

## Brutin, Batya. Etched in Flesh and Soul: The Auschwitz Number in Art. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021

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**Brutin, Batya. *Etched in Flesh and Soul: The Auschwitz Number in Art*.  
Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021.**

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*Etched in Flesh and Soul: The Auschwitz Number in Art* is a thorough investigation of the tattooing of concentration camp prisoners at Auschwitz and the connection that this practice has to art. Her book addresses a conspicuous lack of work done on tattooing of Auschwitz prisoners and its connection to art, as there has been no in-depth research about visual representations of the what she refers to as the Auschwitz number, or the number tattooed onto Auschwitz prisoners frequently on the arm. Art historian Batya Brutin seeks to answer several questions with her text, including,

In what way have the artists used the image of the Auschwitz number to represent the Holocaust? What are the messages and meanings that the artists deal with through this image? To what extent have the artists used the Auschwitz number image to commemorate the Holocaust and fight against Holocaust denial?

Through an in-depth analysis of particular works of art, she successfully answers the questions for the reader. The text also is filled with pictures of works of art in high, glossy detail that provides the reader with examples. This is an excellent feature of the book, for nearly every page of the text highlights an example of a work of art or monument, so it is a great resource for art historians of the Holocaust.

Brutin begins with an introduction that places her intervention in history, the lack of other texts that analyze the Auschwitz number, and then a description of how tattoos were originally placed into the skin of concentration camp prisoners. This was done with a metal seal that was punched into the chest of prisoners and then rubbed with blue ink. This changed to the single needle with blue ink still being rubbed into it, which is the expression of the Auschwitz number that we most commonly see now on the arms of survivors. Brutin argues that many artists who are also Auschwitz survivors use their number to sign their artwork, a way to remember the brutality and oppression that they have experienced in a poignant manner. While some survivors of the tattooing process have it removed, she also shows that some second and third generation survivors

get replicas of their parents' or grandparents' tattoos tattooed onto themselves, to commemorate their suffering and to never forget what horrors their family went through.

The text is broken down into four chapters. The first chapter contends with the experience of being tattooed and the change of identity that comes with one's flesh being permanently marred. The chapter predominantly looks at survivors who are artists, either composing their work during the Holocaust or afterwards. Adolf Frankl, for instance, is one of the few survivors who portrays the tattooing process and shows the physical and emotional pain it causes. Brutin notes here that the tattoo was written so that others could read it, not the person it was tattooed on.

The second chapter looks at artwork by second generation artists, the children of Holocaust survivors. The author focuses heavily on works by Haim Moar, a second-generation Holocaust survivor, who has created several works of art featuring the Auschwitz number. His works focus on themes of obsession, trauma to carry, and that everyone is a potential victim. This also included work by Yossi Lemel, who depicted Auschwitz fifty years after its liberation.

The third chapter is about sculptures and public monuments that utilize the Auschwitz number as a piece of the art. Brutin argues that there are three main ways that the Auschwitz number is commemorated in public and private monuments: figures of Job, chimney stacks, and giving names back to the numbers.

The fourth chapter discusses how the Auschwitz number is generally used to convey images and connotations of the Holocaust. Brutin argues that the fist has become a symbol of Auschwitz survival as well, often portrayed with the tattooed number upon the wrist. An open fist represents suffering, whereas a closed fist represents resistance. This number, she conveys, has also been used in order to fight against Holocaust denial and as a remembrance that an atrocity such as the Holocaust should never happen again.

Finally, there is an in-depth epilogue that examines how the Auschwitz number became a symbol of the Holocaust. The epilogue is also useful in that it provides descriptions of nearly all of the works of art featured in the body of the book.

This book would be especially useful for art historians as it provides hundreds of examples of art and monuments that portray the Holocaust and survival. It would also be useful to Holocaust historians, showing primary sources in the form of artistic works that can be utilized. She successfully answers her questions originally posed in the Introduction about how the Auschwitz

number has come to be representative of the Holocaust as whole as well as that themes that frequently come up include pain, suffering, resistance, loss of identity, and survivorship. Her last question contends with Holocaust denial, which she argues successfully that the Auschwitz number is used to fight Holocaust denial with a visual symbol and real representation of atrocity and horror that people underwent as concentration camp prisoners.

Batya Brutin is an art historian who focuses on art during and after the Holocaust. Her expertise in this area shines through in *Etched in Flesh and Soul*, a monument to her ability as an art historian to analyze the way the Auschwitz number tattoo has taken up space in artist's and society's consciousness. She is also the receiver of the Yad Vashem award for lifetime achievement in the field of Holocaust education, awarded to her in 2018. This book showcases her wheelhouse as an art historian and is an excellent read for anyone interested in Holocaust studies.

Overall, this is an excellent book for any interested in Holocaust studies or art history. By employing vivid examples through a myriad of photographs of artistic works interlaced throughout the text, it contends with heavy topics about the Holocaust, genocide denial, identity formation, and other topics. Brutin successfully answers the questions she set out to answer in this text and makes for an excellent read.