

A SHORT JOURNEY THROUGH JEWISH ART

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Jewish art in the western world can be divided into three main periods: the first begins with the Diaspora and the dispersion of the Jews in 70 CE after the victory of Titus and the destruction of the Temple and ends with the *gherush* in 1492, with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and its territories; the second, defined generally as “The Age of the Ghettos,” includes the next four centuries and closes with the Emancipation; the third includes the first decades of the 1900s up to the founding of the State of Israel (a period we will exclude from our discourse because its complexity merits its own analysis).¹

Jewish art in the Middle Ages spanned a wide variety of artistic genres. Although most of those works have been lost over the course of time, archival documents record the names of numerous Jewish artists of both ceremonial and non-ceremonial art. The history of Jewish art has passed down to us the names of scribes and miniaturists who produced splendid codices and illustrated manuscripts in Spain and Germany. In Italy, this tradition continued during the Humanistic and Renaissance periods, leaving a heritage of magnificent works now conserved in major libraries, including Milan, Parma, Modena, Florence, Rome and Vatican City. In addition, there are important collections of many Jewish bibliophiles and of foreign institutions of Jewish Study.² During the Renaissance the exchange between humanists and Jewish scholars was so prevalent that reflections of Jewish culture can be seen even in biblical-themed works of art such as the *Gates of Paradise* by Lorenzo Ghiberti (Plate 7).³

During this period, there were Jewish artists who worked not only for the large Jewish community, but also for Christian clients. In Spain, prior to the restrictions imposed on Jews in the first decades of the 1400s that led a few decades later to their expulsion, Jews were allowed to work for the church and even to paint their sacred images. However, as often happened, once Jews began to practice an important activity, they were denied permission to develop and exercise that activity.⁴ Many Jews were skilled workers of precious and base metals, and coral, but during the centuries of the ghettos, they exported

¹ The study of Jewish Art has had an incredible growth in recent years. Not being able to cite all the texts, I will give a partial bibliography of three extremely important works that came out in the last few years: V. B. MANN (ed.), *Gardens and Ghettos. The art of Jewish Life in Italy*, exhibition catalog (New York, 17 September 1989–1 February 1990), University of California Press, Berkeley-New York-Oxford 1989; D. DI CASTRO, N. BERGER (eds), *Italia ebraica: oltre duemila anni di incontro tra la cultura italiana e l'ebraismo*, Allemandi, Torino 2007; G. BUSI, S. GRECO (eds), *Il Rinascimento parla ebraico*, exhibition catalogue (Ferrara, MEIS, 12 April – 15 September 2019), Silvana Ed., Milano 2019.

² E.M. COHEN, *Hebrew Manuscript Illumination in Italy*, in V.B. MANN (ed.), *Gardens and Ghettos. The art of Jewish Life in Italy*, pp. 92-109; L. MORTARA OTTOLENGHI, «*Figure e immagini*» dal secolo XIII al secolo XIX, in C. VIVANTI (ed.), *Gli ebrei in Italia, II, Dall'Emancipazione a oggi*, Einaudi, Torino 1997 (*Storia d'Italia, Annali 11*), pp. 967-1008; A. CONTESSA, *The Mantua Torah Ark and Lady Consilia Norsa: Jewish Female Patronage in Renaissance Italy*, «*Ars Judaica*» 12 (2016), pp. 53-70.

³ F. LELLI, *L'interesse per la cultura ebraica a Firenze tra 1480 e 1530*, in T. MOZZATI, B. PAOLOZZI STROZZI, P. SÉNÉCH (eds), *I grandi bronzi del Rinascimento. Giovanfrancesco Rustici*, exhibition catalog (Florence, National Museum of the Bargello, 10 September - 1 October 2010), Giunti, Firenze 2010, pp. 106-117; ID, *Circolazione di materiali ebraici ed arti visive nell'Italia rinascimentale*, in S.U. BALDASSARRI, F. LELLI (eds), *Umanesimo e cultura ebraica nel Rinascimento italiano*. Convegno internazionale di studi ISI Florence, Palazzo Rucellai, Florence 10 March 2016, Angelo Pontecorboli, Firenze 2016, pp. 147-159.

⁴ F. LANDSBERGER, *Jewish Artists before the Period of Emancipation*, [s.n.], Cincinnati, Ohio 1941 (H.U.C.A., XVI), p. 341.

these skills and goods to Livorno, the only place besides Amsterdam where there were no restrictions on the Jewish population.⁵

Taking advantage of similar privileges during this period, Jewish silk weavers, many from Greece, prospered in southern Italy and Sicily. The chronicles and records of the time provide a vivid image of this art form, both ceremonial and secular, that flourished within the Jewish community that lived in the region. Benjamin of Tudela, during his long journey through most of the then-known world (a sort of cultural and commercial “grand tour”) left us a huge quantity of information, among which are the only descriptions of the Jewish Italian community of the Middle Ages. For more than ten years, Tudela, a Spanish Jew, traveled to important cities of the time, paying particular attention to the Jewish community in the places where he stayed.⁶ His chronicle at the end of the twelfth century, along with that of Obadiah of Bertinoro two centuries later (who travelled from Città di Castello down through Italy and on to Palestine) gives us a good picture of the appearance and furnishings of the synagogues of southern Italy.⁷

Before the ninth century, the Jewish community was subjected to only minor restrictions relative to the execution of images. The interpretations of the prohibitions imposed by the Second Commandment were less strict, and, in the area of two-dimensional art, there was considerable liberty. Only images that invoked idolatry were forbidden. This liberty of expression is evident in the pavement mosaics of the Synagogue of Beth Alfa (517 /518 CE) or those of the Hamat Tiberias Synagogue (fourth century CE), on the lake of Tiberias, but above all in the splendid frescos of the synagogue of Dura-Europos in Syria (244/245 CE). The scenes, painted within registers that cover the synagogue walls, are thought to be taken from ancient biblical illuminated rotuli, where the illustrations are intercalated among the columns of text that recount the story.⁸ All traces of these rotuli have disappeared, but their illustrations, according to historian Cecil Roth, are from a series of *Haggadòt*, liturgical books meant to be read at dinner in the homes of Jews on the night of *Pesach*, the Jewish Easter (Plate 8).⁹ Roth’s justification for this theory is that the images from Genesis, at the beginning of the text, have nothing to do with the commentary on the exodus of the Jews from Egypt.

This period is thus defined by three fundamental facts: freedom of figural representation, at least until Christian Iconoclasm and Islam created the conditions for greater severity also on the part of the rabbis; the opportunity for Jews to produce works both for the synagogue and for the domestic market; and the ability to work in both Jewish and non-Jewish artistic fields.

There is a large number of surviving objects from the second period, but in the vast majority of cases, these works were executed by non-Jews. They are, however, the only ones that offer interesting insights into the study of the styles and, above all, the commissions.

The last period, that following the Emancipation in the mid-1800s, is characterized by art produced by Jewish artists, but of a non-Jewish character. After the fall of the ghetto walls in Italy and the rest of

⁵ M.T. LAZZARINI, *Artigianato artistico a Livorno in età lorenese (1814-1859)*, Confederazione Nazionale dell’Artigianato, Livorno 1996; EAD., *L’Oriente a Livorno nell’Ottocento*, in M.A. GIUSTI, E. GODOLI (eds) *L’Orientalismo nell’architettura italiana tra Ottocento e Novecento*, Atti del Convegno (Viareggio, 23-25 October 1997), Maschietto Editore, Siena 1999, pp. 94-96.

⁶ The high level of specialization in weaving is due to various factors. Up to the time of the Arab invasion, the Jews had close contacts with the ruling population, who, in turn, always tried to maintain good relations with the various ethnic groups present in the areas they had conquered. The Arabs were experts in the production of silk cloth. This mastery was also present among Jews living in southern Italy and especially in Sicily. Secondly, during the Norman domination, Roger II during an expedition against Byzantium in 1147 imprisoned the major part of the cities of Thebes, Athens, and Corinth, where there were large Jewish populations working mainly in the weaving trade. The same Benjamin of Tudela says that the Jews of Thebes numbered around 2,000 and were “the best in all of Greece in the production of clothes made of silk and porpora”. BENJAMIN OF TUDELA, *Itinerario (Sefer massa’ot)*, ed. G. BUSI, Luisè, Rimini 1988, p. 24.

⁷ OVADYAH YARE DA BERTINORO, *Lettere dalla Terra Santa*, ed. G. BUSI, Luisè, Rimini 1991.

⁸ In this connection, remains fundamental: K. WEITZMANN, *Illustrations in Roll and Codex, A Study of the Origin and Method of Text Illustration*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1947.

⁹ C. ROTH, *Die Haggadah von Sarajevo*, E.A. Seemann, Leipzig 1963.

Europe, many Jews, who had repressed their artistic capacity and sensibility, finally began to express themselves freely. The Emancipation, through its real measures and even more through its psychological effects, stimulated a desire in the Jewish population to adapt to the society in which they had lived, albeit isolated, for more than four hundred years. This was accompanied by a loosening of internal ties to the Jewish community and a major tendency toward assimilation. Many Jewish artists would adhere to and be influenced by the major movements of the Avant-garde, contributing their fame to the history of official art. They turned away from work with a Jewish character, and had even less interest in ritual objects. Prime examples are Amedeo Modigliani, Ulvi Liegi (Luigi Levi), Vito d'Ancona, Vittorio Corcos, and many others.¹⁰ It would be interesting to look at architecture in Italy after the Emancipation, particularly the architecture of large temples (Plate 9), chapels and funeral monuments (Plate 10). In their grandiosity, they serve as a symbol of this new desire for visibility, but also of the escape from the external and internal bonds of a society that by custom or constriction was unaccustomed to such impressive visual symbols.

Almost all of the items still available for study belong to the age of the ghettos. There are only a few objects attributed to the preceding period: a pair of *rimonim*, the finials that adorned the Torah scrolls, from Camerata in Sicily, which dates to the around the middle of the 15th century (now conserved in the Cathedral of Palma de Mallorca); a pair of boxwood handles of *etz haim* (the dowels the Torah parchment is wrapped around) donated by Nethanael Trabot in the second part of the fifteenth century (Tel Aviv, Collection Bill Gross); a Gothic style *Aron Ha-Kodesh* (the cabinet or ark containing the Torah scrolls) from the synagogue of Modena in 1472 (Paris, Cluny Museum); and another ark in the Renaissance style from the synagogue of Urbino in 1500 (New York, Jewish Museum). There are also two curtains (*parokhyòt*), one in Pisa (Plates 11 and 12) and one in Rome, of fabric woven in the fifteenth century, but almost certainly made into curtains at a much later date. Crafted not for a synagogue, but for a stately home is the splendid Niello Box, probably from the Veneto region (Jerusalem Museum, Israel).

Paradoxically it was only with the foundation of the ghettos (Venice in 1516 and all the other cities of Italy with the exception of Livorno beginning in 1555) that Jews began to have more permanent places of worship. Up to that time Jews lived in constant fear of being expelled from their homes. Their synagogues, very small and generally located in the house of the most senior member of the community, contained only the items necessary for conducting the ceremony. The ghetto, in spite of being a place of compulsory residence and humiliating segregation, gave Jews the certainty of a more permanent community. As a result, synagogues were established and although very small, their installation was at times entrusted to famous architects. Although the architects were not involved in the actual construction of synagogues (which were generally located in the upper story of residential houses), they did design the internal furnishings and decoration. The indispensable *aronot ha-kodesh*, that defined such a synagogue, were often in precious marble, adorned with ornaments bearing traditional Jewish inscriptions and symbols. Earlier ark cabinets - made of wood because they could be easily dismantled and reassembled in another location - were replaced by *aronot* in marble or masonry. The synagogues of the ghettos, therefore, became the only place that received special artistic attention, contrasting sharply with the dilapidated, unhealthy and segregated neighborhoods where the Jews lived. The best example of this is the ghetto of Rome with its five synagogues or *Scole*, as they came to be called.

Particular care was given to the furnishings, textiles and silver used for the liturgical ceremony. In the period under examination here, the rules pertaining to the representation of human and animal figures became much more severe, and Jewish art was confined to a very few categories of the Minor Arts. Furthermore, because Jews were prohibited from practicing the so-called Major Arts, and in particular any occupation that used precious metals, Jews never had the opportunity to make ritual objects

¹⁰ D. LISCIÀ BEMPORAD, *Il Collezionismo ebraico a Firenze fra Otto e Novecento*, in L. CASPRINI, D. LISCIÀ BEMPORAD (eds), *Studi in Onore di Leone Ambron*, Polistampa, Firenze 2004, pp. 15-24; E. CASOTTO, *Pittori ebrei in Italia. 1800-1938*, Colpo di fulmine, Verona 2008; D. LISCIÀ BEMPORAD, *I volti della memoria. Artisti dopo l'Emancipazione*, in A. DOLFI (ed.), *Gli intellettuali/scrittori ebrei e il dovere della testimonianza. In ricordo di Giorgio Bassani*, Atti del Convegno di Studi (Florence 7-9 November 2016), Florence University Press, Firenze 2017, pp. 69-78.

for their own use.¹¹ Apart from some rare cases in the nineteenth century, particularly in the Piemonte region, we have no evidence of Jewish silversmiths. On the other hand, it is probable that many buyers dictated the general guidelines, the styles and the decoration of the cultural furnishings. Initially these were based on existing objects, but later the buyers themselves described in minute detail what they wanted, based on their own recollections. This resulted in furnishings or ornaments quite similar to the originals in structure, but adapted in decoration and in details to local tastes. It should be noted that although some of these items were typical of the Jewish sect, they had analogues both in the Catholic church and in domestic use. The crown atop the *Sefer Toràh*, often was similar in form to contemporary ones that adorned votive statues. The half crowns on the *tassim* (the shield suspended in front of the *sefarim* to indicate the passage to be read from the various rolls) are similar to many found on the frescoes of sanctuaries. Jugs and basins are identical to those in domestic use and are distinguished only by their Hebrew inscriptions or by their symbolic representative motifs. Other objects, however, have no analogues. The most typical of these are the *rimonim*, that is, the finials placed on the ends of the staves of the *Sefer*, once the parchment scroll is completely rolled up and covered with its scarf. These finials sometimes have the form of a pomegranate, the fruit from which the object takes its name (*rimòn* in Hebrew means pomegranate). Another common adornment is a tower, which symbolizes the towers of Jerusalem (Plate 13) and its walls (shown on the crown: Plate 14) to which the Torah is often compared.

The furnishings and ornaments of each city have characteristics that follow the stylistic and decorative culture of the area. In the past, when we spoke of Jewish art, we were able to assign generic citations with only their country of origin. Studies in this area have now developed to such an extent that it is possible to precisely identify the provenance of an object. This is especially true for the *rimonim*, since silversmiths used contemporary buildings as models. Examples are a finial from Florence that evokes the dome of Brunelleschi (Plate 15), or others in Rome that reference the bell tower of the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine, or Bernini's *ciborium* in Saint Peter's Basilica, or others in Turin that reference details of the Royal Palace.

Only in the 1800s did a more strictly Jewish style of art emerge. Currently, it is fashionable to attempt to give every group and culture its own specific artistic character, and in keeping with the roots of the Jewish people, we have assigned them to a generic Moorish style. It produced, mostly in Tuscany, objects with decorative elements not found in any other type of furnishings, in either ecclesiastical or lay culture.

The situation is different in other areas. Textiles, for instance, were made with contemporary fabrics that were currently in vogue. The Jews, in the Iberian Peninsula and its territories, took an active part in the production and the commerce of silk fabric, which made it easy to obtain precious material for the synagogue furnishings. Jews remained active in the textile business even in the period of the ghettos. In Livorno after Ferdinand I de' Medici issued his famous Letters Patent in 1591, which lifted existing restrictions, and gave Jews the right to exercise any occupation they wanted, Jews quickly entered the textile industry. In other cities where ghettos still existed, the papal bull of 1555 allowed Jews to work only in the commerce of second-hand fabrics, rags and old cloths. Fine and even precious handiwork remained available, but being second-hand, it was no longer in style. Precious textiles often had inscriptions embroidered on them listing the occasion and the name of the giver, or the festivity where the cloth would be used, or even, in the case of a domestic destination, the name of the ritual foods that would be consumed during the ritual meals. The inscriptions served not only as documentation, but also for decoration. Since the Middle Ages, the harmony and the beauty of Hebrew characters has been used to create ornamental motifs. The lines of the design are made up of minuscule characters that form entire passages of sacred text, according to a tradition of micrography of great virtuosity.¹² In modern times, micrography was used not in hand-written manuscripts, but in printed texts, for which innumerable Jewish printers became famous, such as Soncino in the seventeenth century. Micrographic motifs were used in *ketubòt*, the matrimonial contracts that sanctified the union between a couple, through

¹¹ LISCIA BEMPORAD, *Jewish ceremonial Art*, pp. 110-135.

¹² M.L. MAYER MODENA, *Scritte in Ebraico nelle opere d'arte italiane. Perché? Per chi?*, «Acme», 60.3 2007 (Atti del 3° incontro sull'epigrafia, Milano, Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità, 9 novembre 2006), pp. 111-120.

accords reached by the families. These parchments were often finely decorated with colored designs or more simply with ornaments created from the writing itself. Micrographic motifs were also used in the *meghillôt*, the rotuli that contained the story of Queen Esther and the escape of the Jews in the time of ancient Persia (Plate 16).

On many of the marriage contracts there are the crests of the families being joined in marriage. The Jews, of course, did not have noble coats of arms (investiture was only allowed to Jews in the nineteenth century), but rather “talking seals,” crests with text that conveyed the significance of the name of the holder or the place where they came from through the reproduction of images. Since the selection of images was often subjective, families with the same name, but living in different cities, sometimes had different crests.¹³

Many embroidered cloths bear the crest of the donor families and are embellished with rich ornamentation overlaid with embroidery in silk, gold and silver to emphasize the family’s importance. The majority of these works, like other splendid embroideries conserved in synagogues, are a testament to the skill of the women of the ghettos.¹⁴ Along with printing, it is the unique art form practiced by the Jews in the modern age. In the Medieval and Renaissance eras and in gentile society, the craft of embroidery was the purview of men, who were part of a corporation. It was only in the seventeenth century that it became the monopoly of women who, confined to their houses, produced these complicated and long works that required not only skill but also extreme patience (in the Christian area, this type of work was also performed in convents). As a result, it was an activity that was not constrained by the innumerable interdictions placed on the Jewish people. This is confirmed by the fact that there are many signed embroideries. The makers, conscious of the skill required to produce such a work, wove their names into the long, written dedications that were used as decoration.

In some cities, especially Venice and Rome, it was not uncommon to see wall coverings embroidered with symbolic images with a strong naturalistic impact, which seems to contradict the biblical instruction that forbids the reproduction of figures and, in a broader context, everything having a natural appearance. A Venetian example is a set of curtains, embroidered in an “ungaro” point stitch to simulate tapestries, where the various symbols are inserted within the cartouches that frame the central panel that features the Tables of the Law bordered by two columns (the columns of the Temple of Jerusalem).

The embroideries are always current with contemporary tastes, leading to the conclusion that Jewish embroiderers were not restricted to clients from within the ghetto, but had external clients as well. In Livorno there are neoclassical embroideries much closer to the current styles of the time than those produced in the same years in Florence for a lay public.¹⁵

In conclusion, we can summarize in these terms. Jewish art existed in the modern age even if in most cases, it was not physically created by Jews. It was essentially a ceremonial art that in symbolic form reproduced concepts or symbols rooted in remote antiquity. Although strongly symbolic, it is for the most part an aniconic art, but it does allow some images as long as those images are tied to biblical themes. Although in decor and in certain formal characteristics, the art took on the distinct style of the place where it was created, it always distinguished itself by some original features. This distinction was linked to the rituals and in large measure to the way the various furnishings, both textiles and metals, came together to form a coherent whole so that even if a single piece could be compared to similar objects made for other uses, the ensemble was clearly original and “Jewish”.

¹³ For Jewish heraldry, see: F. PISA, “Parnassim”. *Le grandi famiglie ebraiche italiane dal sec. XI al XIX*, «Annuario di studi ebraici», 10 (1980-1984), Carucci, Roma 1984, pp. 291-461; D. DI CASTRO, *Arte ebraica a Roma e nel Lazio*, Palombi, Rome 1994.

¹⁴ D. LISCIA BEMPORAD, *Ricamatrici ebraiche nell’Italia dei ghetti*, in M. LUZZATI, C. GALASSO (eds), *Donne nella storia degli ebrei d’Italia*, Proceedings of the 9th International Congress of “Italian Judaica” (Lucca 6-9 June 2005), Giuntina, Firenze 2007, pp. 295-304. Such themes are also addressed in: D. LISCIA BEMPORAD, O. MELASECCHI (eds), *Tutti i colori dell’Italia ebraica. Tessuti preziosi dall’antica Gerusalemme al prêt-à-porter*, exhibition catalog (Florence, Uffizi, Salone Magliabechiano, June-October 2019), Giunti, Firenze 2019.

¹⁵ D. LISCIA BEMPORAD, *I ricami datati della Sinagoga di Firenze*, in *I tessuti antichi e il loro uso: testimonianze sui centri di produzione in Italia, lessici, ricerca documentaria e metodologica*. III Convegno C.I.S.S.T., Torino 1984, C.I.S.S.T. Sezione Piemonte, Torino 1986, pp. 66-77.

SUMMARY

Jewish art in the West can be divided into three main periods: I) from the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), with the subsequent diaspora, until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and its possessions (1492); II) the “Age of the Ghettos”, which includes the following four centuries up to the Jewish Emancipation; III) the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the birth of the State of Israel. In the first period Jewish artists worked for Jewish people and on Jewish themes, but also for Christian commissions, while in the course of the twentieth century many prestigious Jewish artists often dedicated themselves to non-Jewish themes and addressed the whole society. The essay focuses on the intermediate period, when the processing of precious metals and certain handicraft activities were mostly prohibited to Jews: so, non-Jewish artists and artisans, on Jewish commissions, often made sacred furnishings, ritual vestments and artistic objects, significant examples of which are presented here.

KEYWORDS: Jewish Art; Age of the Ghettos; Jews and non-Jewish artists.