

Louis Rosenthal, Sculptor of Jewish Art

IN the midst of the most modern surroundings, in the Drovers and Mechanics Bank Building, forsooth, a Baltimore sculptor models from his clay the historic personages of an ancient people.

Louis Rosenthal, a native of Russia, who emigrated to this country in 1907, and established himself in Baltimore as an operator in one of the large clothing factories, soon gave up his humble position in the commercial world and directed his talents to his more dignified work in sculpture. His genius was quickly recognized at the Maryland Institution after his enrollment there as a student under Prof. Ephraim Keyser, where he received prizes and numerous honorable mentions. After his graduation from the institute the artist struggled for several years to make both ends meet, for in the coin of the realm the returns were very meagre indeed. Despite the most distressing circumstances, he steadily applied himself to his art, and his work is now beginning to receive widespread and authoritative appreciation. But it is not of Mr. Rosenthal himself that we would write in this article, no matter how interesting his personality. It is the merits of his work that require attention, both because of its virility and the exquisite touch of the author, whose modeling is productive of noteworthy results. Rosenthal is essentially a sculptor of Jewish art, and as such we have chosen here to discuss his conception of two of the most celebrated Tannaim, Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Simeon Ben Yohai.

The bust of Simeon Ben Yohai, the supposed author of the Zohar, and the bust of Akiba, his teacher, pictured here, express the sculptor's individuality better, perhaps, than any others of his works. It is at once apparent that the artist himself is possessed of strong Jewish feeling, that he is well-versed in the Talmudic background, that he has a vital understanding of Jewish history, and that he is animated with a passion to portray the Jewish soul in a thoroughly Jewish spirit. Rosenthal has, it is true, completed a number of pieces of a non-Jewish character, such as his "Newsboy," a splendid study, and "War," a heroic group which took the first prize at the Mary-

land Institute when he was only a student, but these are of comparatively minor importance, and are so considered by the artist himself, who is determined to devote his talents more particularly, and almost exclusively, to Jewish art.

The head of Akiba Ben Joseph represents the father of rabbinical Judaism quietly determined, undisturbed by the prospect of suffering physical agonies, unmoved by the thought of martyrdom, employing his favorite maxim, "Whatever God doeth, He doeth for the best." Historical sources give only an incomplete portrait of the great Palestinian Tanna and Rosenthal's conception is based on the numerous legends surrounding his life. Of Akiba's character it is



Rabbi Akiba

known that he was not proud and arrogant, but of a modest disposition. He was modest only in private affairs, however, for when an important matter, one that was not merely personal, was concerned, Akiba could not be cowed by the greatest, as is evidenced by his attitude toward Gamliel II. Others of his personal excellences were his benevolence, and kindness toward the sick and needy, but he is chiefly celebrated for his vast intellectual capacity. The bust by Rosenthal portrays all of these qualities and visualizes them with remarkable skill. The very hand, unconsciously toying with the beard, has lifelike semblance. It is evident that the general expression of the face is brought out through laborious efforts over the technical details.

The bust of Simeon Ben Yohai portrays the great mystic in a most striking attitude. It is executed to represent a momentary position, showing Rabbi Simeon angered at the people for neglecting the study of the Torah, which he declared to be one of the three good gifts of God to Israel, and which could not be preserved without suffering. According to tradition, Simeon, whose anti-Roman feeling was very bitter, was compelled to seek refuge in a cavern because of the Roman governor's decree sentencing him to death. He remained in this hiding place until twelve years had elapsed, when Elijah, the prophet, announced to him the death of the emperor and the annulment of the sentence of death against him. When Simeon came forth, he observed the people occupied with agricultural pursuits to the neglect of the Torah, and, being angered thereby, he smote them with his glance. The power of the Tanna's eyes is remarkably brought out by Rosenthal—to such an extent that it is almost uncanny. The head, which seems literally to rise out of the book of the Zohar which forms the base of the statue, shows, besides, the independence of Rabbi Simeon's character, its strength and power. The effect is well-nigh supernatural.

It might be well to explain that Rosenthal's ideas on the execution of Jewish subjects are very definite and of a distinctive character. As he conceives him, the Jew must be unalterably steadfast and determined in maintaining his individuality. "The time has come," he remarked, "when we should depend less upon others and more upon ourselves, for the past plainly shows that we have had strength to endure; this power is undiminished today, and, after lying dormant so long, is beginning to awaken to claim its own. I will not bring out in my art the picture of the Jew, meek, humble, trembling and in despair. I will portray him rather, as Herzl said, 'not with intent to awaken sympathetic feelings on our behalf. That would be a foolish, futile and undignified proceeding.' I shall endeavor to show the Jew," Mr. Rosenthal continued emphatically, "as he really must be, not asking for sympathy, but demanding respect!" A study of the busts of Akiba and Simeon illustrate the sculptor's words.

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