affected by the events of her childhood, and the question of identity and self-knowledge has always been central to her artistic research.

Unfortunately, despite numerous attempts to gather biographical information about Antonietta, her life story remains incomplete. In the absence of any trace of Antonietta in the archives consulted,<sup>5</sup> her diary, her letters and the memories of her daughters are still our main sources of reference. There is still a certain mystery surrounding her data, as her memories are not always consistent and she was reluctant to talk about her past and her family, never revealing her original name to her Italian relatives. As she wrote that she was called ‘Nicomola’, short for ‘Nechoma’, we can assume that this was her Hebrew given name. ‘Nechoma’ – ‘comfort, consolation’ – was traditionally given to babies born around Tisha B’Av, the annual Jewish day of mourning for the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. In 1895, the year in which Antonietta is believed to have been born, this holy day began on the 29th of July, the day on which she always celebrated her birthday. This coincidence seems to confirm our assumption. Indeed, 1895 is the date she gave when she got married. She also shuffled the cards and falsified her date of birth on her passport several times because she felt uncomfortable being older than her husband, Mario Mafai.

Back to the name: as was often the case with Jewish people at the time, Raphaël and her mother changed their first names when they

<sup>3</sup> More about the Litvak communities in: Katz (2004); Andrijauskas (2008); Liekis and Polonsky (2013).

<sup>4</sup> This comment is not based on observations of the Lithuanian social context, but on considerations of the artist’s family. It was a traditional family, her brothers were tailors, and there does not seem to have been any particular sensitivity to art. Antonietta herself did not begin to paint until she arrived in Rome in 1925, at the age of about thirty. On Jewish artistic life in Lithuania during this period, and on the inclusion of women artists in circles of Jewish artists, see Bukauskaitė (2020): 107–123; and Bukauskaitė (2021): 17–30.

<sup>5</sup> During the 1960s, Antonietta’s Italian family forwarded an unsuccessful request for information to the Russian government. None of the more recent searches done in Kaunas and online returned any results.



1. Antonietta with her mother Chaya, London, c.1918–1920. Courtesy Centro Studi Mafai Raphaël, Rome

emigrated to Britain. Either 'Chaja' or 'Nechoma' was usually translated as 'Annie'.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps to distinguish between the two, the artist adopted the name 'Annette' and then 'Antoinette'. Unfortunately, we do not know much more about her family name.

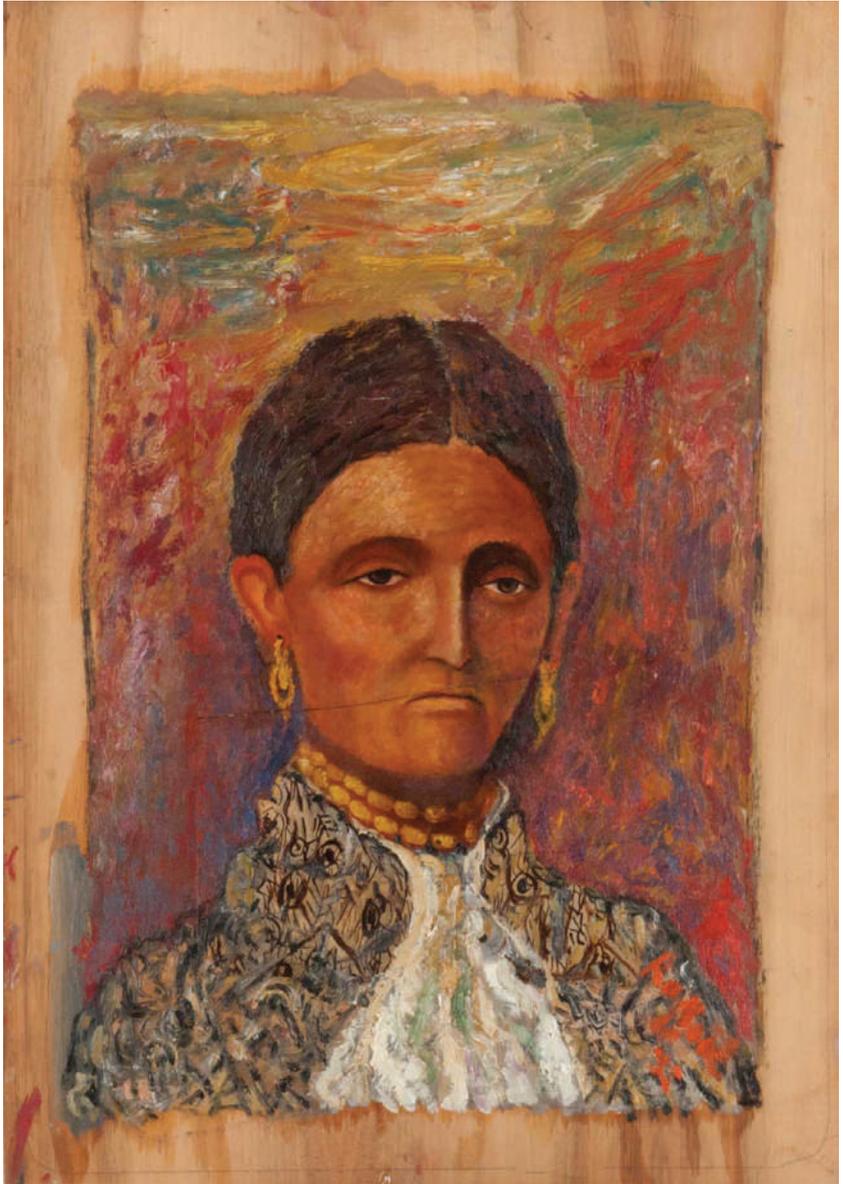
Raphaël explained that she was the youngest of twelve children of a rabbi, Simon, who died when she was still a child. She spent her childhood somewhere near Kaunas in modern Lithuania. On one occasion, the artist wrote that in 1905, after the death of her father, she and her mother left the Russian Empire to join her brothers in London. On another occasion, she reports their arrival in London in 1910, so it is unclear when or under what circumstances they left the country. This is not just a subtlety: she would have been either ten or fifteen years old, which would make a big difference in terms of the influence, if any, that Litvak culture had on the artist's fictional world, and formal and thematic choices. At the end of the 19th century, as we know, many Lithuanian Jews fled to Eastern Europe to escape anti-Semitism, but there were no pogroms in the Kaunas region. However, Antonietta had some memories about them. Since she mentioned that her maternal family came from Ekaterinoslav, where she may have visited, we can assume that they moved to the east of the country before going to London. It is likely that they were economic migrants who joined part of their family who had already emigrated.

Emigration has always been a painful process. Logistical challenges added to the psychological difficulties, and it was more expensive and complicated to manage then than it is today. In addition, Jews generally needed special permission to move around, as Marc Chagall recalls in his memoirs.<sup>7</sup>

Migrating to Britain must have been a powerful experience, even if it took place within a specific cultural continuity, as she moved from one Jewish community to another. Antonietta took an active part in the social life of the East End, joining a theatre group through which she met intellectuals and artists, including the sculptor Jacob Epstein. She studied

<sup>6</sup> On the Federation of Synagogues Burial Society database, her mother Chaya is registered as Chaya/Annie Raphael.

<sup>7</sup> Chagall [1931] (1998): 73.



2. Antonietta Raphaël, *My Mother*, 1932–1958. Oil on panel.  
Courtesy Centro Studi Mafai Raphaël, Rome

piano and violin and became a music teacher, according to the London Street Directory in 1920.<sup>8</sup> When her mother died in 1924, she left London to explore southern Europe and the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> Antonietta's mother was a central figure in her life and the difficulties they faced together had an undeniable influence on her work.

After a few months in Paris, she went to Rome and began attending a free school of nude painting.<sup>10</sup> Here she met two young painters, Mario Mafai and Scipione, with whom she contributed to the so-called 'Via Cavour School' in 1925/1930 – the beginning of the famous Scuola Romana. Until then, she had made a few sketches and visited art museums, but had devoted herself to music. Something changed in Rome. The colours of the city enchanted Antonietta and inspired her to paint. From this period come some fiery cityscapes and mysterious interiors, most of which were lost in the bombing of London during the Second World War. Antonietta aroused the curiosity of her male colleagues. Mafai and Scipione, who had never left Rome, were interested in her originality and the many experiences she had gathered in Europe. However, as a woman, she was not always taken seriously.

Over time, conflicts in her relationship with her companion and partner Mario Mafai (with whom she had three daughters) and the need for creative renewal led her to study sculpture. Slipping from painting to sculpture, she moved from Rome to Paris and then to London, where she

<sup>8</sup> The 1920 London Street Directory reports on page 605: 'Sidney Street. East Side. 36 Raphael Mrs. Antoinette, teacher of music'. The same is on page 588 of the 1925 Post Office London Directory.

<sup>9</sup> 'I was tracing the itinerary, London, Paris, Rome, Egypt. This way I arrived in Rome. And Rome fascinated me and seemed more beautiful than ever! Even more beautiful than all the descriptions I had read'. From Antonietta's journal, 23 January 1959. The artist's diaries and correspondence (only published in fragments) are kept in the Mario Mafai and Antonietta Raphaël Fund, Alessandro Bonsanti Contemporary Archive – Gabinetto Scientifico Viesseux, Florence. See <https://www.viesseux.it/archivio-contemporaneo/elenco-dei-fondi/mario-mafai-antonietta-raphael.html>

<sup>10</sup> 'I decided to stay there a little longer, and to avoid wasting my time, I went to the Academy of Fine Arts to draw the nude where furthermore all the foreign intellectuals end up drawing the nude and painting, and also out of a secret desire to be able to paint Rome even more beautiful!' (Antonietta's journal, 23 January 1959.)

3. Antonietta Raphaël, *The Anguish*, 1936. Plaster. Courtesy Centro Studi Maïfai Raphaël, Rome





4. Antonietta Raphaël, *Escape from Sodom*, 1939–1969. Bronze. Courtesy Centro Studi Mafai Raphaël, Rome



sought out old friends like Epstein. The journey was indeed an exercise in renewal and stimulation of creativity.

We know very little about what happened in Paris because the artist left no traces in her diary and her letters to Mafai were sporadic. In France, Antonietta initially adopted a 'classical' approach, influenced by Kolbe, Despiau, Bourdelle, and Maillol. She searched for solidity, and paid unwavering attention to volume and light effects. After meeting Epstein, Antonietta developed a sensitivity to primitivism and the ancient Egyptian statuary, which she appreciated during her frequent visits to the British Museum. A penchant for concision prevented her work from being overly ornate, and she avoided the temptation of a certain monumentalism that was in vogue in Rome. In 1933 she returned to Rome, where the sculptor Ettore Colla, who had studied under Bourdelle, offered her a corner of his studio for a while. At that time, Antonietta had already exhibited several times as a painter, but her sculptures were almost unknown to the critics.

In 1938, the promulgation of racial laws in Italy forced her to flee from Rome and go into hiding with her three daughters. It was not until 1951, after the war, that Antonietta returned to Rome, choosing it as her home. During the 1950s, she made many trips to Italy and Europe, but surprisingly never returned to Lithuania. Nevertheless, she claimed her origins, so much that she wrote in her diary: 'I am Nordic, Lithuanian, I spent my youth in England. Arriving at the Mediterranean coast was a revelation to me. I seemed to feel the colours vibrating around me, I would say, almost more than those who had always lived in the south'. Given that Lithuania was part of the vast Russian Empire at the time, her emphasis on nationality may seem bizarre. But claiming individual national roots within the Empire was not uncommon: Sonia Delaunay also stressed her Ukrainian origins.<sup>11</sup>

However, Antonietta Raphaël did not have a particular gift for memory. She did not suffer from nostalgia; what had happened had happened. She was not interested in what we cannot change or transform; she always looked only to the future and rarely allowed herself to reminisce

<sup>11</sup> Giordano (2002): 23–24.

in her diaries: ‘one must never idolise the past, one must go forward’, she said. The large sculpture ‘Escape from Sodom’ seems to embody this imperative: it depicts Lot’s wife turning into a pillar of salt as she fled Sodom, turning to face the burning city despite a divine command. But there is at least one exception. In May 1956, Antonietta went to China with an Italian delegation of artists for a cultural visit and to take part in a group exhibition in Beijing.<sup>12</sup> In those days the journey was very long and it took several days to cover the distance between Italy and China by plane. There were many intermediate stops, including a short stopover at Vilnius Airport. In a letter to her daughter Giulia, and later in a diary note, she expressed her happiness to be in Vilnius. She said that when she asked people about what Vilnius was like now, they replied that it was a beautiful city, but that Kaunas, though smaller, was more beautiful. Antonietta later wrote that a strange feeling – regret, perhaps – came over her. After fifty years, she was having dinner at the airport only fifteen kilometres from the city, but she could not visit it; she had to leave again and move on.

One of her travelling companions, the painter Ampelio Tettamanti, thanks to whom we know many details of the journey, sketched a beautiful portrait of Antonietta during the trip.

Returning to her work, the war years were a difficult but prolific time for her. Uprooted and disconnected, Antonietta used art as a means for self-exploration amid a constant struggle for independence.

The events of Antonietta’s life, her uprooting and displacement, had a profound effect on her artistic production, especially in her choice of subjects. Her sculptural work, in particular, was marked by the themes of wandering and flight, which she developed on several occasions by

<sup>12</sup> This journey was organized by the founder of CGIL’s National Union of Artists, Mario Penelope. The Italian group was composed of Raphaël with Aligi Sassu, Ampelio Tettamanti, Agenore Fabbri, and Tono Zancanaro. On the 9th of May, the artists left Rome and stayed in Zurich for a week while waiting for a visa. On the 15th of May, they flew from Zurich to Prague, and from Prague to Moscow, stopping at Vilnius airport for dinner. They spent the whole day of the 16th of May in Moscow, then left again for the Soviet border. Irkutsk was the last stop before Beijing, where they landed on the 18th of May.



5. Ampelio Tettamanti, *Portrait of Antonietta travelling to China*, 1956. Ink on paper.  
Courtesy Silvana Tettamanti, Rome



6. Antonietta Raphaël, *Niobe*, 1939. Bronze. Courtesy Centro Studi Mafai Raphaël, Rome

dealing with biblical stories. One of her main sources was the myth of Niobe,<sup>13</sup> taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which she used to explore the motif of mother and daughter. She had owned a precious old copy of this book since her days in London. It was one of the few things she took with her when she left England in 1924.

This series of works also explores the concepts of hubris, guilt, and the inheritance of evil, as well as the delicate balance between divine causality and human error. It also embodies the dual condition of flight and struggle as a condition of migration itself, which has always been a socially transgressive condition for women.<sup>14</sup>

In Antonietta's imagination, factual details, mythology, and biblical stories constantly overlapped. Real life and fiction always mixed together: the artist was Niobe, just as her mother had been a Niobe before her.

She returned to this motif several times in sculptures before the war and the Nazi persecutions, so we can say that the mother-daughter theme is linked to the artist's childhood and is only a part of a broader speculation

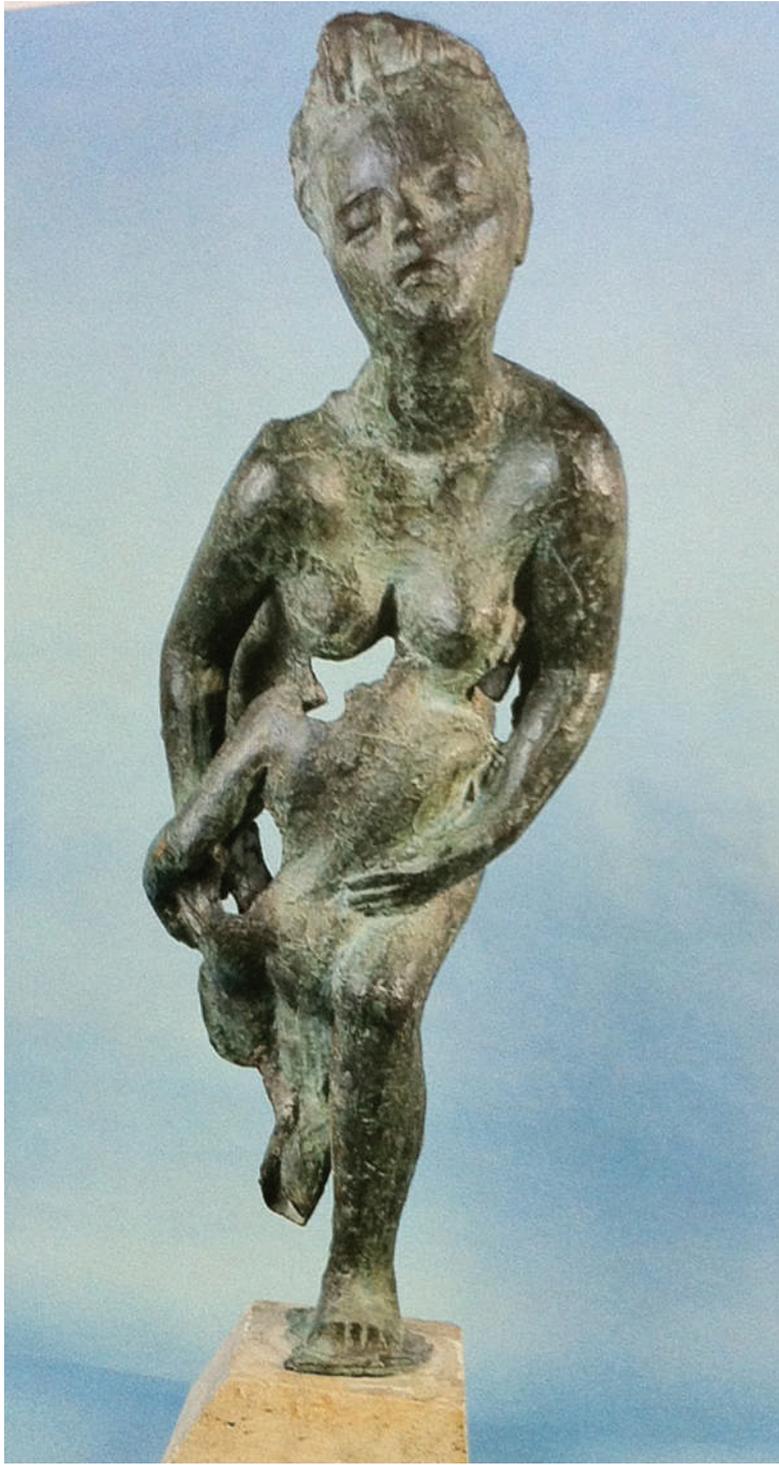


7. *Niobe* of Villa dei Quintili, Rome, 2nd century AD copy. Marble. Courtesy Parco Archeologico dell'Appia Antica, Rome

<sup>13</sup> Niobe boasted of her progenerative superiority to the Titan Leto and was punished for her pride. Apollo and Artemis killed all her children while she was trying to protect them.

<sup>14</sup> See Poinot (2020), <http://journals.openedition.org/hommesmigrations/11902>.

8. *Niobe*, 1939. Bronze. Courtesy Centro Studi Mafai Raffaelli, Rome





9. Antonietta Raphaël, *The Flight no. 2*, 1947–1958. Bronze. Courtesy Centro Studi Mafai Raphaël, Rome

on the feminine dimension. It should be noted that in the Italian context between the two world wars, artists (including women artists) rejected the theme of motherhood in various ways, choosing instead to refer to the Virgin Mary or the Great Mother of the Mediterranean tradition, rather than to Greek mythology.<sup>15</sup>

In a 1939 version, we can see how these references mix with the classical Roman sculptures Antonietta was used to observing. This work is formally close to the Niobe of the Roman Villa dei Quintili, which she had likely seen. It has the same layout: the two figures seem to be designed into each other – a solution Antonietta repeated several times – as if the mother wanted to incorporate her daughter's body into her lap. It is the only one with drapery.

Antonietta usually preferred to model naked human figures, as they more openly suggested the movement she was looking for.

Gradually, she gave way to a gestural art that was more essential and at the same time more dynamic. From the end of 1939, she adopted new

<sup>15</sup> See Iamurri and Spinazzè (2001).



10. Antonietta Raphaël, *The Comber*, 1957. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Centro Studi Mafai Raphaël, Rome



11. Antonietta Raphaël, *Self-Portrait with Violin*, 1928. Oil on panel. Courtesy Centro Studi Mafai Raphaël, Rome

practices involving the fragmentation of material and mutilation, a trick used in the Roman milieu at the time.

The *Niobe* of 1939 is a vivid and powerful example of this kind of treatment: Niobe floats on one foot, with torn material and an unstable appearance that erodes volume and gives a sense of movement.

In *The Flight* no. 2, all the attention is focused on the smooth rendering of the diagonal movement. The bodies of the three children seem to be merged with that of the mother, who is trying to move forward, to escape.

For the artist, mother and daughter is a dramatic subject, but one that is joyfully portrayed in her paintings.

If her sculpture is essential, Antonietta's painting is rich in colour, lively, and increasingly decorative. *The Comber*, for example, might seem to be a subject far removed from the mother-child theme, but it is in fact



related to it. The presence of the comb is not only a symbol of vanity or purity, but also, as in some archaic cultures of Central Europe and Anatolia, a symbol of protection,<sup>16</sup> which perhaps brings these paintings back to the original theme. It is also a self-portrait, part of a search for identity. Motherhood has a higher and broader meaning for Antonietta. It is not only about her private life or a mere matter of procreation, it is something more. It means the creation of all things, as she explained in an interview.<sup>17</sup>

Despite her close relationships with various Italian artists, Antonietta remained a solitary figure on the Italian art scene, and very original both in terms of subject matter and style. Her private matriarchal world and her status as a Jewish sculptor, in stark contrast to the patriarchal, Catholic, and Fascist society of the time, made her an outsider.

Nevertheless, she participated in many important exhibitions, such as the Rome Quadriennale and the Venice Biennale between 1948 and 1954. She adapted to the environment of Roman modernism, but never really became part of the indigenous Italian tradition. She brought with her elements of the Jewish tradition, some tragic themes, and a specific sense of space that were not in keeping with the tradition of Italian art. Combined with this was her original sense of colour, conveyed through the Expressionist tendency that was so widespread in Paris. This was relevant to Antonietta's contemporaries, who were searching for new paths, and to whom she offered real freedom and an extraordinary imagination nourished by her intense dreams.<sup>18</sup>

Some of her cultural references were unusual in the specific Italian context. From the very beginning, Italian critics perceived her peculiarity, emphasising her Oriental-Slavic inspiration and comparing her to Marc Chagall and Chaim Soutine.

In sculpture, she synthesised the lessons of Bourdelle, Maillol, and Epstein, whom she always considered to be her master.

Echoes of the statues of the ancient Romans, as we have just seen, and of Arturo Martini, a great innovator of Italian sculpture in the 20th

<sup>16</sup> Gimbutas (1989).

<sup>17</sup> Mottola (16 Sept. 1964): 26.

<sup>18</sup> Iamurri (2012): 153–155.



12. Antonietta Raphaël, *Yom Kippur in the Synagogue*, 1931. Oil on canvas.  
 Courtesy Centro Studi Mafai Raphaël, Rome

century, resound in her art, which truly combines different sources. Some critics, looking at the harshness of her early paintings, which were almost like bas-reliefs, saw in them the characteristics of Russian icons, and I must admit that I thought this was reasonable. But when, a few years ago, I visited the deposits of the Čiurlionis Museum in Kaunas and saw the polychrome wooden statues of Christian saints that used to stand on street corners, I wondered what impression they must have made on the little Antonietta and whether she remembered them when she painted her first canvases.

Jewish culture also inspired her as inspiration in many ways, either thematically or formally. Themes such as wandering and creation are present in her work, as are biblical stories and liturgical rites. Moreover, as we can see in the painting, Antonietta did not try to imitate the real

world through perspective. Reality is often subverted by floating figures living in fluid architectures. So, perhaps we can imagine a link between this disregard for the spatial dimension and the fact that Jewishness cannot be reduced to a spatial concept: as the architect and fine Jewish intellectual Bruno Zevi has observed, Jewishness lives in time, not in space.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the insistence on the theme of creation (approached through the path of motherhood) owes much to the Jewish obsession with creation as an ongoing action, something in progress, in which man participates with God, as Martin Buber reminds us.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, Raphaël's work is the result of a wise management of many different inputs, of a transcultural experience built on roots and loss. She brings out the best in migration, making art a powerful tool for reconciling diversity.

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<sup>19</sup> Zevi (1993): 10.

<sup>20</sup> Buber (1996): 100–101. 'The world of true Judaism is the world of the unity of all life on earth, a unity not in being but in becoming, and a becoming not of itself but of the human spirit chosen by the divine Spirit to be, as the Hebrew word proclaims, His "companion" in the work of creation.' See also: Buber, *I and Thou* (1937).

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## Antonietta Raphaël: litvakų ir italų dailininkės transkultūrinė patirtis

### *Santrauka*

Šio straipsnio tikslai – pažvelgti į Antoniettos Raphaël meninę kūrybą atsižvelgiant į jos migracijos patirtį, kuri paveikė jos gyvenimą ir kūrybą net du kartus, ir pabandyti atsakyti į keletą klausimų. Kaip Raphaël gyvenimo įvykiai paveikė jos kūrybinės raiškos būdus ir kūrinių tematiką? Koks yra atminties ir nostalgijos vaidmuo jos kūryboje? Koks menininkės santykis su praeitimi ir litvakiška kilme? Antoniettos atvejis nušviečia Rytų Europos žydų migracijos iš buvusios Rusijos imperijos platesnį kontekstą, skatindamas ypatingai skirti dėmesį moterų migracijai į Vakarų Europą XX a. pradžioje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: ekspresionizmas, žydų menas, litvakai, migracija, mitologija, skulptūra, moterų dailininkės