Kindling of the Lights
c. 1956
Glass shards, polychrome
Jewish Museum Frankfurt

Samson Schames: Fragments of Exile

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Abstract:

This essay explores the life and work of Samson Schames (1898–1967), a German-Jewish artist whose career spanned the tumultuous decades of the 20th century. Initially trained in traditional art forms in Frankfurt am Main, Schames became known for his unique fusion of Expressionism and Jewish cultural motifs. His artistic journey was drastically restricted by the rise of the National Socialism, forcing him into exile in England, where he began working with found materials from the London Blitz. This innovative use of debris, *detritus*, symbolized both destruction and renewal, turning Schames into a pioneer of wartime and postwar modernism. The essay examines how his personal experiences of displacement and resilience are reflected in his evolving artistic style, particularly through his integration of light, texture, and memory in both secular and religious contexts. Ultimately, Schames' career serves as a powerful testament to the capacity of art to bear witness to trauma through the many fragmented stages and phases of exile.

I. Negotiating Identity and Exclusion: Samson Schames' Frankfurt Roots and Initial Experiences of Exile (1898 – 1939)

Schames Family (from left): Parents Sofie and Albert, Children Luise, Paul and Siegfried "Fritz", c. 1904, Historical Museum Frankfurt

Samson Schames was born on December 31, 1898, into a well-established Jewish family in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Born Siegfried Fritz Schames, he would later adopt "Samson" as his professional name. His parents, Albert Schames (1860–1905) and Sophie née Guggenheim (1871–1943), belonged to a prosperous class of Jewish entrepreneurs and merchants who had been an active part of Frankfurt's vibrant Jewish community for generations, dating back to Europe's first ghetto – the Frankfurter Judengasse. This community was known for its deep commitment to education, culture, and religious traditions, creating an environment that balanced modern urban life with Jewish heritage.

Tragically, Samson's father Albert passed away when Samson was just seven years old, in 1905. This loss likely had a profound emotional and financial impact on the family, thrusting his mother Sophie into the role of sole provider and protector. Despite these hardships, Sophie Guggenheim ensured that Samson received a solid education, one that included artistic training. The Guggenheim family itself had a strong cultural background, which further influenced Samson's early exposure to the arts.

Growing up in this milieu, young Samson, or "Fritz" as family and friends affectionately called him, was exposed early on to both the cultural richness of Jewish life and the broader German intellectual and artistic movements of the early twentieth century. Frankfurt at the turn of the century was a cosmopolitan city with thriving art scenes, progressive educational institutions, and a growing awareness of modernist trends in the arts and sciences. The prominent Schames family's social and economic status allowed Samson access to quality schooling and artistic opportunities that nurtured his early interests. The Schames family also had a preexisting deep connection to the art world in Frankfurt, namely Samson Schames' uncle, Frankfurt-based prominent art dealer and gallery owner, Ludwig Schames (1852-1922). At the turn of the twentieth century, Ludwig Schames co-founded art dealership Posen & Schames which would later

become Kunstsalon Ludwig Schames. His passion and professionalism would lead his gallery – and by extension Frankfurt – to become a center for modern art, specifically Expressionism, across Europe.

Samson Schames ca. 1935
Photo: Pisarek, Berlin
Historical Museum Frankfurt

From a young age, Samson showed an affinity for drawing and design, talents that would later define his career. He likely received informal art instruction in his youth and was encouraged to pursue his creative talents alongside his formal education. This combination of personal inclination, family support, and access to Frankfurt's cultural institutions prepared him well for his later studies at the Kunstgewerbeschule Offenbach am Main and the Städelschule in Frankfurt. His studies were however, ultimately interrupted by military service during World War I from 1916 to 1918. Following the war, Schames continued his artistic education at the Kunst- und Gewerbeschule Frankfurt (Städelschule) starting in 1919, where he developed foundational skills in painting and design.

In the late 1920s, from 1927 to 1929, Schames expanded his artistic repertoire by creating stage designs for the Künstlertheater Rhein-Main, reflecting his engagement with theater and applied arts. He would later say he found those years demoralizing:

"It was a demoralizing situation: I had to design and execute settings that were calculated to produce cheap effects; in my spare time I painted. I could not do justice to either. The sets were not vulgar enough, and the paintings suffered from lack of finesse."[i]

His talent however gained recognition when, in 1927 and 1928, the Frankfurter Künstlerhilfe (Frankfurt Artists' Aid) acquired two of his watercolors, *Gypsy Camp* and *Sicilian Coast*. These works were held in the Municipal Gallery's depot but were later confiscated by the National Socialists in 1937 as part of their campaign against so-called "degenerate art."

By the mid-1930s, Schames had been increasingly pushed to the margins of the professional art world, ultimately confined to working solely within the Jewish community. This marked the first stage of his exile - an internal displacement within the very country where he was born, raised, and had even served in the military. As a Jew under the National Socialist regime, he was forced to live within the restrictive and isolating boundaries imposed by a society rapidly descending into state-sponsored persecution. From 1934 to 1938, he designed stage sets for the Jewish Cultural

Association in Frankfurt. This earliest phase of his exile, lived out within the confines of his own hometown, highlighted both his imposed isolation and his continued commitment to Jewish cultural life in the face of escalating persecution. In 1935, he held a solo exhibition at his studio on Weissfrauenstrasse 8, demonstrating his unwavering dedication to his art and making use of the limited spaces and opportunities for exhibition that remained available to him.

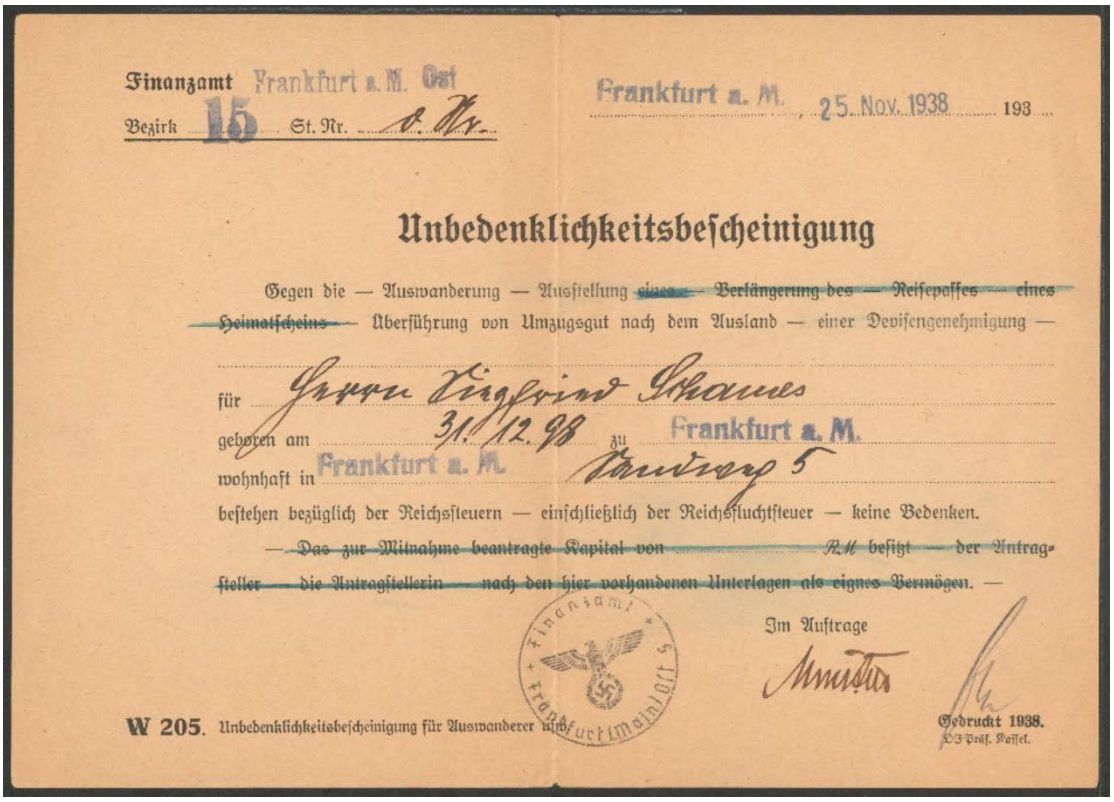
In 1936, Schames participated in the Reich Exhibition of Jewish Artists at the Jewish Museum Berlin, where he exhibited his painting *Street in Autumn*. This exhibition was one of the few platforms for Jewish artists under the oppression of the National Socialists, which simultaneously allowed minimal visibility yet also highlighted the increasing marginalization they faced.

Street in Autumn (Rothschild Park)
1935
Oil on cardboard
Jewish Museum Frankfurt

The 1936 Reich Exhibition of Jewish Artists was a crucial moment of cultural expression during a time of escalating persecution. As Jewish artists were systematically excluded from professional institutions and mainstream art venues, this exhibition became one of the last legal platforms available to them. It offered a rare opportunity for artists like Samson Schames to maintain visibility, assert their artistic identities, and resist cultural erasure. More than just an art show, the exhibition served as a powerful act of resilience, preserving a legacy of Jewish creativity at a time when nearly all other avenues had been closed.

Schames' painting *Street in Autumn* presents a layered depiction of Frankfurt, marked with both personal and historical significance. The Rothschild Villa, found in the park – alludes to a familial connection as his father was the private secretary to Baron Max von Goldschmidt-Rothschild– while the scene captures the growing sense of exclusion and unease felt by the Jewish community. Two figures stand outside the locked park gate, umbrellas open, huddled together as if bracing for an approaching storm. By 1935, many

gates – both professional and societal – had already closed to Schames, making the imagery all the more poignant.[ii]



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Bezirk 15 St. Nr. o. Nr.

Frankfurt a. M., 25. Nov. 1938 193

Unbedenklichkeitsbescheinigung

Gegen die — Auswanderung — Ausstellung ~~eines~~ — ~~Verlängerung des — Reisepasses — eines Heimatscheins~~ — Überführung von Umzugsgut nach dem Ausland — einer Devisengenehmigung —

für Herrn Siegfried Schames
geboren am 31.12.98 zu Frankfurt a. M.
wohnhaft in Frankfurt a. M. Sandweg 5
bestehen bezüglich der Reichssteuern — einschließlich der Reichsfluchtsteuer — keine Bedenken.
— ~~Das zur Mitnahme beantragte Kapital von RM besitzt — der Antragsteller — die Antragstellerin — nach den hier vorhandenen Unterlagen als eigenes Vermögen.~~ —

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25. November, 1938
Historical Museum Frankfurt

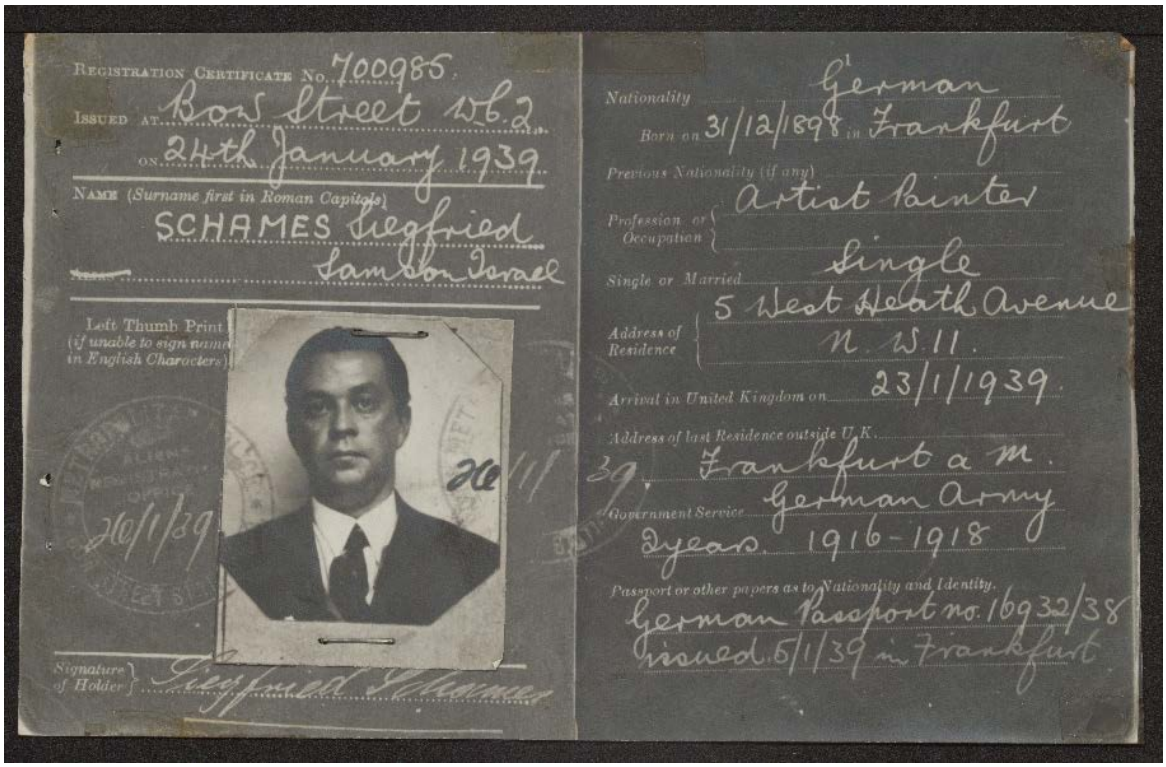
The November Pogroms of 1938, also known as *Kristallnacht*, marked a turning point in Schames' life and career. From his parents' apartment at Sandweg 5, in Frankfurt's predominantly Jewish Ostend neighborhood, Schames bore witness to the violence unfolding around him. It is highly likely that he saw the Friedberger Anlage Synagogue - just down the street and where he had been a member - engulfed in flames that night.

The violent antisemitic attacks and extensive destruction convinced him that remaining in Germany was no longer a viable option and ultimately became the catalyst for his decision to escape into the next phase of his exile. For Schames, as well as tens of thousands of others, the 1938 November Pogroms became the final impetus to flee Germany. This forced emigration would mark the beginning of the second phase of Schames' exile, this time outside German borders.

Right before leaving Germany, he met the aspiring singer Edith Baum (1912-2010), who fled to England as well. They got married immediately after they came to the US.

II. Internment and Innovation: The Wartime Art of Samson Schames in England (1939 – 1948)

Following years of growing peril under the National Socialism, Samson Schames was finally issued a passport in Frankfurt on January 5, 1939, enabling him to leave Germany.



Arrival in England: Registration Certification
January 1939
Historical Museum Frankfurt

Having planned to travel through the Netherlands, Samson Schames arrived in Harwich, England, on January 23, 1939, marking the beginning of a crucial new chapter in his life and career in exile. As an artist whose livelihood depended on his work, he brought as much of his artistic oeuvre with him as possible, entrusting the remainder to a close friend in Frankfurt, Hanny Franke, for safekeeping. Of his canvas works created in Frankfurt, only two are known to have survived the journey to London: *Opera Square* and *Street in Autumn*.

Europe was on the brink of war, yet for Schames, his relocation meant both safety and the daunting challenge of rebuilding his artistic identity in a foreign land. Shortly after his arrival, Schames joined the Free German League of Culture in Great Britain, a vital organization founded by German émigré artists and intellectuals dedicated to preserving and promoting German culture outside the reach of National Socialist censorship. The League provided Schames with a supportive network and opportunities to remain connected to the German artistic diaspora during turbulent times.

When Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Britain and France declared war two days later, on September 3. As a result, all German and Austrian nationals living in Britain, regardless of their political beliefs or refugee status, were officially classified as "enemy aliens." After Italy joined the war on the Axis side in June 1940, Italian nationals were similarly classified. This sweeping designation affected thousands, including many Jews who had fled Nazi persecution, yet now found themselves caught in a legal and social limbo in their country of refuge.

In March 1940, barely a year after his arrival, Schames mounted his first solo exhibition in England at the Brook Street Gallery in London. This exhibition was significant, not only as a professional milestone, but also as a symbolic act of resilience and renewal. The show featured a compelling combination of works Schames had brought from Frankfurt and new pieces created in exile, signaling his determination to continue evolving as an artist despite displacement and growing uncertainty.

However, this fragile sense of progress was interrupted by the wartime policies of the British government. Between June and October 1940, Schames was one of approximately 5,000 interned at the Huyton Camp near Liverpool, one of several hastily organized sites used to detain "enemy aliens"—including many Jewish refugees who had fled Nazi Germany and Austria. Despite being victims of fascism, they were interned alongside actual Nazi sympathizers due to blanket policies driven by fear of invasion. The camp was overcrowded and poorly equipped, with detainees housed in requisitioned

Huyton Internment Camp, Sleeping Place
1940
Watercolor, pastel, gouache on paper
Jewish Museum Frankfurt

homes under constant guard. Conditions were irregular and disorganized, marked by a lack of proper sanitation, insufficient food, and little access to legal recourse. For many, the experience was a bitter irony—having escaped persecution only to be imprisoned by the very country they had hoped would offer refuge.

Yet, within these difficult conditions, Schames found creative resilience. He vividly recalled the harsh realities of camp life but also the unexpected opportunities it afforded. Lacking conventional art supplies, he innovatively crafted his own paints using soot from the camp stove mixed with condensed milk to produce black pigment, and beet juice combined with powdered chalk for red hues. For brushes, he cleverly used his own hair, which he attached to small sticks. Schames' resourcefulness reflected more than his ingenuity but a larger, even profound, need to endure through artistic expression.

Bombed House and Broken Wheel Barrow
1941
Tempera and gouache with sand on paper
Jewish Museum Frankfurt

Alongside other artists interned at Huyton Camp, including the noted expressionist painter Ludwig Meidner, Schames participated in an internal exhibition that sold works both to fellow internees and to British officers overseeing the camp. This artistic activity became a lifeline, offering psychological relief and a sense of community amidst confinement.

Following his release from internment in late 1940, Schames settled in London and became active in Civil Defense, serving as a firefighter during the relentless bombing raids on the city. His firsthand experience of the London Blitz and its devastation

profoundly influenced his artistic direction. In October 1941, he took part in the First Civil Defense Artists Exhibition held at the Cooling Gallery on New Bond Street. The following month, he exhibited at the Second Civil Defense Artists Exhibition, showcasing groundbreaking mosaic works such as Unknown Victim and Crown of Thorns.

The specific style Schames honed for the mosaics he created during the London Blitz (1940–1941), would become quite indicative of the *detritus art* movement. It was a unique form of artistic expression, which quite literally, emerged from the rubble. Amid widespread destruction caused by German bombing raids, artists began to use the physical remnants of war-torn London – shattered glass, broken tiles, twisted metal, bricks, and nails – as raw materials for creative work. This movement was both a response to the trauma of war and a powerful act of transformation: turning destruction into beauty, and debris into meaning.

Crown of Thorns
1941
Nails, clay shards in coloured gypsum compound
Yeshiva University Museum, New York

Schames walked through bombed neighborhoods, collecting fragments of everyday life – blasted windowpanes, scorched wood, rusted nails – and incorporated them into mosaics that reflected both personal and collective suffering. His works, such as *Unknown Victim* and *Crown of Thorns*, were exhibited in 1941 in London, coming to symbolize the collective trauma endured by Londoners.

Schames' first mosaic in the detritus art style was *Crown of Thorns*, whose inspiration was described my Schames himself:

"One day as I went by a bombed building I saw some long rusty nails on the ground. It seemed to me that they formed a crown of thorns. Taking this as my title, I produced my first mosaic and dedicated it to an unknown victim of the blitz…"[iii]

Detritus art blurred the lines between sculpture, painting, and memorial, resonating with civilians and soldiers alike. It gave physical form to the psychological landscape of wartime Britain, serving as both documentation and protest. In doing so, it redefined the possibilities of artistic materials and laid a foundation for later movements like assemblage and post-war conceptual art.

These mosaics marked a significant innovation in Schames' art. He began incorporating fragments of shattered glass, nails, and other debris collected from bombed-out buildings into his pieces, transforming materials symbolic of destruction into powerful expressions of suffering and hope. The *Crown of Thorns*, in particular, originated from a moment of deep reflection when Schames observed a cluster of rusty, long nails lying near a bombed site. Seeing in them the poignant image of a crown of thorns, a symbol of pain and sacrifice, he used these fragments to create a work that spoke to the collective trauma of war and the endurance of the human spirit.

This period in England was thus marked by both adversity and remarkable artistic experimentation. Schames' adaptation to new surroundings, his inventive use of limited resources, and his engagement with both the émigré community and the broader British public through exhibitions and Civil Defense efforts reveal an artist deeply committed to his craft and to bearing witness through art. His mosaics, born from the rubble of war, the ensuing detritus, stand as enduring testaments to transformation – turning destruction into beauty and despair into resilience.

III. Negotiating Belonging in Exile: Samson Schames in Postwar New York (1948 – 1967)

The intertwined themes of exclusion and exile were central to the life and career of Samson Schames, shaping not only his personal experiences but also the symbolic content and material form of his art. Continually forced into fragmentary phases of exile, Schames lived through displacement, marginalization, and cultural loss – experiences that deeply informed both his creative vision and his evolving relationship with the postwar art world.

Schames' initial exclusion came with the rise of National Socialism in Germany. As a Jewish artist in Frankfurt, he was gradually pushed to the margins of the German art world—barred from public exhibitions, stripped of institutional support, and ultimately forced into exile after the violent 1938 November Pogroms. His escape to England in 1939 marked the beginning of a long period of geographical and cultural dislocation. Although he found temporary refuge in London, he was still classified as an "enemy alien," interned at Huyton Camp in 1940 despite being a victim of the regime he had fled. These experiences of enforced marginality became central to his identity and outlook.

After World War II, Schames sought a new beginning in New York, arriving in the emerging capital of the global art world in May 1948. Upon arriving in the city, Schames is said to have longed for nature, often escaping the urban environment to seek out greenery - a theme that appears frequently in his work through recurring depictions of trees. The anonymity of the large metropolis was also unfamiliar and unsettling to him. This sense of alienation is reflected in his urban scenes, where metro passengers appear

disconnected from one another and isolated within their surroundings.

Samson Schames, Tree
1951
Oil on hardboard
Jewish Museum Frankfurt

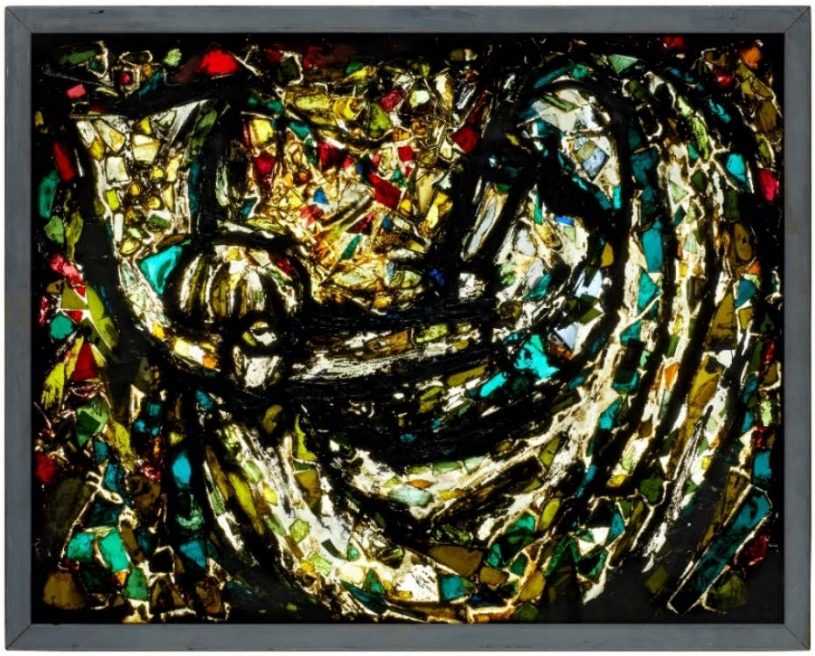
To counter the isolation they felt in New York, Samson Schames and his wife Edith (née Baum) spent their summers in Cape Cod and Long Island, where they found welcoming, tightly knit artistic communities. In these more intimate and supportive environments, Schames was able to build meaningful connections and expand his artistic network - opportunities that had been far more difficult to cultivate in the anonymity of the big city.

In February and March 1950, Samson Schames presented a solo exhibition titled *"A Monument to Hitler's Infamy"* at the Carlebach Gallery in New York. The exhibition featured a powerful selection of works, combining pieces from his various phases of exile. This show marked an important step in reestablishing his artistic presence in the postwar American art world, reflecting both loss and resilience through his evolving artistic medium.

While he found a degree of stability and recognition – exhibiting in major cities like Paris, Jerusalem, and New York – he also encountered a more subtle form of exclusion. His deeply personal and symbolic mosaics, often made from fragments of glass and debris, reflected themes of Jewish suffering, memory, and endurance. Yet, in an art scene increasingly dominated by abstract expressionism and formal experimentation, his work was often sidelined as too narrative, too historical, or simply unfashionable.

One of the most telling moments of this exclusion occurred in the early 1960s when Alfred H. Barr Jr., the influential founding director of the Museum of Modern Art,

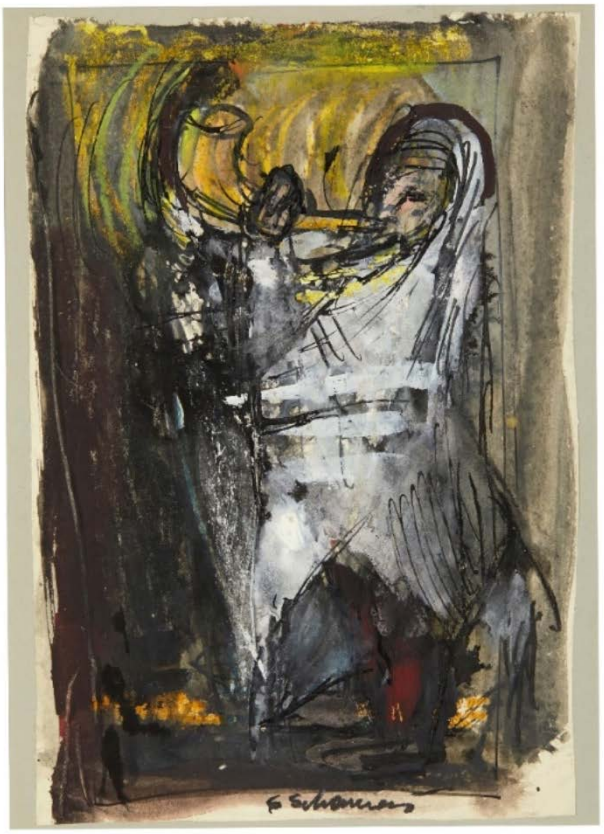
encouraged Schames to submit his mosaic Crown of Thorns for consideration. The piece, made of found materials from bombed London, evoked suffering, sacrifice, and the enduring scars of violence. Although Barr personally admired the work, MoMA rejected it. Schames later reflected on this with deep bitterness: "Up to that time I still had faced life optimistically, now I was deeply hurt."[iv] For him, the rejection was not merely a curatorial decision - it was a symbolic dismissal of the emotional and historical truth he had carried through his art.



Blowing the Shofar
c. 1956
Glass shards, polychrome
Jewish Museum Frankfurt

This sense of exclusion was compounded by the lack of institutional support for émigré and Jewish artists in the postwar period. Many, like Schames, found themselves outside the dominant narratives of modern art, which increasingly favored stylistic innovation over historical testimony. As a result, Schames' wartime mosaics – profoundly material and grounded in memory – remained under-recognized in major museums and art historical accounts for decades. It was only after his death that Samson Schames and his work regained public recognition, starting with the retrospective "*Samson Schames: Bilder und Mosaiken"* held at the Jewish Museum Frankfurt in 1989.

While Samson Schames reserved the detritus mosaic style for the experiences he lived in London during the war, he would go on to work with a different form of mosaics – this time breaking the pieces himself. Schames designed two glass mosaics for the Winter 1956/7 Exhibition at the Jewish Theological Seminary under the motto "Contemporary Art for Synagogue and Home" which included motifs to two prominent Jewish holidays.



Blowing the Shofar (Design for Glass Mosaic)
c. 1956
Watercolour, gouache, and ink on paper
Jewish Museum Frankfurt

Blowing the Shofar, references Rosh HaShana, the Jewish New Year as well as Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. *Kindling of the Lights*, illustrates Hannukah, the Festival of Lights.

Some might argue - exile might have become Schames' greatest source of creative power. It drove his artistic vision to develop a visual language rooted in fragments – glass, stone, metal – materials that carried the weight of destruction and the possibility of reconstruction. In this sense, Schames transformed exclusion and persecution into an aesthetic, transforming displacement and oppression into poignant mosaics that endure as acts of remembrance and resistance.

"I developed a sense of self-preservation as an old tree grows a new branch." [v]

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[i] Samson Schames unpublished translated memoirs, German originals unfortunately lost (p. 36)

[ii] Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt, *Samson Schames 1898 – 1967: Bilder und Mosaiken*, Frankfurt 1989. Cordula Frohwein „Samson Schames, Leben und Werk"

[iii] Samson Schames quoted in a newspaper article in the Hamstead News, undated.

[iv] Samson Schames unpublished translated memoirs, German originals unfortunately lost (August 1964, p. 78)

[v] Samson Schames unpublished translated memoirs, German originals unfortunately lost (p. 35)