

ARTISTIC ADAPTATION IN THE JEWISH DIASPORA:
THE ASHKENAZI APPROACH TO ORNAMENT IN THE DECORATIVE ARTS

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts
History of Decorative Arts

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Date: April 26, 2013 Spring Semester 2013
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my paternal grandmother and life coach, Frances Davidson Lockwood (1890-1991). She would have enjoyed reading this even though she probably would have found something wrong with it. I still miss her.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this thesis has been a tremendous learning experience for me, enriched by the inspiration and support of three key people. Rabbi Joshua Segal, whose guidance, insights, and unique sense of humor kept this project on track, deserves much of the credit. Dr. Dorothea Dietrich, whose keen editorial skills and willingness to help steer a mammoth topic through to a successful completion, provided a voice of sanity during those periods when I was ready to give up. Finally, I am grateful to Dr. Vivian B. Mann, whose decision to include me in her 2007 ‘Institute in Jewish Art’ at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America ignited what would become my driving interest in the broad and complex field of Jewish visual culture. Six years later, this thesis – in part – is the culmination of that journey.

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ABSTRACT

ARTISTIC ADAPTATION IN THE JEWISH DIASPORA: THE ASHKENAZI APPROACH TO ORNAMENT IN THE DECORATIVE ARTS

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This thesis challenges some commonly held opinions about the restrictive nature of the *Ashkenazi* decorative arts vocabulary, often perceived as the result of a long-practiced avoidance of figural imagery throughout the history of the Jewish Diaspora. While Jewish ceremonial and everyday objects produced in various media and in geographically diverse locations and time periods have shared similar uses and meanings, their broad range of decorative styles and materials indicate the extent to which Jewish populations have always absorbed and adapted the ornamental styles of outside cultures. This suggests a consistent pattern of interest in the decorative styles of neighboring Christian, Muslim, and pagan cultures. I argue that this history of the fundamental flexibility of the Jewish decorative arts supports the reason why the immigrant Jewish artisans who re-established themselves in America in the latter years of the nineteenth century had the ability to further adapt their artisan skills to a wider, secular market of consumers. By

drawing upon centuries of practice in developing a richly varied ornamental vocabulary based on a broad amalgam of design sources, the Jewish American artisans of this period further demonstrated the flexibility inherent in the evolution of their design capabilities, all the while maintaining a core belief system firmly rooted in over three millennia of unchanging religious observance.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Jewish Diaspora there is a rich tradition of non-figural ornamentation in the decorative arts, particularly among the Ashkenazi – those Jews who trace their roots back to Eastern/ Central Europe and the Russian Pale. This avoidance of human imagery stems from a literal interpretation of the biblical second commandment, forbidding ‘the making of graven images.’ Whether untutored folk carvings on Jewish tombstones, finely crafted ceremonial objects from skilled metal workshops, or elaborate wooden synagogue furnishings made by Jews whose skills were passed down through generations of self-taught carvers, these decorative arts all share a conspicuous absence of human form. While the Ashkenazi tradition does not follow this pattern exclusively, there is a thread of cohesion among many forms of their decorative arts – from the medieval period through the beginning of the nineteenth century – indicating this avoidance of figural imagery.

One way in which Ashkenazi artisans have addressed this issue has been with an ornamental preference for flora and fauna, using a design vocabulary of presumably Jewish symbols to decorate their material and sacred objects with animal motifs (such as “the Lion of Judah”) or floral/vegetal motifs (such as “the Tree of Life”), to name just a few. However, despite this design history – believed by many to be a static, unchanging tradition in *Jewish art* – I will argue that Ashkenazi artisans have responded to and

incorporated a variety of design influences from the surrounding, dominant cultures among which they have lived throughout the long history of the Diaspora. Refuting some widely-held assumptions that the Jewish decorative arts traditions have been firmly bound to certain design restrictions, my study will reveal the extent to which the Ashkenazi arts have been fundamentally flexible – often adapting to the arts and design motifs of neighboring Christian, Islamic, and Pagan cultures.

My thesis will open with a brief history of the *Ashkenazi* artisans in the context of Jewish Diaspora, including a discussion of their exclusion from the guild system of Medieval Europe. Although a parallel system of Jewish decorative arts workshops in a wide variety of media did develop, I will argue that many of the Jewish artisans found inspiration in, and borrowed designs from Christian and Islamic illuminated manuscripts – the early conduits of design fusion among many cultures. In subsequent chapters I will discuss several areas of non-figural design motifs including: floral/vegetal, animal, and mythical beings, all of which dominate numerous Jewish ceremonial objects, synagogue furnishings, and tombstones. It is my theory that the Ashkenazi usage of all of these motifs proves a history of adaptability to the designs of outsiders, all the while maintaining a strong cultural identity that was uniquely their own. Chapters have been divided by motif category rather than by medium, as a way of unifying the themes among the pieces into which these motifs have been incorporated.

I will conclude with a discussion of the rapidly transforming Jewish decorative arts in the New World at the beginning of the twentieth century when immigrant Jewish artisans began to adapt their design motifs and their trade from a solely Jewish clientele

to the secular market. In the context of the uniquely American multi-cultural landscape that existed at the close of the nineteenth century, coupled with a massive migration of *Ashkenazi* Jews from Eastern Europe and the Russian Pale, I will argue how and why this adaptability (from the religious to the secular arts) actually illustrates a tendency that had been present throughout history. While the New World did provide these artisans with a fresh – and cross-cultural – market in which they could ply their trade, these Jewish immigrants were able to do so by continuing a pattern they had already honed, having had centuries of practice as well as the history of a richly developed and culturally diverse design vocabulary from which to draw.

1. THE ASHKENAZI IN THE CONTEXT OF THE JEWISH DIASPORA

Historically, the relocation of any group having the same customs and religious beliefs has been most successful when such a population has been able to maintain its traditions and cultural identity through the recreation of its former world in the new environment. Those who have done so have transported a “cultural blueprint”¹ to the new surroundings and replicated, as much as possible, what had been the core of their former lives and belief systems. Thus, much can be learned from how a specific group such as the Diaspora Jews of the *Ashkenazi* world has succeeded in maintaining cultural identity while living as a minority population for centuries – if not millennia – in regions significantly different from where they originated.

“Diaspora” is the Greek word for “dispersion”² and when used in the context of Jewish history this term generally refers to the fall of Jerusalem (to the Romans) in 70 A.D. and the subsequent exile of its inhabitants. This event, which has been memorialized by the relief carving on the Arch of Titus – depicting Jews having been taken prisoner by the Romans (fig. 1) – was actually the *second* Diaspora era, having been preceded by the Babylonian Exile (586 - 539 B.C).³

¹ James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1977), 58.

² Joan Comay, *The Diaspora Story* (New York: Random House, 1980), 7.

³ Comay, 115.

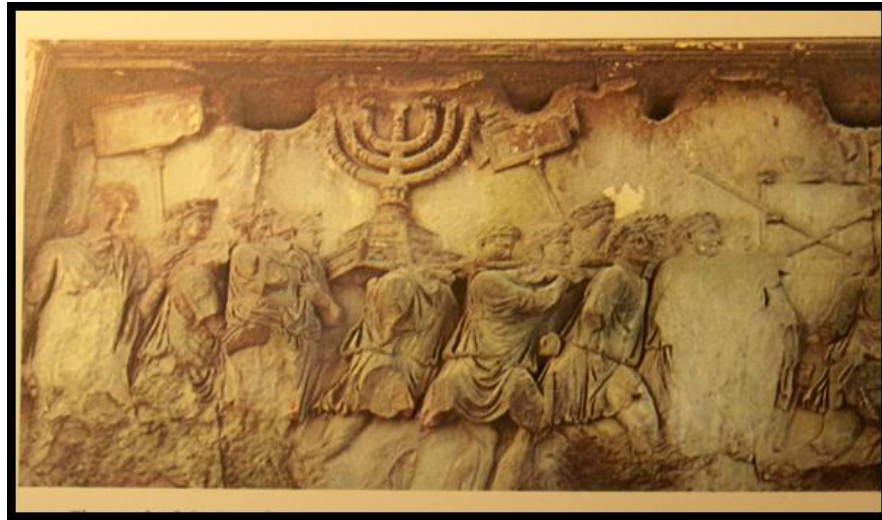


Figure 1: Arch of Titus, depicting the sack of Jerusalem (70 A.D.)
Reproduced from Bezalel Narkiss, *Picture History of Jewish Civilization*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1970), 60.

Yet despite these two significant occurrences of banishment from Ancient Palestine, the long era of Jewish ‘exile’ should have been considered as finished in 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel. However, even today, a large number of Jews worldwide believe otherwise. While centuries of dispersion have impacted the historical evolution of a widespread and equally diverse community of people all claiming the same cultural and religious identity, many Jews still live with the concept, no matter how irrational, of being separated from their historic homeland. As will be discussed, this global dispersion has undoubtedly impacted the often unacknowledged and wide variety of outsiders’ design influences on Jewish ceremonial and material objects throughout history. Yet, while context and geography may be a large part of the story, the equally important influences brought on by a history of social acceptance or rejection cannot be overlooked. Jewish social and political history has played almost as critical – and often

concurrent – roles as the design history of the assortment of decorative objects under consideration

The largest segment of the world's Jewish population today, estimated to be eighty percent of a total of 13.3 million Jews, claims *Ashkenazi* heritage.⁴ Originally mentioned in the bible in the genealogical tables of the descendents of Noah, the term '*Ashkenaz*' – since the ninth century – has referred to those Jews who descend from the Germanic and Slavonic lands of Eastern and Central Europe. In fact, '*Ashkenazi*' is the Hebrew word for 'German,' although culturally, this term has evolved to include many Jews now living in the United States, Eastern and Central Europe, the United Kingdom, as well as the majority of Jews from the former Soviet Union – specifically from the Russian Pale of Settlement.⁵ The Pale of Settlement comprised the area of Czarist Russia in which the Jews were legally allowed to settle. Covering an area of approximately 386,000 square miles, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, the Pale was home to nearly five million Jews who, by the late nineteenth century, comprised ninety-four percent of Russia's Jewish population.⁶ (fig. 2) These Jews were thus confined to the territories that are today known as Lithuania, Belarus, the Ukraine, Bessarabia, parts of Poland, and the Crimea.⁷

⁴ Judaism Online, <http://www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/world-jewish-population.htm>, Accessed 31 October 2012.

⁵ R.J.Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* (New York: Adama Books, 1986), 45.

⁶ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1976), 5-6.

⁷ Elaine Strosberg, *The Human Figure and Jewish Culture* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2008), 85-86.

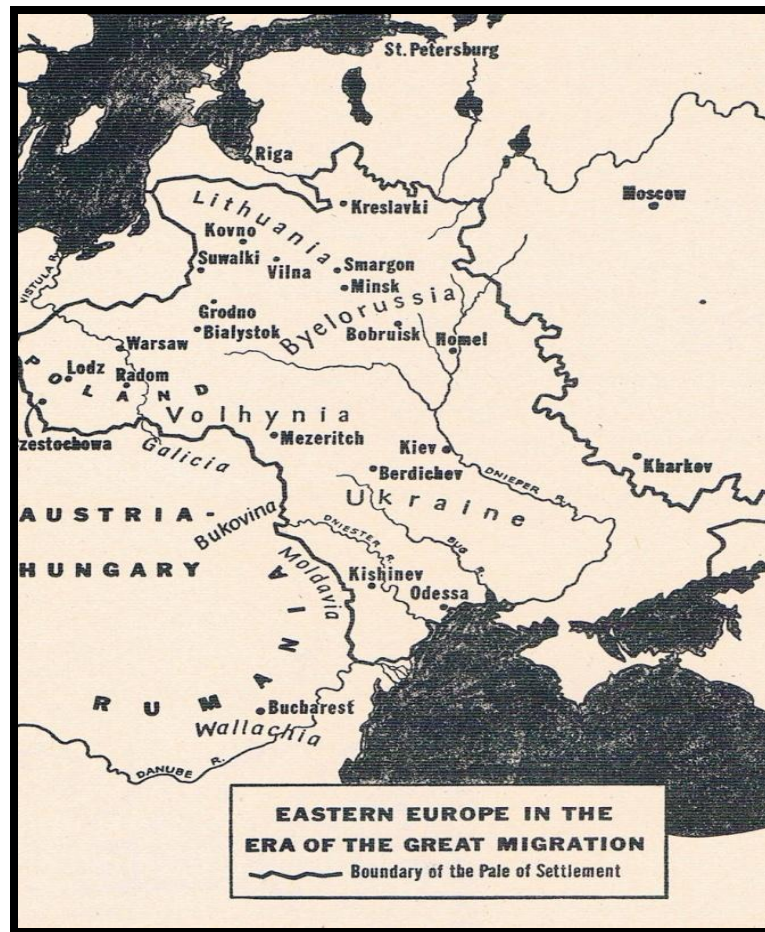


Figure 2: Map of Eastern Europe and the Pale of Settlement, Late 19th c.
 Reproduced from Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo,
How We Lived; A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America, 1880-1930.
 (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, Inc. 1981), 2.

This was primarily a population of poor and minimally educated peasants, eking out a living in miserable conditions (fig. 3), constantly under the threat of losing their men to forced military conscription (by the Czarist army), and enduring the anti-

Semitism that took the form of *pogroms* – unannounced outbursts of violence against these defenseless and isolated Jewish villages.⁸



Figure 3: Jewish Village in the Pale of Settlement, Late 19th c.
Reproduced from Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers:
The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*
(New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 141.

Considering these trying circumstances, it is understandable why – by the end of the nineteenth century – the majority of this population sought emigration to America and/or to any place that would likely offer a more hospitable existence. Yet, in spite of their relative isolation from the Jews of Europe, the *Ashkenazi* of the Russian Pale

⁸ Howe, 7.

observed similar religious rites and followed similar customs and traditions, including the avoidance of human imagery in the adornment of their sacred and material objects.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 'SECOND COMMANDMENT' IN JEWISH VISUAL CULTURE

The question of figural representation, primarily absent in the history of Jewish sacred texts, remains a hotly debated topic even today in Jewish intellectual and rabbinic circles. While this avoidance of human imagery is attributed to the biblical second commandment forbidding the making of human images,⁹ some interpret the second commandment to be merely a prohibition against '*bowing down, or worshipping graven images,*' thus leaving the adornment of Jewish sacred or secular objects open to the artistic styles of numerous Jewish artisans throughout history.¹⁰ However, Jewish art historians at least agree that the majority of human imagery that populates "modern" *Ashkenazi* visual culture has become more profuse since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹¹ Rather than addressing the arguments surrounding the validity of the Jewish attitude towards human representation, this study will focus instead on the methods by which the decorative arts of the *Ashkenazi* have conveyed their message by adapting to other – non-figural – design motifs and approaches. While the Jewish artists of past eras were aware of the human imagery so common in neighboring Christian arts of all media, the creative ways in which the *Ashkenazi* avoided these motifs, even while adopting other design trends of their neighbors, is in itself a theme worthy of exploration.

⁹ Ori Z. Soltes, *Our Sacred Signs: How Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Art Draw From the Same Source* (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2005), 9.

¹⁰ Bezalel Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1969), 13.

¹¹ Strosberg, 24.

3. THE PROBLEM WITH THE MEDIEVAL ARTISAN GUILDS – “JEWS NEED NOT APPLY”

In perspective, any discussion of Jewish “borrowing” of the design trends of outsiders must confront a somewhat sensitive topic regarding the development of the artisan guilds of (Christian) Medieval Europe. The majority of these professional workshops excluded Jewish participation. Through a combination of anti-Jewish Church ideology and the economic interests of the period, the Jews of Medieval Europe were viewed as “non-productive outsiders and were estranged from handicrafts – those workshops formed and maintained primarily by Christians.”¹² While an abundance of historical documentation supports this information, there is much less written about the Jewish response to this exclusion. By necessity, but in small numbers, Jewish workshops did exist, although they served their own communities and thus produced items that catered specifically to their own – Jewish – clientele.¹³

Presumptions about the Jews’ lack of participation in the major artisan guilds often suggest that the Jews of Medieval Europe had no place in the business of trade and commerce except in the areas of money-lending and other similar professions that were forbidden to Christians.¹⁴ Yet there is reliable information regarding Jewish involvement in the production and the commercial trade of a wide variety of desirable goods such as

¹² Mark Wischnitzer, *A History of Jewish Crafts and Guilds* (New York: Jonathan David, Publishers), xv.

¹³ Wischnitzer, xvi.

¹⁴ Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), 230.

metalwork, textiles, clocks and other mechanical devices.¹⁵ The metal arts in particular, long considered “a dirty profession” by the Medieval Christian world, were dominated by both Jews and Muslims, particularly throughout the Ottoman Empire – including Medieval Spain.¹⁶

¹⁵ Abrahams, 221-227.

¹⁶ Vivian B. Mann, Lecture, “*Three Sephardi Communities and the Art of the Other*,” The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 10 February 2010.

4. THE OTHER TWENTY PERCENT: A BRIEF LOOK AT *SEPHARDIC* JEWISH HISTORY AND CULTURE

While the Jewish situation with regard to the artisan workshops of Medieval Spain tells a much more inclusive story,¹⁷ this was due primarily to the more favorable conditions extended to the Jews that had developed during the long history of Muslim rule in the Iberian region. Moreover, this population of Jews was *Sephardic* in origin with a different, if not separate history from their *Ashkenazi* brethren. Under Muslim rule, the *Sephardic* Jews of Medieval Spain developed into an educated, economically successful and culturally rich population that absorbed and mirrored many aspects of their Islamic neighbors' decorative arts including architectural styles such as the *El Transito* synagogue (c.1400), (fig. 4) and illuminated manuscript motifs, as illustrated in the *Hispano-Moresque Haggadah* example (c.1300). (fig. 5)

¹⁷ Vivian B. Mann, *Uneasy Communion: Jews, Christians, and the Altarpieces of Medieval Spain* (New York: Museum of Biblical Art, 2010), 22.

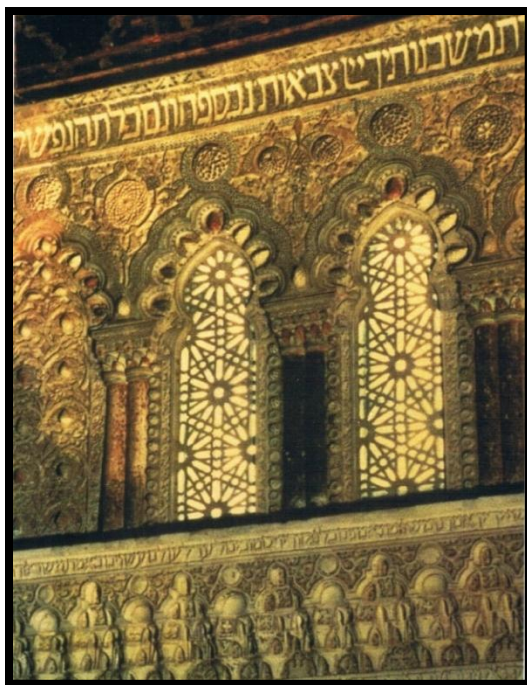


Figure 4 El Transito Synagogue, c. 1400
 Reproduced from Vivian B. Mann, ed.,
Uneasy Communion: Jews, Christians, and the Altarpieces of Medieval Spain
 (New York: Museum of Biblical Art, 2010), 20.

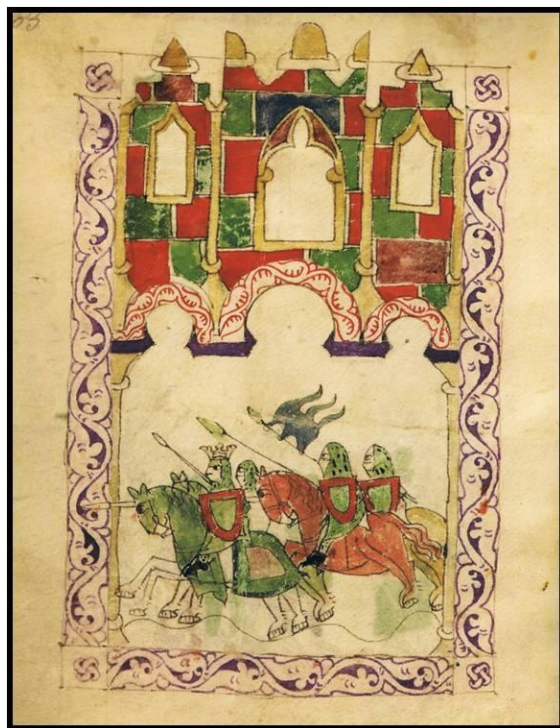


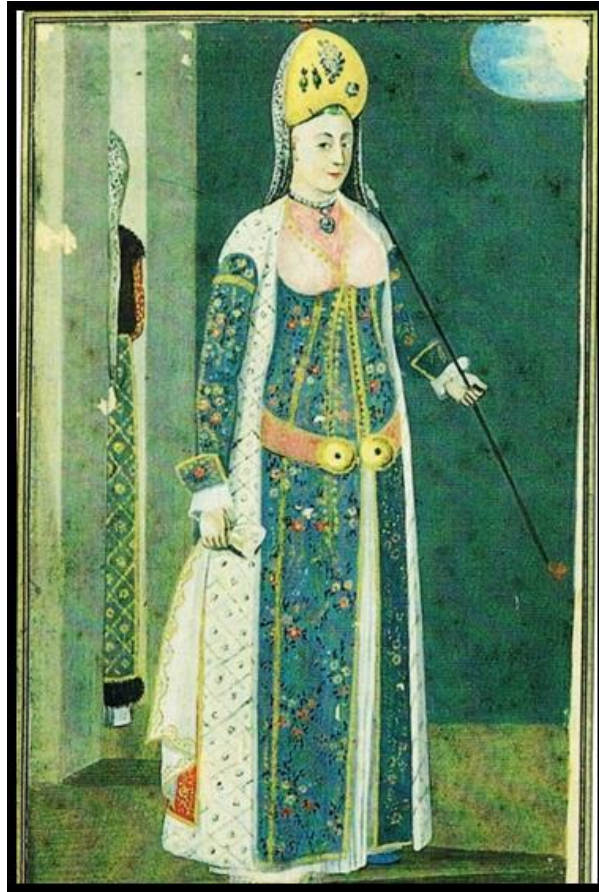
Figure 5 Hispano-Moresque Haggadah, c. 1300
 Reproduced from Vivian B. Mann, ed.,
Uneasy Communion: Jews, Christians, and the Altarpieces of Medieval Spain
 (New York: Museum of Biblical Art, 2010), 170.

Were it not for the obviously Jewish derivation of both of these works, at first glance either of them might be mistaken as Islamic due to the prominence of the horseshoe-shaped arch motifs (*mihirabs*) and the abundant floral and geometric decorative elements. The fact that the *Hispano-Moresque Haggadah* depicts figural imagery indicates one of the many differences between the decorative arts of the *Ashkenazi* Jews and those of the *Sephardi*, who populated the Iberian region at this time.

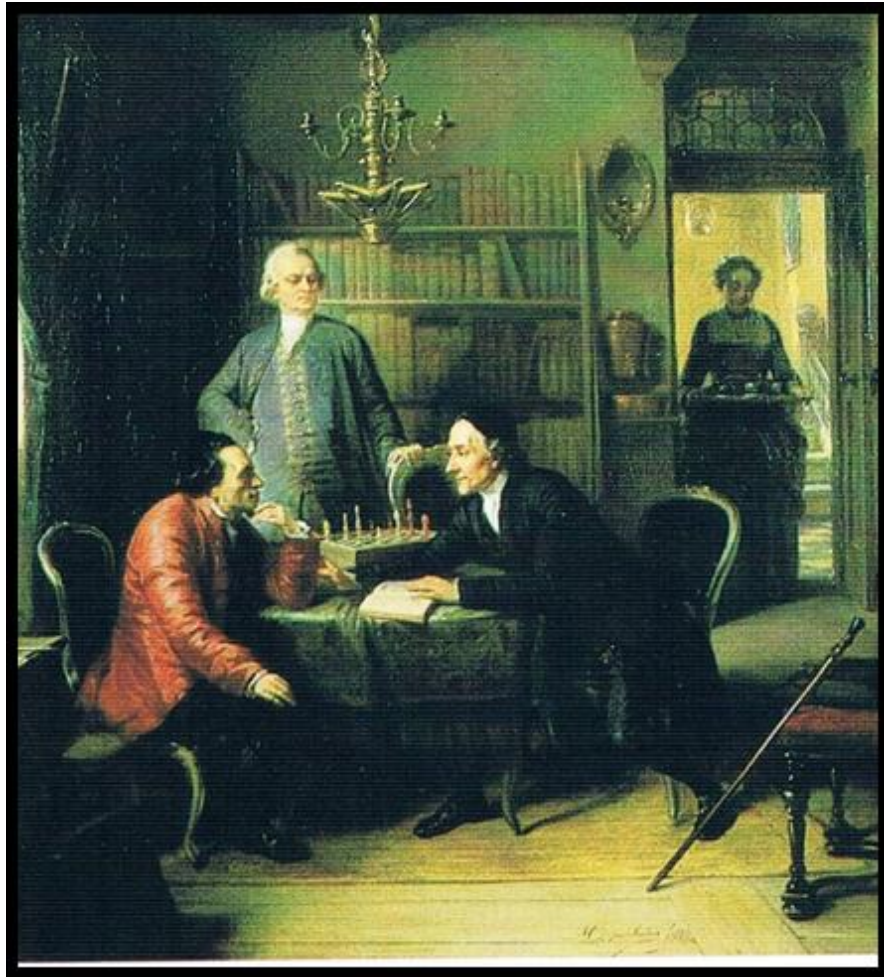
‘*Sepharad*’ is the Hebrew word for ‘Spain’ and ‘*Sephardic*’ refers to those Jews who trace their ancestry back to the Iberian Peninsula.¹⁸ In addition to observing a somewhat different set of religious rites and practices, the *Sephardic* Jews also have historically demonstrated an entirely different – and inclusive – attitude to the human image as an integral component of their visual culture. To this day, there is a schism between the *Ashkenazi* and the *Sephardic* Jews, who often maintain separate synagogues, different worship customs, and a social culture that continues to keep a polite distance from one another. Temporally similar paintings of economically successful, upper class Jews from each culture illustrate some of the visual differences between these two worlds. (fig. 6 & 7) While a span of only fifty years separates these two eighteenth century paintings – of a wealthy *Sephardic* woman and a prominent *Ashkenazi* family – the context of each juxtaposes the exoticism and riches of the Ottoman Empire with the westernized, albeit equally rich culture of nineteenth century, upper-class Germany. While tomes have been devoted to the apparent differences between these two Jewish

¹⁸ Werblowsky and Wigoder, 347-48.

cultures, this study will keep primarily within the *Ashkenazi* realm; it is within this context that the most prolific and creative adaptations of a non-human design vocabulary distinguish the history of the Jewish decorative arts.



**Figure 6: Unknown painter, Sephardic Woman, 18th c.
Reproduced from Eli Barnavi, ed., A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People
(New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 156**



**Figure 7: M.D. Oppenheim (Ashkenazi) *Lavater and Lessing Visit Moses Mendelssohn*, 1856
Reproduced from Eli Barnavi, ed., *A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People*
(New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 172.**

5. Artistic “Borrowing” in the Book Arts; The Mobility of Illuminated Manuscripts

From the surviving illuminated manuscripts and books of the Middle Ages, a picture may be gleaned of life imagined, as well as life as it may have been lived. In Medieval Europe, illuminated manuscripts were initially a product of the Church to promote the teachings of Christianity and such hand-made books were produced by some of the only literate persons of the time – the monks and the missionaries who were eager to spread the teachings of their faith.¹⁹ While the term “illuminated” suggests many things, in this context it concerns those documents with added decorations, frequently involving pictorial scenes, although sometimes only displaying embellished text initials and decorative page borders. In terms of spreading the Christian faith, any materials containing illustrations would have been extremely helpful, as literacy in Europe prior to Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press (in 1455) was not widespread.²⁰ For this same reason, the stained glass windows in the great medieval cathedrals

¹⁹ Christopher De Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2012), 14.

²⁰ Karen Brookfield, *Writing* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1993), 43.

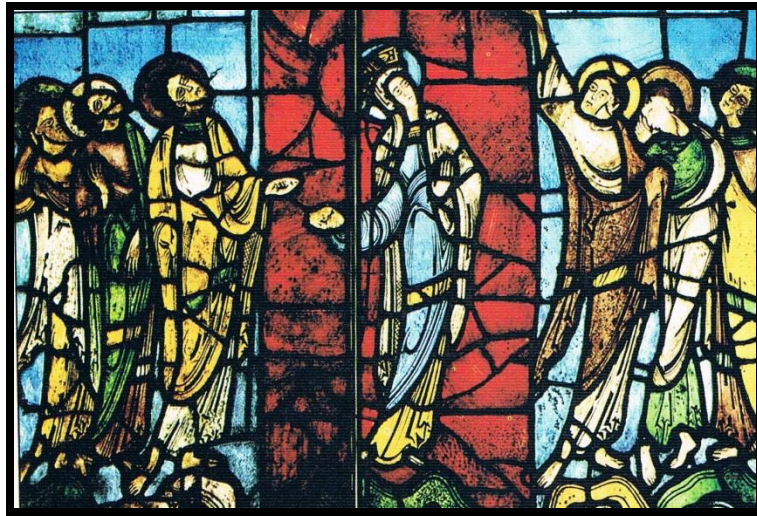


Figure 8: Stained Glass Window (Detail), Le Mans Cathedral, Early 13th c., France
Reproduced from Colin Platt, *The Atlas of Medieval Man*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 68.

illustrating the life of Christ and other pivotal bible stories were a great method of conveying information to the majority of the believers of this period. (fig. 8)

The very purpose of these early Christian missionaries involved travel, and with travel went the books which became the early conduits of cultural fusion as well as religious influence. Some scholars suggest that the creation of artisan guilds for manuscript and book illumination may have been formed later than other decorative arts workshops because the monasteries were such accomplished producers of these treasures and thus, artisan guilds' work in this area may have been in less demand. Moreover, monks were such avid and prolific producers of hand-copied books that they were even known to have borrowed manuscripts from foreign monasteries for the purpose of

copying them.²¹ By their doing so, even within the realm of Christian book production, there was overlap in the design influences between one Christian culture and another.

Understandably, the status associated with owning a hand-copied book was high, and such treasures became both a great show of wealth and evidence of learning within royal circles and the nobility.²² For centuries, the pride and status associated with books has remained strong within Jewish tradition as well. Even as late as the nineteenth century, a popular choice for the gravestone iconography of a learned *Ashkenazi* Jew was a shelf of books, as illustrated in this example from Poland. (fig. 9)



Figure 9: Jewish Tombstone, Scholar Motif (Detail), 19th c., Poland
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman.
Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestones
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1993), 108.

²¹ De Hamel, 159.

²² Brookfield, 26.

Jewish interest in the book arts can be traced to well before the invention of the printing press. As was true in the non-Jewish world, hand-copied Hebrew books were a commodity of great value, and they were bought and sold by Jewish merchants along the popular trade routes by which the finest textiles, silver and gold objects, and other precious items were traded. While Hebrew books could only be reliably copied by Jews, illumination and marginalia decoration were probably learned from the monks.²³ In any case, it is well documented that the illumination of early Hebrew books was influenced by the work of outsiders and thus, the designs of others found their way into the Jewish world. However, if so, then presumably Jewish book illustrations of the pre-Gutenberg period would mimic the popular imagery of the time, and in the world of Christian books, human imagery was common. However, extant *Ashkenazi* manuscripts and books show us that the use of figural illustration was the exception, rather than the rule.

Two Significant *Ashkenazi* Examples

The earliest surviving illuminated German *haggadah* (book used at the family holiday table during the celebration of the Passover meal) – *the Birds' Head Haggadah* – (c. 1300) displays several characteristics significant to both the history of Jewish book illumination in particular and the history of *Ashkenazi* decorative arts in general. The depiction of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments (fig. 10) has been accomplished by the use of a curious illustrative technique. While the story itself is illustrated, the 'people' involved in it take the form of human bodies with birds' heads. Moreover, the

²³ Abrahams, 220.

“hand of God” giving Moses the Ten Commandments is exactly that – a hand, only. By providing just the suggestion of divine presence – by a hand – the maker of this manuscript has been able to tell a story without violating what would have been a strong *Ashkenazi* tradition at this time, avoiding the making of human images. In this one example, neither the divine nor the human beings have taken on a literal, identifiably human shape.



Figure 10: Bird's-Head Haggadah (Detail), c. 1300, Germany
Reproduced from Bezalel Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*
(Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1960), 97.

A slightly earlier example, *the Laud Mahzor* (prayer book, c. 1275) (fig. 11), also from southern Germany, shows a similar adherence to the Ashkenazi restriction regarding illustrating the human form, yet the approach shows an even broader, creative solution. The image in the upper left (fig. 12), meant to be the giving of the Ten Commandments

by God, has been illustrated by a winged, divine figure with no face. This approach to depicting divinity with distortion or with a blank face is typical for *Ashkenazi* illuminated manuscripts and books of this period.²⁴ Moreover, the nearby illustration of the Jews receiving the Ten Commandments depicts beings with human bodies and birds' heads, not unlike the previous example from *the Birds' Head Haggadah*. In other areas of this one page of rich illustrations from the *Laud Mahzor*, there are numerous other figures present, all with human bodies but with distorted heads, primarily with birds' beaks.



Figure 11: Page from *The Laud Mahzor*, c. 1275, Germany
 Reproduced from P. Van Boxell and S. Arndt,
Crossing Borders: Hebrew Manuscripts as a Meeting Place of Cultures
 (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2012), 52.



Figure 12: *The Laud Mahzor* (Detail from previous page), c. 1275, Germany
 Reproduced from P. Van Boxell and S. Arndt, *Crossing Borders: Hebrew Manuscripts as a Meeting Place of Cultures* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2012), 52.

The *Laud Mahzor* also contains a rich collection of grotesques which were common in Christian illuminated manuscripts in the early fourteenth century throughout the medieval world.²⁵ (fig. 13) However this book has the added significance and the irrefutable documentation of having been the product of a collaboration of artisans; some Jewish and some Christian. While the Hebrew text is the work of a Jewish scribe, the decorative aspects are the work of a Christian illuminators' workshop. Instructions specific to the illuminator, *written in Latin*, still evident on this manuscript provide proof that, as was typical of this period, Jews and Christians collaborated in the production of Jewish illuminated manuscripts and books.²⁶ As previously mentioned, the lack of Jewish participation in the artisan guilds at this time may have precluded Jewish expertise

²⁵ De Hamel, 146.

²⁶ Sabine Arndt and Piet van Boxell, ed., *Crossing Borders: Hebrew Manuscripts as a Meeting-place of Cultures* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2012), 52.

in the decorative, illustrative aspects of such works, but even in turning to outsiders for the decorative completion of this book, instructions regarding what types of imagery were and were not allowed also indicate the extent to which the *Ashkenazi* Jews of the late thirteenth/early fourteenth century were willing to incorporate outsiders' design motifs, but only within the limits of their own religious code. Even in this example (fig. 14) depicting a hunt scene, the figure of the hunter himself is a composite of a human body and an animal's head.



Figure 13: Page from *The Laud Mahzor*, c. 1275, Reproduced from P. van Boxell and S. Arndt, *Crossing Borders: Hebrew Manuscripts as a Meeting Place of Cultures*, (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2012), 50.



Figure 14: *The Laud Mahzor*, (Detail from same page)

The Unique Aspect of Hebrew Manuscripts

In spite of evidence of design fusion in the book arts, Hebrew books have always had a unique reason for the addition of decorative designs interspersed throughout the text. The Hebrew alphabet contains no upper case letters and as such, illumination of the entire word of a given paragraph or passage was very helpful in letting the reader know where crucial passages began and ended.²⁷ With Daniel Bomberg's invention of the Hebrew printing press (in Italy) a full century after Gutenberg's invention had revolutionized the dissemination of books to the Christian world, the spread of Jewish books also increased, undoubtedly because this technology enabled the production of books at greater speed and less cost.²⁸ With the increase of production, availability, and mobility of all books, the transfer of designs between and among markedly different cultural groups was also likely to have increased. While the design currents between the Jews and outsiders may have flowed in both directions, the evidence of Jewish borrowing of the designs and motifs of others is abundant. As has already been suggested, however, the *motifs* may have been borrowed, but the meaning(s) ascribed to them, when used in the Jewish context, were believed to have wholly distinct derivation and origins.

²⁷ Narkiss, 15-16.

²⁸ Vivian B. Mann, Lecture, "*Jewish Ceremonial Objects in Context*," The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 7 October 2008.

6. COMMON ROOTS OF THE 'TREE OF LIFE' MOTIF: PAGANISM

While one of the most cherished decorative motifs in each of the three Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) – the 'tree of life' – is believed original to each group's use, the roots of this symbol stretch significantly further back in history. The mythical powers of "the three great roots of the cosmic ash or yew tree" in early pagan societies of Scandinavia were worshipped as the source of physical and spiritual life stemming from a central 'Mother Earth,' the source of life itself.²⁹ (fig. 15) In fact, if traced back to their origins, it is likely that numerous spiritual symbols ascribed – often incorrectly – to one religion or the other, have primarily pagan roots.

²⁹ Ami Ronnberg, ed., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*. (Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 129-130.



Figure 15: Friedrich Wilhelm Heine, "*The Ash Yggdrasil / Tree of Life*," 1886
Reproduced from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yggdrasil> (accessed 12 December 2012)

Another Pagan Symbol: The Twisted Roots of the Six-Pointed Star

One of the most prolific symbols recognized *today* as identifiably Jewish – the six-pointed ‘star of David’ – was conspicuously absent from the Jewish decorative arts until the late nineteenth century. The use of the star in a Jewish context only came about during the first World Zionist Conference held in Basel, Switzerland in 1897. By choosing the six-pointed star as the symbol of this historic gathering, this image began its now universal association with the Jewish faith.³⁰



Figure 16: Carving, Capernaum Synagogue, 1st c..
Reproduced from Hershel Shanks, *Judaism in Stone: The Archaeology of Ancient Synagogues*
(Washington, DC: The Biblical Archaeology Society, 1979), 68.

³⁰ Ori Z. Soltes, *Our Sacred Signs: How Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Art Draw From the Same Source*. Cambridge: Westview Press, 2005, 147.

Initially a pagan symbol, but historically incorporated into the decorative arts of other monotheistic religions, any inclusion of the six-pointed star motif as a Jewish decoration, such as in this first century synagogue carving, (fig. 16) would have been primarily a coincidence of design choice rather than a symbol carrying any religious meaning. Composed of two superimposed equilateral triangles forming a hexagram, and representing the forces of male and female, this motif has no biblical significance and in fact, was used more frequently in non-Jewish environments prior to the eighteenth century.³¹ This decorated Fatimid (Islamic) casket from the thirteenth century is one such example. (fig. 17)



Figure 17: Fatimid Casket Panel, 13th c.
Reproduced from Tim Stanley, et al., *Palace and Mosque: Islamic Art from the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: V & A Publications, 2004), 114.

³¹ Werblowsky and Wigoder, 246.



Figure 18: Hebrew Amulet, 15th/16th c.
 Reproduced from Deirdre Jackson, *Marvelous to Behold: Miracles in Medieval Manuscripts* (London: The British Library, 2007), 75.

While the ‘star of David’ first began to appear on Jewish gravestones of scientists and doctors in Medieval Prague, even then the motif had a primarily magical or mystical reference, since both the six-pointed and five-pointed stars were associated with alchemy and magic.³² Appearing in mystical writings (fig. 18), the six-pointed star, also known as the “Seal of Solomon,” was seen as a safeguard against misfortune.³³ In addition, for seventeenth century believers of *Kabbala* – Jewish mysticism – the ‘tree of life’ had central meaning to “the levels of existence connecting the realms of the planets and the elements with the kingdom of earthly reality” and mystical texts frequently included diagrams of this belief system.³⁴ (fig. 19 [L])

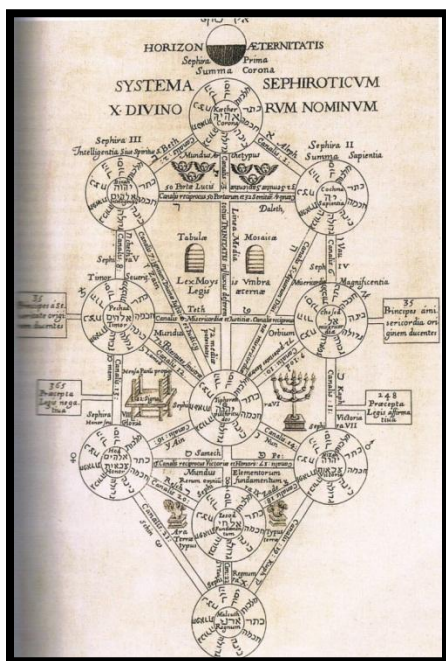
³² Soltes, 147.

³³ Deirdre Jackson, *Marvelous to Behold: Miracles in Medieval Manuscripts* (London: The British Library, 2007), 75

³⁴ Ronnberg, 142.

7. THE TREE OF LIFE IN JEWISH SYMBOLISM: THE *MENORAH*

Yet, embedded within this *Kabbalistic* diagram of the ‘tree of life’ is one of the oldest and purest ‘Jewish’ symbols; the seven-branched candelabra, or *menorah*. (fig. 19 [R]) It is this symbol rather than the ‘star of David’ that has roots tracing back to biblical times and it references The Temple in Jerusalem, making it an undeniably Jewish motif.



Detail with 7-branched candelabra

Figure 19: Kabbalistic Tree of Life, 1652, Germany, Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, ed., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 143.

For nearly two millennia, the seven-branched candelabra – recognized as a symbol for Solomon’s Temple – has decorated Jewish ceremonial objects (fig. 20), amulets, synagogues and tombs.³⁵ (fig. 21) In the early centuries of the first millennium, numerous Jewish objects such as these decorated fourth century Roman glass fragments and a second century Jewish sarcophagus indicate the popularity of this motif, as well as its early association with Judaism.



Figure 20: Jewish Gold Glasses, 4th c., Roman
Reproduced from Karl Katz, et al.,
From the Beginning: Archaeology and Art in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem
(London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., 1968), 118.

³⁵ Hershel Shanks, *Judaism in Stone: The Archaeology of Ancient Synagogues* (Washington, DC: The Biblical Archaeology Society, 1979), 154.



Figure 21: Jewish Sarcophagus, 2nd c., Palestine
 Reproduced from Bezalel Narkiss, *Picture History of Jewish Civilization*
 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1970), 64.

Not surprisingly, this *menorah* shape resembles a tree, and the fact that it appears inset in the Kabbalistic diagram is more than coincidental. In the Jewish context, the form of the seven-branched candelabra is thought to be an allegorical image of the ‘tree of life,’ in addition to being a symbol for messianic hope. Moreover, some scholars suggest an analogy between the *menorah* as a light-bearing tree and the burning bush, mentioned in the book of Exodus as a pivotal event in the story of Moses.³⁶

Form vs. Function: Variations of the *Menorah*’s Shape

In the modern context, many *Hanukkah menorahs* have been created in the shape of an actual tree (figs. 22 & 23), perhaps to further extend the ‘light-bearing tree’ analogy.

³⁶ Abram Kanof, *Jewish Ceremonial Art and Religious Observance* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1980), 55.

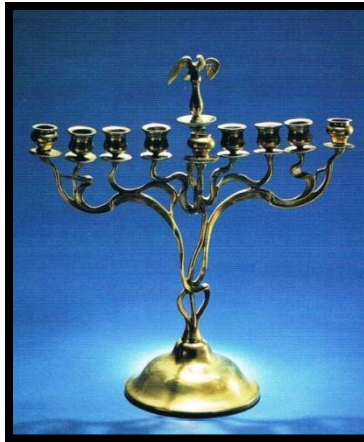


Figure 22: Hanukkah Lamp with American Eagle Motif, 1900, United States
Tin, cast and brass plated Reproduced from Vivian B. Mann and Emily D. Bilski,
The Jewish Museum, New York, (London: Scala Publications, Ltd, 1993), 68.



Figure 23: Hanukkah Lamp, "Tree of Life" Form, c. 1980, United States
Private collection
Photo: Susan Lockwood, 2008.

However, while tree-shaped candelabra can easily be found, they are by no means the standard by which such objects must be made. There is tremendous diversity in the forms of *Hanukkah menorahs* worldwide, and this raises another aspect of the Jewish

decorative arts significant to this study. Within the context of Jewish sacred and material objects, there exists an odd dichotomy between specific regulation and creative interpretation. Surprisingly, the forms of so many of these objects are varied even though they are used for similar purposes. The laws that govern the making of these objects ensure that the religious purpose of their use is fulfilled, rather than requiring that such objects take a certain shape or form. In light of the fact that mobility has played such a constant role in Jewish history, the huge diversity in decorative styles and fabrication of Jewish sacred and material objects would appear to be more a function of the influence of outsiders' artistic styles, but that is only half the story.

The *Shulhan Arukh* – The Framework for Jewish Customs and Practice

Since the publication of the *Shulhan Arukh* – the ‘standard of Jewish code and practice’ – in 1565, Jewish rituals have been regulated into a framework that has helped to standardize the lives and behaviors of a widely scattered people all claiming to share the same belief systems and cultural affiliation.³⁷ With hindsight, this ‘code’ may have been more useful in unifying and standardizing the former, rather than the latter. While there is no question that Jewish life-cycle events and religious holidays are marked with traditional observances regardless of where Jews may be living or have previously lived, the wide cultural diversity surrounding many Jewish communities throughout history has undoubtedly influenced how many Jews, either individually or collectively have evolved, both socially and culturally.

³⁷ Vivian B. Mann, Lecture, “*Jewish Ceremonial Objects in Context*,” The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2 September, 2008.

The impact of the *Shulhan Arukh* can be illustrated with a few comparative examples of *Hanukkah menorahs*, such as one nineteenth century model from North Africa contrasted with a nineteenth century example from Germany. While these

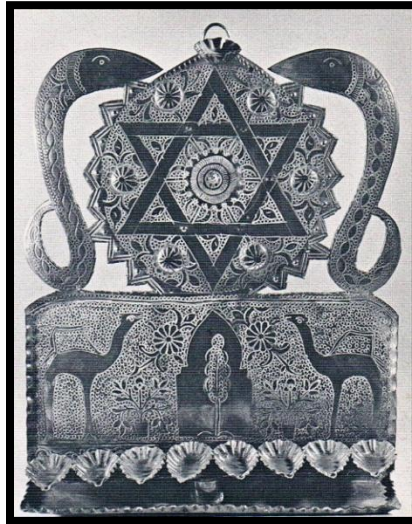
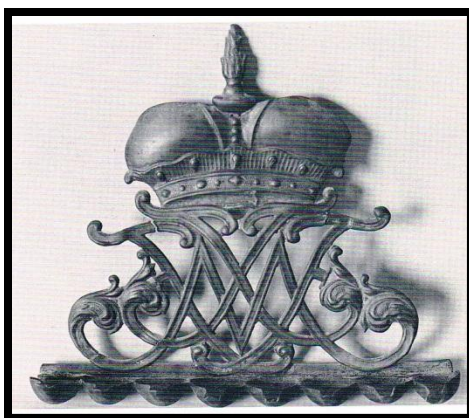


Figure 24: Hanukkah Lamp, 19th c., Tunisia
Pierced and hammered brass Reproduced from Yehuda L. Bialer and Estelle Fink,
Jewish Life in Art and Tradition (Jerusalem: Japhet Press, 1980), 163.

objects date from the same period, design elements taken from the surrounding cultures are evident, such as exotic animals and floral motifs from the Muslim world of North Africa (fig. 24) and the regal design elements taken from a German military officer's helmet, from which this *Hanukkah menorah* was fabricated. (fig. 25)



**Figure 25: Hanukkah Lamp made from a (military) helmet ornament. 19th c., Germany
Brass, with evidence of gilding Reproduced from Ruth Eis,
Hanukkah Lamps of the Judah Magnes Museum. (Berkeley: Judah L. Magnes Museum, 1977), 53.**

Equally significant, however, is the fact that the ‘standard of Jewish code and practice’ has been followed. The *Shulhan Arukh* merely requires that a *Hanukkah* lamp must have eight candles, all on equal level. While not a religious requirement, if there is a ninth candle present it must be set apart and on a different level from the other eight.³⁸ Both of these nineteenth century examples feature eight candles evenly lined up along the base of each *menorah* and each also has a ninth candle at the top of the piece, set apart from the rest. By comparing these two objects we can see how and why the great diversity in styles of Jewish objects could have developed over the centuries in a manner that satisfied certain religious requirements but allowed for creativity in design and materials. Moreover, for those artisans who chose to exclude human form from their ornamental choices, the alternative design options available to them were numerous. Among the broad range of design variations (animal and floral motifs, provincial and

³⁸ Solomon Ganzfried, *Code of Jewish Law (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch); A Compilation of Jewish Laws and Customs*, trans. Hyman E. Goldin, rev. ed. (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1927), Vol. 3, 110.

patriotic symbols, and other regionally specific decoration), Jews could fashion their ceremonial objects since the middle of the sixteenth century using the guidance of the *Shulhan Arukh*, with the assurance that these items would be acceptable for their intended religious purposes even without conforming to one specific or standard shape.

The ‘Tree of Life’ as Metaphor for the *Torah*

Historically, one of the most pervasive decorative, literary, and allegorical motifs throughout the Jewish world is the ‘tree of life.’ Central to Jewish religious beliefs and practices; the “tree of life” is also a frequent metaphor for the *Torah*, the first five books of the bible, commonly referred to as the Old Testament. Due to all the ethical guidance and knowledge that is bound up within the *Torah*, the ‘tree of life’ is its most frequently referenced metaphor in Jewish tradition, associating this compendium of religious code and practice with the one item in nature universally recognized as displaying strength and permanence. The illustrative examples of the ‘tree of life’ in the Jewish decorative arts are countless, and are as varied as the locales and the decorative styles of the numerous communities established throughout the history of the Jewish Diaspora, although decorative items associated with the *Torah* are the most common. (figs. 26 & 27)



Figure 26: Torah Mantle, 1748, Germany
Velvet, with gold and silver thread Reproduced from Yehuda Bialer and Estelle Fink.
Jewish Life in Art and Tradition (Jerusalem: Japhet Press, 1980), 102.



Figure 27: Franz Anton Gutwein, Torah Shield, 1801, Germany
Cast, repousse, parcel-gilt and engraved silver Reproduced from Linda Altshuler, ed.,
In the Spirit of Tradition .(Washington: The B'nai Brith Klutznick Museum, 1988), 53.

While the custom of fabricating elaborate Torah ornaments can be traced back to antiquity,³⁹ regrettably, few fabricated prior to the sixteenth century have survived.⁴⁰ However, even without material evidence, some Jewish historians suggest that such items may have come into production on a wider scale concurrently with the establishment of some of the Jewish-operated metal workshops in Medieval Europe, particularly in Germany.⁴¹

Jewish Gravestone Art and the ‘Tree of Life’ Motif

In addition to the wide variety of design choices for so many Jewish sacred and material objects, in the area of Jewish gravestone art, a broad range of ornamental motifs suggests some degree of ‘borrowed’ design styles. However, given the popularity of the ‘tree of life’ motif and its association with Jewish continuity and unity, the analogy of ‘a tree cut down’ with that of *a young life cut short* has been for centuries one of the most poignant and frequent images appearing on Jewish gravestones in both the *Ashkenazi* and *Sephardic* contexts.⁴² A seventeenth century *Sephardic* example from the Ouderkerk cemetery (the Netherlands) depicting a tree in the process of being cut down, (fig. 28) compared with an *Ashkenazi* gravestone from approximately two centuries later in the Ukraine, showing the hand of God severing a flower (fig. 29), appear visually and metaphorically closely linked. Both images suggest an abrupt interruption of life by

³⁹ Kanof, 227.

⁴⁰ Vivian B. Mann, *Crowning Glory: Silver Torah Ornaments of the Jewish Museum, New York* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1996), 1.

⁴¹ Wischnitzer, 89.

⁴² David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc, 2000), 103.

showing the cutting of the tree and the flower, both still in bloom and thus, still in their prime of life.



Figure 28: Sephardic Tombstone (Detail), Ouderkerk Cemetery, 17th c., The Netherlands
Reproduced from Henriques De Castro,
Selected Gravestones from the Dutch Portuguese Jewish Cemetery
at Ouderkerk aan de Amstel. (Leiden: Brill., 1999), 110.



Figure 29: Ashkenazi Tombstone (Detail), 19th c., Ukraine
Reproduced from David Goberman,
Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale.
(New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), Book Cover.

Early in the twentieth century, this motif was still popular, as seen in a Jewish cemetery in Massachusetts on a gravestone erected in 1924 for Jacob Davidson, a young man of *Ashkenazi* descent. In this case, however, the ‘tree cut down’ metaphor has evolved; the stone itself has been carved into the sculptural form of a severed trunk of a tree. (figs. 30 & 31)



**Figures 30 & 31: Gravestone of Jacob Davidson (Side and Front Views), 1924,
Hevrah Kaddisha Cemetery, Leicester, Massachusetts
Photo: Susan Lockwood, 2010.**

The same motif, although further distilled into a slightly more modern interpretation, was utilized by the architect of the memorial to President John F. Kennedy, erected in Israel in 1966. (fig. 32) Although three-dimensional, massive in size, and completely contemporary in form, the metaphor of a severed trunk of a tree

taking the form of the building itself, while conceptualized in the modern era, has its roots in centuries of the evolution of Jewish gravestone design.

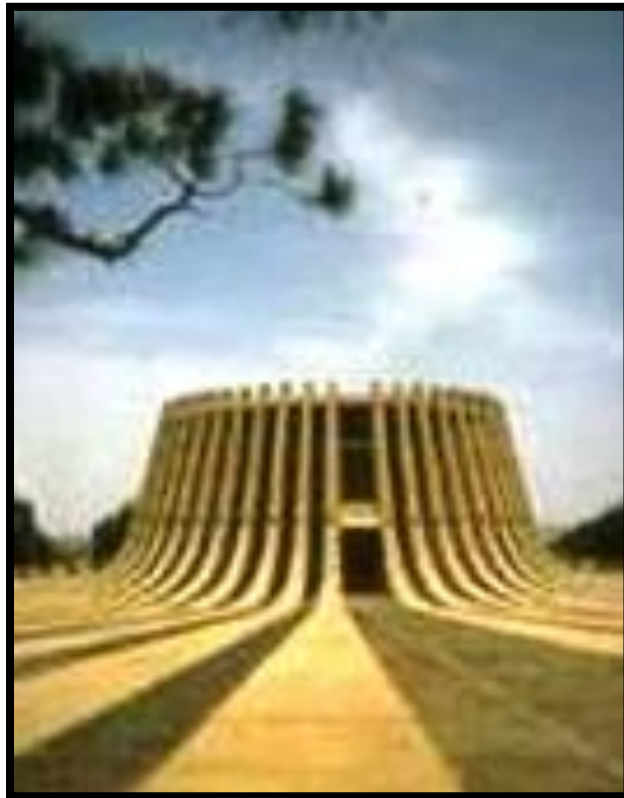


Figure 32: John F. Kennedy Memorial, 1966, Jerusalem, Israel
Reproduced from www.delange.org/ADIsrael/Kennedy/Kennedy.htm (accessed 3 May 2010).

8. THE ‘TREE OF LIFE’ MOTIF IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

The symbol of the ‘tree of life’ has a prominent place in other long-established religious traditions in the Pagan, Islamic, and Christian worlds. Although each religion interprets the symbolism somewhat differently, the “tree of life” ultimately refers to immortality, eternity, divinity, knowledge, the source of life itself, or some combination of all of these concepts.⁴³ This is probably not a coincidence; the frequency and importance placed on this one theme indicates the high degree of significance given to it. Moreover, the qualities and powers symbolized in specific types of trees (and their associated fruits) detail a wide spectrum of religious significance, particularly in the Christian world, but like the tree itself, all belief systems ultimately stem from this one central source of life and sustenance.⁴⁴

Christian Roots

For the early Christians, the olive tree was the embodiment of the ‘tree of life.’ Reasons for this include the fact that the olive tree perpetually renews itself: it resurrects after fire by sprouting new shoots and it is able to grow back even if the top or trunk has decayed. Furthermore, cultivated olive strains cannot grow by themselves from seed, but instead must be grafted onto wild olive trees. Saint Paul reminded the Christians of his

⁴³ Werblowsky and Wigoder, 389.

⁴⁴ Ronnberg,, 129-130

time that they “had been grafted onto the cultivated olive tree of Jewish-Christian believers, whose roots and branches were Israel.”⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, the predicted messianic savior – emerging from “the root of Jesse” – ties the presumably ‘saved’ generation to Christ’s biblical genealogical roots.⁴⁶

Tree Motifs in Christian Gravestone Art

In addition to a number of Victorian motifs such as urns, obelisks, and draped fabric, the tree motif became a popular choice for Christian gravestone iconography in the nineteenth century. Allegorically, the weeping willow tree was presumably a symbol of grief and mourning, as depicted in this example from Massachusetts, dated 1844. (fig. 33) However, Christianity also associates the willow tree with the gospel of Christ

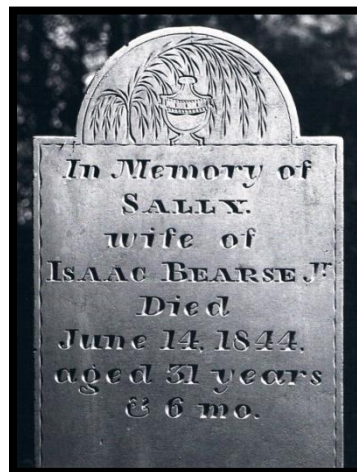


Figure 33: Gravestone of Sally Bearnse, 1844, Centerville, MA, USA
Reproduced from James Blachowicz, *From Slate to Marble: Gravestone Carving Traditions in Eastern Massachusetts, 1770-1870*. (Evanston: Graver Press, 2006), 194.

⁴⁵ Ronnberg, 134.

⁴⁶ Ronnberg, 140.

because the tree will flourish and remain whole no matter how many branches are cut off. As such, to the Christian believers, the weeping willow also suggests immortality.⁴⁷ Another tree motif popular at this time was the image of a tree trunk or a tree cut down, however, as already mentioned, this supposedly Christian gravestone theme has much older roots – in the Jewish world.

Islam's "Celestial Garden"

Not unlike Jewish (*Ashkenazi*) decorative traditions, the majority of Islamic visual culture also shuns the depiction of human form.⁴⁸ It is a widely held Islamic belief that on Judgment Day the painters will be among those most severely punished because of their arrogance and presumption in trying to imitate the creativity of God. It is also believed that the angels of mercy will not enter a house containing a human image.⁴⁹ This may help to explain why even today some extremely devout Muslims will not allow photography of themselves or their family members. With this in mind, Islamic artistic tradition which is distinguished by exquisite floral and geometric decoration has always served two purposes: beautifying the sacred texts and houses of worship and representing the "landscape of celestial Paradise,"⁵⁰ often indicated by the presence of the 'tree of life' motif. (fig. 34)

However, in yet one more situation of cross-cultural diffusion, the 'tree of life' motif that appears so frequently in Islamic carpet designs and on porcelain decoration is

⁴⁷ Keister, 67.

⁴⁸ Barbara Brend, *Islamic Art*. (London: The British Museum Press, 1991), 228-9.

⁴⁹ Kanof, 20.

⁵⁰ A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, et al, *Treasures of Islam* (Seacaucus: Wellfleet Press, 1985), 111, 171.

believed to have stylistically evolved from Chinese Buddhist artifacts that would have come to the Islamic world via the trade routes along the Silk Road.⁵¹

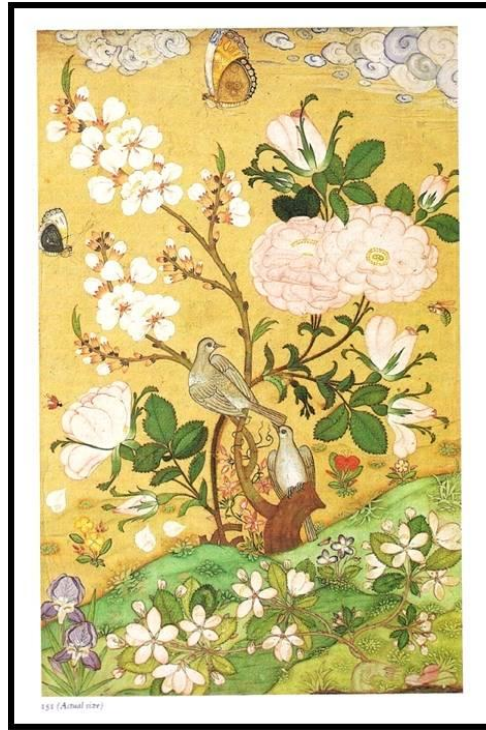


Figure 34: ‘Celestial Paradise’ Mughal Manuscript, c. 1650
Reproduced from A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, et al, *Treasures of Islam*
(Seacaucus: Wellfleet Press, 1985), 171.

⁵¹ Brend, 228.

9. COMMON ROOTS OF THE SYMBOLISM OF FLOWERS

Floral Motifs in Christian Gravestone Art

Floral ornamentation throughout the Christian decorative arts is permeated with symbolism. Although such motifs on Christian tombstone art of the Victorian period suggest references to new life, renewal, rebirth, resurrection, and even the transitory nature of the human soul,⁵² the types of flowers also contain specific meanings. While the ancient Greeks believed the iris (fig. 35) to be the messenger of the Olympian gods, this flower was adopted by the Christians to mean ‘the sorrow of the Virgin Mary,’ much like the more common floral symbol of the lily.⁵³ (fig. 36) Other flowers associated with Christian iconography – such as the passion of Christ – are the flower of the same name (passion flower) and the red rose, a symbol of Christian martyrdom. The white rose often indicates the purity of female saints and/or the Virgin Mary.

Taking the rose theme a step further, Christian doctrine sometimes refers to the Virgin as ‘the rose without thorns’ with the presumption that she was free of sin. In this context, Christian gravestone designs for women of the Victorian era often included roses.⁵⁴

⁵² Ronnberg, 150.

⁵³ Keister, 48.

⁵⁴ Keister,

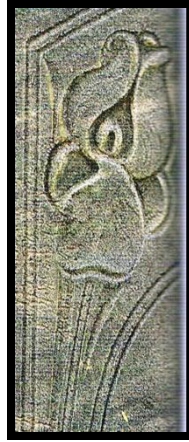


Figure 35: Gravestone, Iris Motif (Detail)
 Reproduced from Douglas Keister,
Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography
 (New York: MJF Books, 2004), 48.



Figure 36: Gravestone, Lily motif (Detail)
 Reproduced from Douglas Keister,
Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography
 (New York: MJF Books, 2004), 51.

Floral Decoration/Ornament in the Islamic World

Due to the previously mentioned ornamental restrictions in the Islamic decorative arts, the preference for floral designs has been a constant throughout their long history. That said, however, the trade routes along the Silk Road brought European luxury goods and books to the Islamic world from Europe and other exotic origins, thus broadening their traditional design vocabulary of floral patterns. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Muslim artisans of the Ottoman Empire were incorporating outsiders' floral and vegetal designs into the manufacture of their own decorative items, enriching their own designs while maintaining an avoidance of human forms.⁵⁵ While modern historians of the Islamic arts agree that outsiders' design influences ultimately did permeate the Islamic world, the influence of outsiders' religious dogma appears to have been kept at bay. Much like the Jewish artisans, Muslim workshops' artistic production remained faithful to the floral patterns that represented the 'gardens of Celestial Paradise,' (fig. 37) while their geometric ornamentation glorified 'the perfection of divine order.'⁵⁶ While less common, floral motifs on some Ottoman gravestones do exist, (fig. 38) although further research would be necessary to determine if such motifs were intended to represent specific themes (such as the death of a young person, for example).

⁵⁵ Krody, p. 61-62.

⁵⁶ Brend, pp. 226-227.



Figure 37: Wall Tiles, 18th c., Court of the Haremagalars, Topkapi Palace, Turkey
 Reproduced from Sumru Belger Krody,
Flowers of Silk and Gold: Four Centuries of Ottoman Embroidery
 (Washington, DC: Merrell Publishers, Limited, 2000), 64.



Figure 38: Gravestone, Ottoman Empire, Date Unknown
 Reproduced from Sumru Belger Krody,
Flowers of Silk and Gold: Four Centuries of Ottoman Embroidery
 (Washington, DC: Merrell Publishers, Limited, 2000), 65.

Floral Motifs on Jewish Gravestones

Similar to a fallen tree as a metaphor for a life cut short, the image of flowers on a Jewish gravestone usually represents the grave of a young woman. While it is common to represent the flower(s) as wilted (fig. 39), images of a “divine hand” plucking a single flower are also plentiful on 19th century *Ashkenazi* gravestones, (fig. 40) particularly in the Russian Pale. The obvious message of a young life interrupted is clear. But unlike the ‘tree cut down’ motif (on a Jewish gravestone), the cut flower motif appears to be specifically representative of a young woman, whereas the tree motif appears more frequently on the gravestone of a young man.



Figure 39: Grave of a Young Woman (Detail), Mid-19th Century, Kutu, West/Central Ukraine
Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
(New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000.), 67.



Figure 40: Grave of a Young Woman (Detail), 1884, Chernovtsy, West/Central Ukraine
 Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
 (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000.), 97.

While floral ornamentation was ubiquitous on Medieval illuminated manuscripts and books of all the Abrahamic faiths – with the exception of the actual scroll of the *Torah*⁵⁷ – the presence and the symbolism of flowers in general, as well as specific types of flowers as decorations on religious and material cultural artifacts of all these cultural groups appears to be more specifically directed. In other words, floral ornamentation on book marginalia, surrounding a piece of carved furniture, or painted onto a piece of porcelain have had historically primarily decorative qualities, whereas the iconography on tombstones and other artifacts of Jewish life have often been more indicative of a deeper meaning.

⁵⁷ Vivian B. Mann, Lecture, “*Three Sephardi Communities and the Art of the Other*,” The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 10 February 2010.

Floral Motifs on Jewish Metalwork / Ceremonial Objects: Spice Boxes

With the formation of Jewish metal workshops during the Middle Ages, the fabrication of highly decorated ceremonial objects evolved, many of which had floral-themed ornamentation. However, since the skills of Jewish artisans were often not up to the caliber of the professional guilds' workshops, it was not uncommon for a Jew to purchase, adapt, and re-use a decorative object initially made for a non-Jew and originally intended for another purpose entirely, such as the previously cited *Hanukkah lamp* fabricated from a German military officer's helmet (fig. 25, p. 38). This adaptation or repurposing of decorative objects was a frequent practice in the case of the spice boxes used weekly in the Jewish home to mark the conclusion of the Sabbath.

In many Jewish homes worldwide, the *Havdalah* ceremony is performed at sundown on Saturday evening, signifying the conclusion of the Sabbath period. Even the name of this practice indicates its function. *Havdalah* is the Hebrew word for separation, and this ceremony marks the end or the separation from the holy period of the Sabbath and the return to the secular world of the everyday.⁵⁸ Since antiquity, the exotic aroma of spices has been symbolic of richness, and in the context of the *Havdalah* ceremony, the special aroma that emanates from the spice box has two functions. On the material level, it is hoped that the spices will usher in a successful and favorable week. On the spiritual level, the spice box has great significance. While symbolizing the end of the holy Sabbath, the aroma of the spices indicates the departure of the "extra soul" that is believed to inhabit each Jew during the Sabbath period. Some believe the inclusion of

⁵⁸ Werblowsky and Wigoder, 175.

the spices within the *Havdalah* ceremony also symbolizes “the religious separation of the people of Israel from the other nations.” Another interpretation suggests that those Jews whose spiritual beliefs include the anticipation of the arrival of the Messiah think that the homes in which the *Havdalah* ceremony has been performed will be among the first to welcome this auspicious guest.⁵⁹

While the prescribed ritual use of the spice box is specific, its shape and material is not. The emphasis of this ceremony, like many others within the compendium of Jewish observance, is on the practice itself, rather than on the material construction of the ritual object.⁶⁰ Spice boxes produced in 19th century Europe, particularly in Austria and Germany, were often in the shape of Gothic towers.⁶¹ (fig. 41) The Gothic tower form is commonly attributed to the idea that spices were so highly valued in the Middle Ages that they were stored high in the castle or city hall.⁶² Yet this popular tower motif was not restricted to the metal arts; the Gothic tower was also a favorite motif used in numerous Ashkenazi illuminated medieval manuscripts⁶³ such as this German prayer book (*mahzor*) from Esslingen, dated 1290. (fig. 42)

⁵⁹ Alan Unterman. *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend*. (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd, 1991.), 190.

⁶⁰ Vivian B. Mann, “*Jewish Ceremonial Art in Context*,” Lecture, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2 September 2008.

⁶¹ Werblowsky and Wigoder, 45.

⁶² Kanof, 121-122.

⁶³ Kanof, 40.

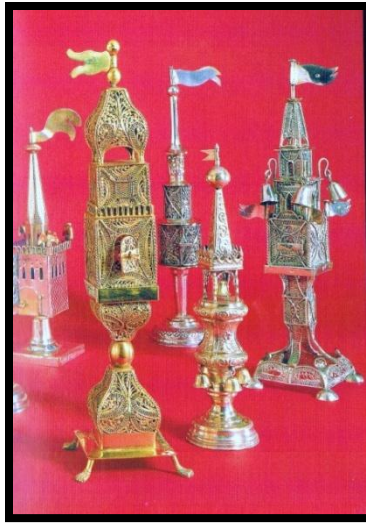


Figure 41: Tower form Spice Containers, 19th c. Europe
 Reproduced from Cissy Grossman, *The Jewish Family's Book of Days*
 (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), Endpapers.



Figure 42: *Esslingen Mahzor*, 1290, Germany, Hand-lettered on parchment
 Reproduced from "Washington Jewish Week" 24 September 2009,
 Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (New York, NY).

Other popular forms for Ashkenazi spice-boxes in Eastern Europe and the Russian pale included fruits, animals, and flowers, (fig. 43) while in Poland, floral shapes were often the preferred style, such as this exquisite eighteenth century gold example with a peacock (partially visible) adorning the lid. (fig. 44)

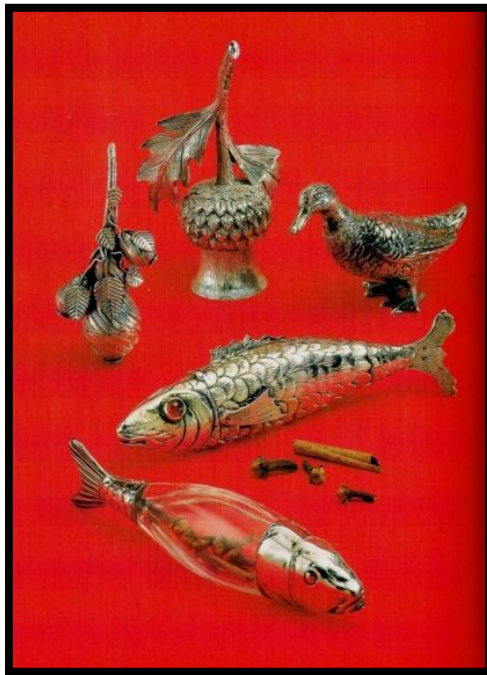


Figure 43: Spice Containers, 19th c, Europe..
Reproduced from Cissy Grossman, *The Jewish Family's Book of Days* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 57.



Figure 64: Spice Container, 18th Century, Poland.
Gold, cast and cut out. Reproduced from Abram Kanof, *Jewish Ceremonial Art and Religious Observance* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1980), 125.

As is sometimes the case with many art forms, there clearly have been instances of excessive enthusiasm in the production of *Havdalah* spice boxes. One such silver example from early nineteenth century Poland (fig. 45) stands over twenty inches tall and is awash in filigree, chased, and parcel-gilt floral and vine decoration. Since *Havdalah* spice boxes are typically small ‘table top’ items that are passed from one family member to the next at the end of the ceremony (so that each person can enjoy the aromatic spices within),⁶⁴ a twenty-inch tall item would have been slightly overwhelming if used in that context. We can presume that this extremely ornate object by an unknown maker was

⁶⁴ Werblowsky and Wigoder, 177-8.

commissioned by a very wealthy family, perhaps believing that ‘more is better.’ From its appearance, this item may very well be a refashioned product of several smaller pieces fused together into one awkwardly stacked piece which barely met the challenge of its intended function, since passing the item from hand to hand would have been cumbersome.



**Figure 45: Spice Container, 1810-20, Poland,
Silver, repousse, cast, engraved, filigree, chased and parcel-gilt Reproduced from Vivian B. Mann, et al.
The Jewish Museum New York. (New York: Rizzoli Int'l. Publications, Inc.,1999), 85.**

10. FRUIT MOTIFS AND THEIR SYMBOLISM: THE APPLES & ORANGES OF RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

In the Beginning...The Apple

While the Pagans believed that the apple symbolized the immortality of the Norse gods, for both the Jews and the Christians, the apple is an immediate reference to ‘the Tree of Knowledge’ and the ultimate expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. (fig. 46) As such, this “forbidden fruit” has come to symbolize a loss of innocence, even today. Moreover, analysts of children’s literature insist that even Walt Disney’s tale of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* leaves little room for misinterpretation regarding the wicked witch and the apple of temptation. (fig. 47)



Figure 46: Hieronymus Bosch, ‘The Fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise’ (Detail), 1482
Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*
(Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 17



Figure 47: Walt Disney, 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' (Detail), 1937
 Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*
 (Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 171.

And “The Holy Apple” – The Pomegranate

Although adopted by the Christians to symbolize ‘the hope of immortality and resurrection,’ the mystique of the pomegranate traces back to the ancient Greeks. They attributed the pomegranate to the goddess Persephone, who represented the return of Spring and rejuvenation.⁶⁵ However, despite its clearly pagan roots, in the Jewish context the pomegranate has an allegorical reference to the *Torah*. It is believed that the pomegranate contains six hundred and thirteen seeds – representing the same number of ‘commandments’ – laws by which the Jews govern their personal conduct, as written in their *Torah*.⁶⁶ Known as the “holy apple” by the ancient Hebrews, the pomegranate, as a symbol of God’s commandments, was a decorative image on the robes of the priests and

⁶⁵ Keister, 59.

⁶⁶ Werblowsky and Wigoder, 333.

was an image used to decorate the Ark of the Covenant.⁶⁷ An early nineteenth century *menorah* from the former Soviet Union depicts a temple façade flanked on either side by pomegranate trees. (fig. 48) Despite the fact that this piece is a dense amalgam of several different design forms and styles, the maker, for whatever reason, chose to include this auspicious biblical fruit in the form of trees growing alongside this ‘building.’ This *menorah* is a typical example of numerous Jewish ceremonial objects fabricated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Ashkenazi Europe and the Russian Pale. As previously mentioned, the metal workshops that handled Ashkenazi commissions at this time often were not comprised of Jewish artisans with the highest skills and often artisans would adapt and repurpose older pieces which may have originally been intended for a different use altogether. The end products of these ‘mixed’ pieces were frequently a jumble of various forms and styles – a *horror vacui* (fear of empty space) design in three-dimensional form.

⁶⁷ Douglas Keister, *A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*. (New York: MJF Books, 2004), 59.



**Figure 48: Menorah with Pomegranate Trees Motif, Early 19th c., U.S.S.R., Silver and silver gilt
Reproduced from Abram Kanof, *Jewish Ceremonial Art and Religious Observance*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1980.), 161.**

In the manuscript arts, the pomegranate with its numerous seeds was a popular symbol for fertility⁶⁸ and images of this fruit were a frequent choice for the decoration of Jewish marriage contracts (*ketubbot*), such as in this *Sephardic* example from Italy, dated 1775 showing seed-laden pomegranates in the top two corners of this document. (fig. 49)

⁶⁸ Kanof, 194-5.



Figure 49: Ketubbah (Jewish Marriage Contract) with Pomegranate Motif, 1775, Italy, Parchment with painted and cut out decoration and gold painted inner frame
Reproduced from Abram Kanof, *Jewish Ceremonial Art and Religious Observance* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1980.), 194.

The Fruit of the Vine....Grapes for One and All

The cultivation of grapes for wine-making dates back six thousand years. Thus, for millennia, any civilization for which wine has played a role in cultural, social, religious, or any related activities has had an affinity with the grape. Early civilizations equated wine (and grapes) with the gods; the Greeks worshipped Bacchus who occasionally was portrayed in fresco art as a divine being wreathed in grapes. (fig. 50)

The ancient Egyptians believed that grape-bearing vines were symbolic of the resurrection of the dead and such images decorated the internal chambers of some tombs. (fig. 51)



Figure 50: Pompeii Fresco with Bacchus Motif, (Detail), 1st c. A.D
Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Image*
(Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 175.



Figure 51: Tomb of Nakht Wall Painting with Resurrection Motif (Detail), c. 1550 B.C., Egypt
Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*.
(Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 175.

While Islam forbids drinking wine, even the thirteenth century mystic Persian poet Rumi wrote: “Before a garden, a vine or a grape existed in this world, our souls were intoxicated with immortal wine.”⁶⁹ Clearly, the powerful properties of the fruit of the vine were recognized even by the Muslims, albeit from a respectable distance.

Christianity, Grapes, and Wine

The association of wine with the divinity of Christ may very well have been a borrowed concept from some or all of these earlier decorative motifs. The metaphor of wine as a symbol for the crucified and then resurrected Christ forms the underpinnings of Christian teaching. As such, the motif of grape clusters has permeated the Christian decorative arts; it is a ubiquitous symbol for the blood of Christ, particularly on Victorian gravestones such as this late nineteenth century example from New York.⁷⁰ (fig. 52

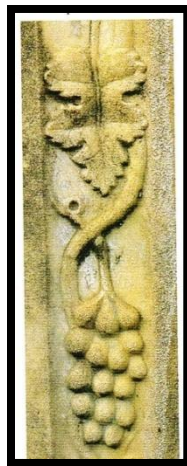


Figure 52: Grape Cluster Gravestone Motif (Detail),
Reproduced from Douglas Keister, *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography* (New York: MJF Books, 2004), 57.

⁶⁹ Ronnberg, 174.

⁷⁰ Keister, 57.

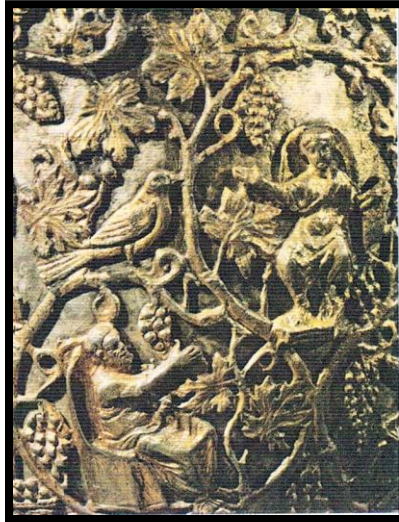


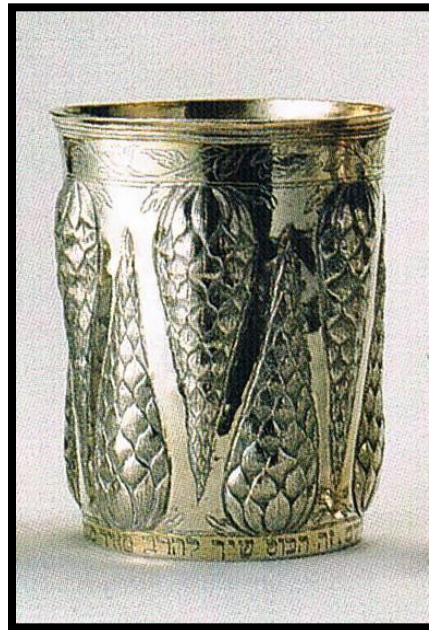
Figure 53: Early Christian Chalice, ‘Christ Seated Among Grapevines’ (Detail)
 Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*
 (Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 175.

Logically, the grape motif was (and still is) a frequent design used to decorate ceremonial objects for the church, such as on this early Christian chalice used during communion. (fig. 53) But regardless of how all these various and varied cultures have interpreted the meanings behind the product of the grape, the common element in three out of four of these decorative examples depict figural imagery; divinity and the supernatural powers associated with it have taken human form.

Judaism’s Take on the Grape

Since antiquity, Judaism’s references to the grape and its product have been numerous and entirely positive. Along with other popular fruits, a lush cluster of grapes

represented abundance in all areas of life; the grape was one of the seven products of Palestinian agriculture mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy.⁷¹ In other areas of the bible, a good wife is “like a fruitful vine” and wine “revives those who are bitter in soul,” a reference that suggests offering comfort to a person who is in mourning.⁷² Not surprisingly, a popular decorative choice for a ceremonial wine cup (*Kiddush cup*) has been a motif that includes grapes, such as this eighteenth century silver example from Russia on which a stylized cluster of grapes becomes a repeated motif winding around the cup. (fig. 54)



**Figure 54: Kiddush Cup with Grape Motif, 18th c., Russia,
Silver, repousse, parcel-gilt, chased and engraved
Reproduced from Vivian B. Mann and Emily D. Bilski,
The Jewish Museum New York (London: Scala Publications, Ltd., 1993), 83.**

⁷¹ Kanof, 56.

⁷² Kanof, 84.

Grapes and Other Non-figural *Ashkenazi* Gravestone Art

On a Jewish gravestone, the grape motif is believed to signify “the fruit of one’s life’s work, either material or spiritual.”⁷³ (fig. 55) On this late nineteenth century example from Moldova, the gravestone honors a rabbi’s wife; her epitaph begins “Here lies an esteemed woman...daughter of ...” Foliate motifs for Jewish gravestone iconography were used in a variety of contexts, such as the previously discussed “tree cut down” motif for a the grave of a young man or a “cut flower” representing the grave of a young woman. Occasionally, the grave of a young Jewish woman included the hand of God holding a broken grape vine, such as this East European example dated 1881, (fig. 56) a variation on the ‘*Song of Songs*’ passage “God’s hand went down and plucked a flower.”⁷⁴



Figure 55: Gravestone of Rabbi’s Wife (Detail) with Grape Motif, Late 19th c., Moldova
Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
(New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 141.

⁷³ Schwartzman, 130.

⁷⁴ Goberman, 31.

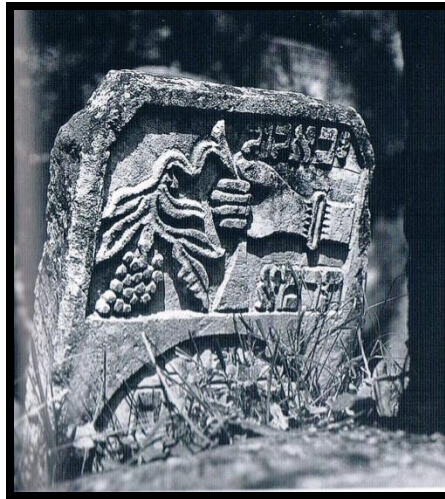


Figure 56: Gravestone of a Young Woman (Detail) with Grape Motif, 1881, Eastern Europe
 Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
 (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 31.

At the beginning of the twentieth century when elaborate gravestone decoration began to diminish, some Jews still used the grape motif on their gravestones, such as on the marker for Ludwig Traube (1907) in Berlin, (fig. 57) although in this case, the motif has a double meaning since the German word for ‘grape’ is ‘traube.’ By this point in the history of Jewish gravestone art, it is difficult to know whether the intended significance on the Traube gravestone was anything beyond the symbol for the family name; biblical and other symbolic iconography on *Ashkenazi* gravestones were both on the decline by this point. Furthermore, this particular gravestone belongs to a Jew who resided in a cosmopolitan European city rather than in the outskirts of the Russian Pale. The Jewish populations in the Pale and in the more rural villages of Eastern Europe were primarily orthodox, less sophisticated, and more likely to employ a Jewish stone carver having had

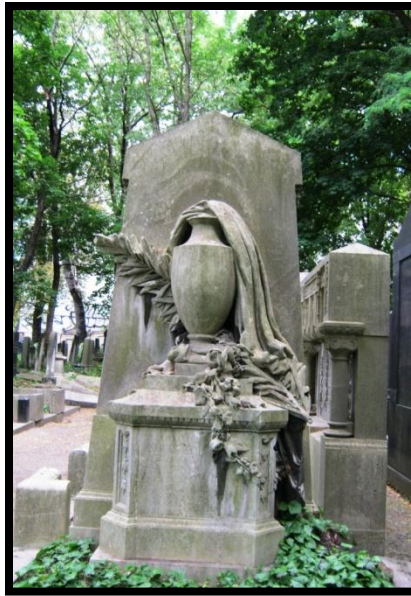
the type of training that would today be associated with ‘folk art,’ albeit folk art that included religious symbolism.⁷⁵



**Figure 57: Gravestone of Ludwig Traube (Detail), with Grapes Motif, 1907, “Old Jewish Cemetery,” Berlin
Photo: Susan Lockwood, July 2010.**

Based on other gravestones found in this same Jewish cemetery in Berlin, it is a safe assumption that these residents of Berlin were more urbane, often adopting the gravestone iconography that was just as likely to be used for non-Jewish markers – but only up to a point. The popular Victorian choices at this time included drapery and urn motifs, and there are numerous examples of these motifs in this one Jewish cemetery. (fig. 58)

⁷⁵ Goberman, 36-7.



**Figure 58: Jewish Gravestone with Drapery and Urn Motif, Late 19th century, “Old Jewish Cemetery,” Berlin
Photo: Susan Lockwood, July 2010.**

However, it is significant that not one gravestone in this Berlin cemetery displays any figural iconography. As shown in this (Christian) New York example from 1912, even though winged angels (fig. 59) had become a popular gravestone theme during the nineteenth century in both Europe and the United States,⁷⁶ *Ashkenazi* Jews for the most part continued to avoid this motif. A stunning example from the late nineteenth century, from a Jewish *Sephardic* cemetery in New Orleans – Hebrew Rest Cemetery – proves that this prohibition was not a concern for the *Sephardic* Jews who have a long history of including human imagery⁷⁷ in all of their decorative arts. (fig. 60) Moreover, the New Orleans example shows another trait displayed by immigrant Jews in nineteenth century

⁷⁶ Sarah Rutherford, *The Victorian Cemetery*, (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2010), pp. 6-7.

⁷⁷ Henriques de Castro, *Selected Gravestones from the Dutch Portuguese Jewish Cemetery at Ouderkerk aan de Amstel* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 50.

America. In the major urban centers where most of this population settled, they displayed a strong desire to fit into and be accepted by the surrounding society in their adopted homeland. This will be discussed in greater depth shortly.

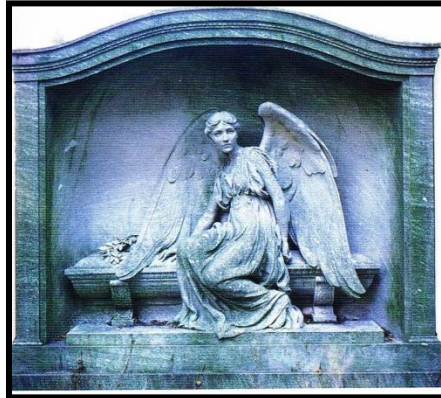


Figure 59: Gravestone with Angel Motif (Detail), 1912, Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, NY,
Reproduced from Douglas Keister,
Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography,
(New York: MJF Books, 2004), 165.



Figure 60: Sephardic Gravestone with Angel Motif, Late 19th c., Hebrew Rest Cemetery, New Orleans
Reproduced from: <http://www.nolacemeteries.com/hebrew.html> (accessed 3 December 2012).

11. OTHER NON-FIGURAL JEWISH GRAVESTONE ART

In the case of Jewish gravestones from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries, those from *Ashkenazi* Europe and the Russian Pale were often distinguished by imagery relating to the profession, the biblical tribe, or to the family name of the deceased.⁷⁸ There are two likely reasons for this practice, specifically among the *Ashkenazi*. It has been suggested that this type of gravestone imagery may have been necessary and/or helpful for the families of the deceased, since literacy at this time, especially in the more remote locales of the Russian Pale and specifically among the women was low.⁷⁹ The imagery on these markers may have served the additional purpose of conveying information about the person buried;. In light of these circumstances, and when coupled with the *Ashkenazi* avoidance of human figures in the decorative arts context, I suspect that the gravestone art that evolved during this period offered the perfect solution: images analogous to the family's name, the profession of the deceased, or the family's Jewish tribal ancestry were all helpfully identifiable monikers.

Symbols of Professions as Jewish Gravestone Iconography

Much in the same way that early Medieval shop signs depicted images of the type of business conducted, it seems reasonable that a parallel could be drawn between

⁷⁸ Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 12.

⁷⁹ Keister, 154.

possible origins of *Ashkenazi* gravestone decoration as both an answer to low literacy rates and as a creative solution for marking a Jewish grave without the benefit of human imagery in the design vocabulary. This example of a shop sign from Medieval England depicting a carpenter at work, most likely for the benefit for those who could not read, helps to support this theory. (fig. 61)

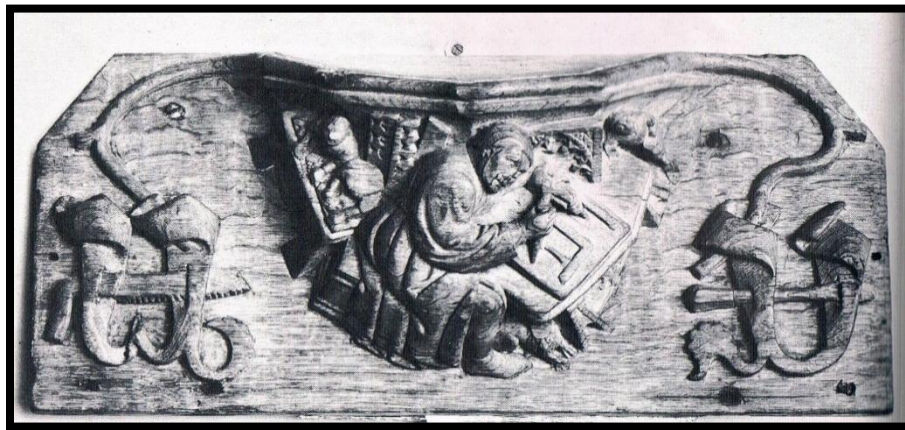


Figure 61: Medieval Carpenter's Shop Sign, Date Unknown, Norfolk, England
Reproduced from John Gloag, *A Social History of Furniture Design: 1300 B.C. – 1960 A.D.*
(New York: Bonanza Books. 1966), 10.

Further support for this argument can be found in an early Jewish manuscript from Ulm, Germany (1320) that depicts Jews at work, in the process of harvesting corn. However, similar to the other medieval German Jewish manuscripts already cited, the people pictured in this activity are portrayed with human bodies and animal heads. (fig. 62) From this work, we can see that there is precedence for imagery representing Jews' engaged in work activities, even without showing identifiably human faces. Therefore, a

link between these early manuscript illustrations of Jews at work and the frequency of *Ashkenazi* gravestones displaying iconography of the deceased's profession seems plausible.



**Figure 62: Ashkenazi Siddur (prayer book) (Detail), 1450, Ulm, Germany
Reproduced from Therese and Mendel Metzger, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*
(Seacacus: Chartwell Books, Inc., 1982), 161.**

Professions were symbolically depicted on *Ashkenazi* gravestones and often with an intriguing amount of creativity. A needle and thread or scissors indicated the gravestone of a tailor, (fig. 63) and images of ritual circumcision implements indicated the grave of the community surgeon (*mohel*). (fig. 64) The grave of a either a philanthropist or the community *gabbai* – the temple official who collected dues and contributions – was indicated by the image of an alms box, (fig. 65) and the grave of a

writer, a teacher, or a rabbi was often indicated by books (fig. 66) or a Torah scroll within the Ark.⁸⁰ (fig. 67)



Figure 63: Ashkenazi Tombstone with Tailor Motif, 18th c., Czechoslovakia
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1993), 114.



Figure 64: Ashkenazi Gravestone with Surgeon Motif, 18th c., Poland
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1993), 112.

⁸⁰ Schwartzman, 107.



Figure 65: Ashkenazi Gravestone with Philanthropist (Gabbai) Motif, 18th c., Poland
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1993), 50.



Figure 66: Ashkenazi Gravestone with Scholar/Rabbinic Motif, 18th c., Poland
 Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*.
 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1993), 106.



Figure 67: Ashkenazi Gravestone with Rabbinic Motif, 18th c., Poland
 Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*.
 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1993), 107.

The frequency of *Ashkenazi* gravestones showing emblems of the deceased's profession may have increased after 1808 – when Napoleon imposed a law requiring all Jews to adopt a family name – since many Jews at that time used only their first names. As a result, many chose the name of their profession as their family names.⁸¹ Numerous examples of *Ashkenazi* gravestones from nineteenth century Europe support this hypothesis. (fig. 68)

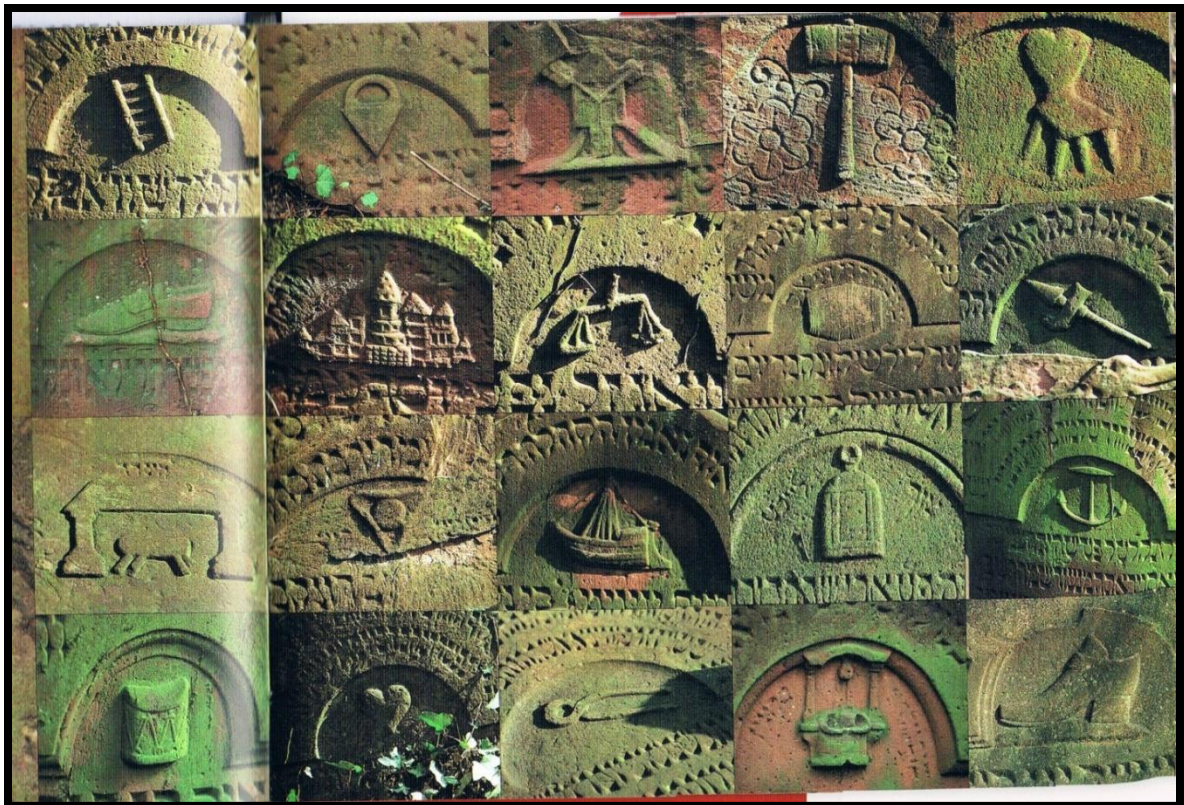


Figure 68: Ashkenazi Gravestones with Various Profession Motifs, 19th c., Eastern Europe
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1993), 118.

⁸¹ Schwartzman, 118.

12. ANIMALS OF THE NATURAL WORLD AND THEIR SYMBOLISM: FISH AND FOWL

Just as the Ashkenazi frequently included imagery relating to their professions on gravestones, they also used a wide variety of animal imagery which was acceptable, even when human imagery was not. Many animal motifs could be used to represent the family name of the deceased since names so frequently had a cognate in the animal world, such as on this Czech eighteenth century gravestone decorated with a carving of a fish. The family name “Fish” is translated as “Fisch” or “Fischel” in both German and Yiddish.

(fig. 69)

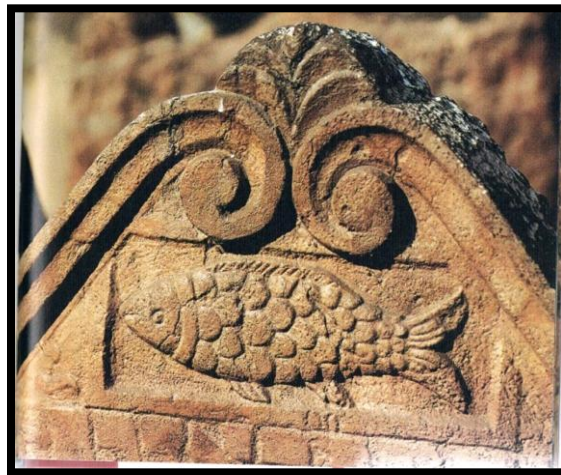


Figure 69: Gravestone with Fish Motif, 18th c., Czechoslovakia
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1993), 125.

The Universal Symbolism of Birds

When considering the symbolism of the bird in general, as well as particular types of birds in the natural world, the ancient cultures were cognizant of this ultimate source of life; birds begin with eggs. As such, it is reasonable to see why bird imagery suggested the power of life-giving capabilities,⁸² as depicted in this alabaster piece taken from an Egyptian tomb c. 2332 B.C. (fig. 70) Moreover, since birds fly toward the heavens and thus, “form a link between heaven and earth... the bird is almost universally seen as a symbol for the soul.”⁸³ The qualities of flight, including the weightlessness

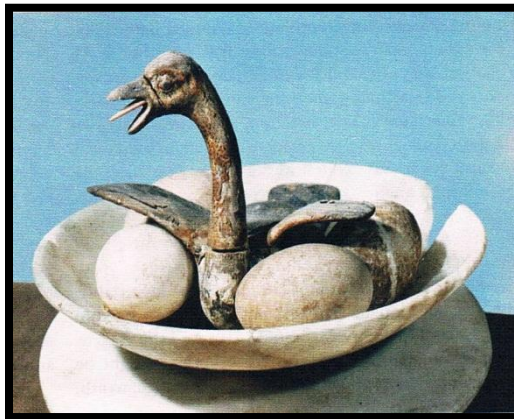


Figure 70: Lid of Alabaster Jar with Bird Motif, c. 2332-23 B.C., Tomb of Tutankhamun, Egypt
Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*
(Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 15.

and freedom of the spirit, were aspects that also captivated Native American Indians, who believed that their ancient shamans flew to other worlds on magical wings. Finally,

⁸² Ronnberg, 14.

⁸³ Kanof, 61.

migratory birds return year after year – often from a great distance – to nest, and this evokes a sense of home and stability.⁸⁴

Islam's Tenuous Relationship to Birds

Despite an intermittent discomfort with imagery of any living creatures, for centuries bird imagery has found a place in the Islamic decorative arts in all types of media. Ceramics, textiles, and metalwork all show abundantly clear examples of bird designs which may have initially come from the Egyptians, as early as the tenth century.⁸⁵ Birds – prominently illustrated on this twelfth century Kufic textile – were also a frequent subject in Persian poetry referencing “a pilgrimage in search of enlightenment.” (fig. 71) While poets historically have been entitled to use imagery



Figure 71: Kufic Textile with Peacock Motif, 12th c., Spain
Reproduced from Caryl Du Ry, *Art of Islam*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1970), 138.

⁸⁴ Ronnberg, 238.

⁸⁵ Melikian-Chirvani, 212-13.

that might raise the eyebrows of the extremely devout, in the context of the poet's creative sphere, this imagery was not only permitted, it was encouraged.⁸⁶ Although not all Islamic scholars would agree, some Muslims see the imagery of the bird as a representative of the soul.⁸⁷

Christianity and the Dove

Any well-schooled Christian will always reference the image of the dove with the concept of the *Immaculate Conception* since so much of the familiar church imagery represents the Holy Spirit in the form of this gentle bird.⁸⁸ Thus, the dove's qualities of innocence, simplicity and purity have all become cognates of the Virgin Mary and all the related teachings representing her moment of divine conception. (fig. 72) The decorative vocabulary of Christian art based on this one event alone is massive. Therefore, it might come as a surprise to the Christian world to know that the ancient Babylonians already associated divinity with the dove believing that this bird represented their great "Mother-goddess," while the ancient Greeks believed Aphrodite took the form of the dove.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ronnberg, 239.

⁸⁷ Kanof, 61.

⁸⁸ Christian Drury, *Painting the World: Christian Pictures and Their Meanings*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 6.

⁸⁹ Ronnberg, 244.



Figure 72: (L) Duccio, *The Annunciation*, 1311, Italy. (R) Detail
 Reproduced from John Drury. *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and Their Meanings*
 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 32.

The dove is the most frequently seen animal in the Christian cemetery.⁹⁰ While the reference to the Holy Spirit is dominant, the dove is often depicted holding an olive branch in its beak as a symbol of the biblical tale of Noah and the great flood, as indicated in this nineteenth century example from California. (fig. 73) Although less common, the dove may also represent the attributes of several saints, including St. Benedict and St. Gregory.⁹¹

However, Christian gravestone iconography has a broad design vocabulary of other birds as well, including the partridge which has a number of different associations ranging from good to evil. In the religious context, the partridge may symbolize the Church, especially if the bird is shown to be drinking from a chalice – the harbinger of

⁹⁰ Keister, 79.

⁹¹ Keister, 80.

the Crucifixion. On the other end of the spectrum, Christian lore may use the same bird to represent an incarnation of the Devil symbolizing both temptation and damnation. Again, the truly devout might be surprised to learn that the ancient Chinese believed that the partridge possessed extraordinary healing powers including the ability to neutralize poison.⁹²



Figure 73: Gravestone with Dove Motif (Detail), 19th c., Oak Hill Cemetery, California
Reproduced from Douglas Keister, *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography* (New York: MJF Books, 2004), 79.

The Symbol of the Bird in Judaism

Birds as symbolism in the Jewish vocabulary of decorative arts run the gamut of possible meanings. Similar to Islam, the Jewish soul is often represented by the image of a bird, and such imagery is also commonly affiliated with the ‘tree of life,’ a motif traditionally associated with the entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem. As in this late

⁹² Keister, 83.

nineteenth century example from Western Ukraine, the symbol of a bird in Jewish gravestone art often indicated the grave of a young woman named “*Feigele*,” which means “little bird” in Yiddish. (fig. 74)



Figure 74: Gravestone of a Young Woman with Bird Motif (Detail), Late 19th c., Western Ukraine.
 Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 118.



Figure 75: Hanukkah Lamp with Bird Motif, c. 1730-70, Bohemia, Czech Republic
 Reproduced from: www.thejewishmuseum.org/onlinecollection (accessed 3 December 2012).

The followers of Jewish mysticism envisioned God as riding in a chariot drawn by either 'cherubim' or 'fiery birds.' Specific types of birds such as the dove symbolize fertility, while the eagle has messianic meaning. In ancient Palestine, the eagle was an extremely popular motif used to decorate synagogues, presumably to remind worshippers of the promise of redemption.⁹³ Bird imagery adorns a wide variety of Jewish ceremonial art – such as this mid-eighteenth century *Hanukkah lamp* from Bohemia. (fig. 75) Occasionally, a Jewish decorative arts object incorporated a symbol of political or regional affiliation, as on this nineteenth century German *Hanukkah lamp* adorned with the double-headed eagle of the Habsburg dynasty. (fig. 76)



Figure 76: Hanukkah Lamp with Double-Headed Eagle Motif, 19th c., Germany.
Reproduced from Susan L. Braunstein, *Luminous Art:: Hanukkah Menorahs of the Jewish Museum*
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). 82.

⁹³ Kanof, 61.

However, despite this rich history in the Jewish context, the double-headed eagle is one of the oldest symbols of the decorative arts belonging to many other cultures prior to having been adopted as a Jewish symbol. While all cultures have historically associated the eagle with power and respect (and reinforced this meaning by doubling the eagle's head), it is originally a Hittite symbol. In the Middle Ages, the Seljuk Turks adopted the symbol, followed by the Crusaders. Thus, by the time the double-headed eagle had morphed into an imperial symbol in the coats-of-arms of Russia and Austria, this motif had traveled the globe and flown through numerous cultures in both the eastern and western world. Finally, even the Freemasons found a use for this motif, along with the Masonic motto "God and my right" as seen on the tombstone of a 33rd degree Mason.⁹⁴ (fig. 77)



Figure 77: Gravestone for 33rd Degree Mason with Double-Headed Eagle Motif (Detail), 19th c., Wyuka Cemetery, Nebraska
Reproduced from Douglas Keister, *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*, (New York: MJF Books, 2004), 81.

⁹⁴ Keister, 81.

The fact that the Crusaders were fond of the double-headed eagle adds some degree of irony to its evolved usage in a wholly Jewish context, since historically, the Crusaders were not known for their acceptance of or moderate treatment towards the Jews. In addition to the previously mentioned metaphor equating the bird with the human soul, the Jewish connotations associated with the eagle as one of the birds used ‘to carry God’s chariot across the heavens,’ also granted protective powers to this regal bird. The eagle is often represented hovering protectively over the crown of the *Torah*, the Ten Commandments, and the ‘lion of Judah,’⁹⁵ another archetypal symbol associated with the Jewish faith.

⁹⁵ Kanof, 61.

13. ANIMALS OF THE NATURAL WORLD AND THEIR SYMBOLISM: THE BEASTS OF THE EARTH

Animal forms, whether in a symbolic or a purely ornamental context, have been popular design choices for the decorative arts for millennia. For the purposes of worship, Pagans often fashioned images of their gods in the forms of animals,⁹⁶ while early cave dwellers, such as those who inhabited the now infamous caves of Lascaux, France, sometimes occupied their time by drawing images of the animals with which they were the most familiar, often those that were hunted in order to provide sustenance.⁹⁷ (fig. 78)

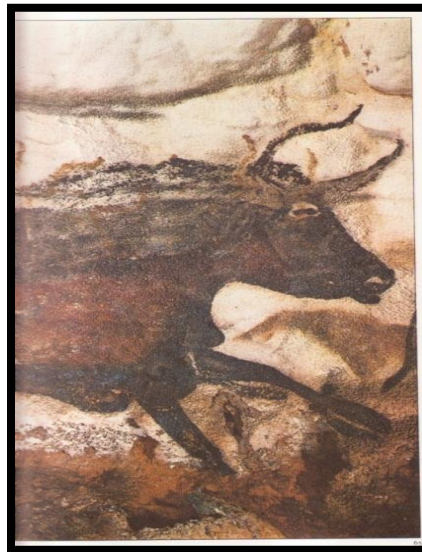


Figure 78: Lascaux Cave Image, 15,000-10,000 B.C., France
Reproduced from *The Illustrated Library of Art*, David Piper, (New York: Portland House, 1986), 65.

⁹⁶ Soltes, 9.

⁹⁷ <http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/lascaux/index.php>, Accessed 20 December 2012.

The fact that so many different symbolic meanings have developed around the animals of the natural world for numerous and diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic peoples throughout history is hardly coincidental. To this day, many traditional indigenous African religions revere the representation of certain animals seen as being endowed with divine powers, magical qualities, and embodying ancestral links.⁹⁸ (fig. 79)



Figure 79: Isango Mask, 19th c., Cameroon
Reproduced from *A History of Art in Africa*, Monica Blackmun Visona, et. al.
(London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2008), 339.

The Symbolism of Animals in the Jewish World

The use of animal imagery in the *Ashkenazi* context can be traced to the twelfth century, when rabbinic restrictions were liberalized by the authority of Maimonides,

⁹⁸ Monica Blackmun Visona, et. al., *A History of Art in Africa*. London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2008, 339.

leaving in place only the restriction against human imagery. This is not to suggest that Jewish artifacts were without decorative animal motifs prior to this period; it merely indicates that such designs were frowned upon by the extremely devout.⁹⁹ While the Muslims in general have never become comfortable with figural imagery of any kind, the Jewish approach to illustrations of animals –imaginary and real – evolved over time to make these allowances although as previously mentioned, the *Ashkenazi* and the *Sephardi* have remained in perpetual disagreement on the subject of human representation.

There are two other possible reasons for the popularity of animal imagery throughout the compendium of the Jewish decorative arts and especially in the area of gravestone iconography. Animal imagery could indicate several meanings much in the same way that the “Traube” gravestone’s grape motif could convey more than one meaning. The family of the deceased may have wished for a reference to one the twelve sons of Jacob, some of which were symbolized by animal imagery indicating from which tribe the family descended. According to biblical text, the twelve sons of Jacob evolved into the twelve tribes of Israel, which in turn suggest that every Jew descends from one of these twelve individuals.¹⁰⁰ The ‘twelve tribes’ motif has decorated Jewish ceremonial objects in all media, for generations, such as this example of an early twentieth century *Hanukkah menorah* from Munich. (fig. 80)

Alternatively, animal signs of the zodiac were also popular choices for Jewish gravestone iconography such as on this example from eighteenth century Prague (fig. 81). The image of a scorpion is a clear indication of the deceased’s zodiac sign since the

⁹⁹ Kanof, 20.

¹⁰⁰ Soltes, 49.

scorpion is not one of the symbolic emblems for any of the twelve tribes of Israel. In addition to gravestone iconography, signs of the zodiac have been used to decorate synagogues as early as the fifth century.¹⁰¹



Figure 80: Arnold Zadikow, *Hanukkah Menorah with 'Twelve Tribes' Motif*, c. 1920, Munich
Reproduced from www.thejewishmuseum.org/collectionsonline (accessed 20 December 2012).



Figure 81: Jewish Gravestone with Zodiac (Scorpio) Motif (Detail), 18th Century, Prague
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 84.

¹⁰¹ Schwartzman, 84.

The Symbol of the Deer in the Jewish Context

While not a member of the traditional zodiac collection of animals, the motif of the deer has been a perpetual favorite in the Jewish decorative arts. The second son of Jacob – *Naphtali* – has always been represented by the deer, and as such, has become a frequent moniker for any Jew claiming lineage from this tribal group. Moreover, in the *Ashkenazi* world of Eastern and Central Europe, the deer was a popular gravestone motif for family names such as “Hirsch” (the German word for a male deer) or “Zvi” (the Hebrew and Yiddish word for deer). As shown in this seventeenth century gravestone from the Ukraine, the deer was occasionally depicted looking back, as if to remind the living to contemplate the life of the deceased.¹⁰² (fig. 82)



Figure 82: Jewish Gravestone with Deer Motif (Detail), 17th c., Ukraine
Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
(New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 74.

¹⁰² Goberman, 75.

In an interesting nexus with another universally popular motif that has already been discussed, a deer with antlers has sometimes been interpreted as a motif analogous to the ‘tree of life,’ and this too has been a choice for gravestone iconography in the Christian context.¹⁰³ Thus, it would probably surprise the most devout Christian or Jew to learn that the ancient Chinese often depicted the throne of the Buddha as being flanked by two deer which were meant to add veracity to the Buddhist legend/belief that the Buddha himself was once incarnated in a previous life as ‘golden stag.’¹⁰⁴ (fig. 83)



Figure 83: Wooden Drum Stand in the Shape of a Deer, Zhou Dynasty, 771-256 B.C, China
Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*
(Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 285.

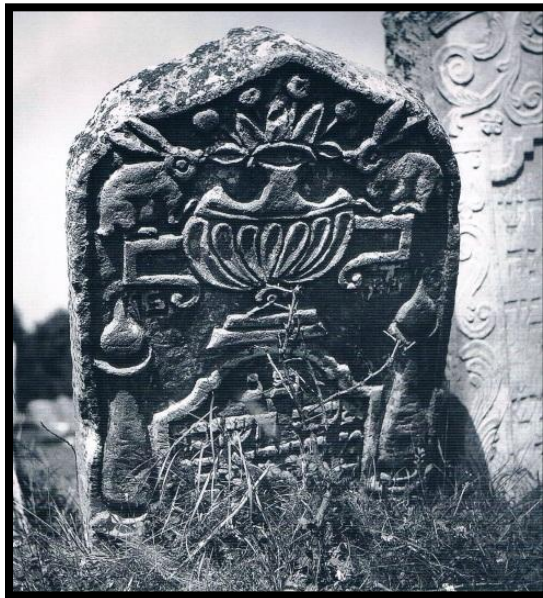
A Proliferation of Rabbits

Just as the stag is often used to represent a male, the symbol of the rabbit, particularly in the context of Jewish gravestone art such as on this early nineteenth

¹⁰³ Keister, 75.

¹⁰⁴ Ronnberg, 284.

century example from the Ukraine (fig. 84), is exclusively female due to a universal association of this animal with fertility.¹⁰⁵ However, this symbol appears to be the exception, rather than the norm. More frequent references to women on Jewish gravestones included the previously mentioned cut or drooping flowers (young woman) or images of Sabbath candlesticks (a pious woman), usually accompanied by the image of hands raised in blessing,¹⁰⁶ as seen on this mid-nineteenth example also from the Ukraine. (fig. 85) The ‘hands raised in blessing’ is another recurrent – and specifically Jewish – motif that will be discussed shortly.



**Figure 84: Jewish Gravestone with Rabbit Motif (Detail), 1826, Ukraine,
Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
(New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 60.**

¹⁰⁵ Goberman, 60.

¹⁰⁶ Goberman, 50.



**Figure 85: Jewish Gravestone with Sabbath Candlesticks Motif (Detail), 1865, Ukraine,
Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
(New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 50.**

In addition to fertility, the connection between rabbits and immortality is a common belief in two other ancient cultures; the Mayans and the Buddhists of China and Japan. Endowed with built-in survival mechanisms, the rabbit has eyes on the side of its head which evolved to keep aware of any dangers lurking; in addition, the rabbit can also out-run many of its predators. The Mayans and the Buddhists also believed that a rabbit, as an eternal agent of renewal (immortality), lived on the moon, another metaphor for cyclical eternity in which darkness and light (of the moon) symbolize death and rebirth.¹⁰⁷ As the previously mentioned Ukrainian gravestone with the rabbit motif is found in a nineteenth century *Ashkenazi* cemetery from the Russian Pale, it is likely that the inspiration for these rabbits came from Christian lore surrounding fertility rather than

¹⁰⁷ Ronnberg, 288.

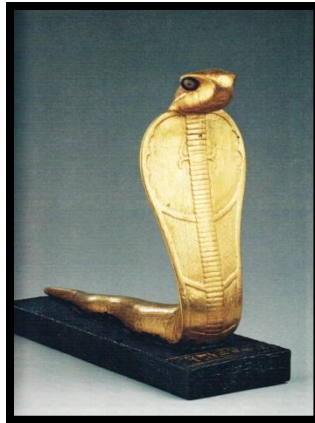
from any sources farther east. Neither of the Buddhist or Mayan cosmic associations with the rabbit mirror any mainstream Jewish belief systems.

The Enigmatic Snake and its Symbolism

The motif of the snake as a reference to healing has been used since the time of the ancient Greeks. The universally recognized emblem of a physician – a snake coiled around a physician's staff – suggests this correlation between medicine and the curative powers of this mysterious reptile. Indeed, the snake is/was a well-traveled motif found in many cultures throughout the globe. The Chinese used this motif as one of the many 'yin/yang' symbols, while the ancient Egyptians believed that the snake personified the daily cycle of the sun.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the Egyptian pharaohs wore a headdress on which sat a cobra as a symbolic protection of the ruler, by threatening everybody else with its potentially fatal venom.¹⁰⁹ (fig. 86) Therefore, historically, the snake's presumed powers have ranged from life-saving to life-ending. With this in mind, it would be reasonable to associate the snake with immortality, since it was believed to have power over both the realm of the living and the realm of the dead.

¹⁰⁸ Keister, 91.

¹⁰⁹ Ronnberg, 196.



**Figure 86: Netjer-Ankh, Protector of King Tutankhamun in the Underworld, 1332-23, Egypt
Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*
(Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 198.**

The Snake in Christian Iconography

In addition to immortality, Christianity has numerous meanings ascribed to the snake, and while most of these allude to supernatural powers, few of them are wholly positive. In the Christian context, these conflicting associations are probably rooted in the biblical reference to that very first – and very sly – serpent responsible for the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.¹¹⁰ This is a corollary to my earlier mentioned allusion to the apple as another ‘tainted’ reference in Christian doctrine. With this negative derivation in mind, it is surprising that the serpent motif is so prevalent in Christian funerary art. However, in this context it usually represents

¹¹⁰ Keister, 90.

immortality since the motif of the ‘snake swallowing its own tail’ – the ‘ouroboros’—represents eternity and rebirth.¹¹¹ (fig. 87)

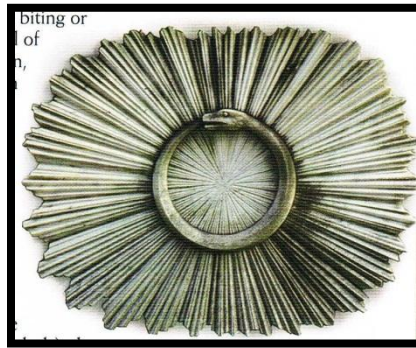


Figure 87: ‘Snake Swallowing its Tail’ Motif, 19th c., “English Cemetery,” Florence, Italy
Reproduced from Douglas Keister, *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*
(New York: MJF Books, 2004), 91.

The Snake Motif in Jewish Gravestone Art

The popularity of the *ouroboros* motif was widespread in nineteenth century gravestone art even in the Jewish world, such as on this richly-carved example from the Gesia Cemetery of Warsaw, Poland. (fig. 88) This is a puzzle, since the concept of immortality is absent from mainstream Judaism and has not been clearly formulated even among the believers of Jewish mysticism whose teachings include reference to the ‘celestial realm’ but fall short of indicating the definitive existence of Heaven.¹¹² Therefore, this example from Warsaw suggests two possible explanations.

¹¹¹ Keister, 69.

¹¹² Werblowsky and Wigoder, 277-79.

As with the earlier, collaborative efforts undertaken in the production of some medieval Jewish illuminated manuscripts, this gravestone may have been the work of more than one carver; a Jew may have prepared the Hebrew lettering, while a Christian carver may have produced the artwork. Alternatively, exposure to some of the popular nineteenth century Christian funerary motifs may have found its way into the decorative vocabulary of the Jewish world of urban, nineteenth century Warsaw. This was an area that likely introduced traditional Jewish gravestone carvers to outsiders' design styles not seen in more remote areas of the Russian Pale. I believe this may have been the case, since this particular gravestone displays another motif characteristic of Christian cemetery art.



**Figure 88: Jewish Gravestone with ‘Snake Swallowing its Tail’ (Eternity) Motif, 19th c.,
Gesia Cemetery, Poland**
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 91.

Placed directly behind the *ouroboros* motif, there is also an hourglass motif symbolizing the passage of time and ultimately suggesting ‘the cyclic nature of Heaven and earth.’¹¹³ Common in *Sephardic* gravestone iconography as early as the seventeenth century, the hourglass is believed to be one of the many adopted Christian symbols taken from Catholic Spanish cemetery iconography, in addition to the *memento mori* (skull) imagery. Both the hourglass and the skull displayed on this seventeenth century gravestone (fig. 89) from the Ouderkerk (*Sephardic*) Cemetery in the Netherlands mirror the iconography that was popular in the Catholic Iberian region from where the *Sephardic* Jews trace their roots. As previously mentioned, prior to the Inquisition and the ultimate expulsion of the Jews from both Spain and Portugal in the final decade of the fifteenth century, this Jewish population enjoyed a relatively integrated and prosperous existence that included some adoption of the host culture’s artistic styles in numerous categories of the decorative arts, and cemetery iconography was no exception.¹¹⁴



Figure 89: Sephardic Tombstone with Hourglass Motif (Detail), 17th c., Ouderkerk Cemetery, The Netherlands
 Reproduced from Henriques De Castro, *Selected Gravestones from the Dutch Portuguese Jewish Cemetery at Ouderkerk aan de Amstel*. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 108.

¹¹³ Keister, 132.

¹¹⁴ Henriques de Castro, *Selected Gravestones from the Dutch Portuguese Jewish Cemetery at Ouderkerk aan de Amstel* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 32.

The Snake as Symbol of the Tribe of Dan

The snake was also a symbol of Dan, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and his presumed descendents trace their lineage back to his tribe. The serpent motif associated with this tribe is referenced in the bible in the book of Genesis “...*Dan shall be a serpent by the road.*”¹¹⁵ As with other tribal symbols – such as the deer (Naphtali) – the serpent



Figure 90: Jewish Gravestone with ‘Tribe of Dan’ Motif (Detail), 19th c., Rema Cemetery, Poland
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman. *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*,
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 90.

motif found its way into the design vocabulary of all manner of the Jewish decorative arts including gravestone iconography, such as on this nineteenth century example from Krakow, Poland. (fig. 90) However, given the historical popularity of a number of animal motifs depicted in *Ashkenazi* gravestone decoration, it is possible that other meanings could be attributed to these symbols. As previously mentioned, there was the

¹¹⁵ Schwartzman, 90.

feasibility of more than one association with each animal symbol depending on the family, the level of integration into the outer, non-Jewish community, and/or the time period under consideration.

The Lions' Roar Through Jewish History

The fourth son of Jacob and the patriarch of his tribe, Judah is always represented by the symbol of the lion. Since antiquity – and a favorite symbol of the Jews of the Greco-Roman era – the image of protective lions was a favorite motif in synagogues. (fig. 91) However, given this timing, scholars believe that the motif was adopted from neighboring pagan imagery although even there, the lions commanded an aura of power.¹¹⁶ Other scholars have suggested that the lion imagery may have evolved out of a reinterpretation of the massive sphinx sculptures of the Egyptian tombs¹¹⁷ (fig. 92) marking the source of this great beast as anything but Jewish.

¹¹⁶ Kanof, 17.

¹¹⁷ Kanof, 40.



Figure 91: Pair of Stone Lions from the Synagogue at Sardis, 223-187 B.C., Manisa Turkey
 Reproduced from Abram Kanof, *Jewish Ceremonial Art and Religious Observance*.
 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1980). 17.



Figure 92: *Sphinx of Hetepheres II*, c. 2723 to 2563 B.C., 4th Dynasty of Egypt,
 Reproduced from [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Sphinx of Hetepheres II -
 fourth dynasty of Egypt.jp](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Sphinx_of_Hetepheres_II_-_fourth_dynasty_of_Egypt.jp) (accessed 20 December 2012).

However, despite its lengthy affiliation with the early Jews, the ubiquitous symbol of two rampant lions – universally recognized today as a Jewish motif – only began to be fashionable in Jewish ceremonial art in the seventeenth century¹¹⁸ after which point the motif quickly found its way into the decoration of all manner of Jewish ceremonial objects, *Torah* ornaments, synagogue decorations, and gravestones. These three rich examples of *Ashkenazi* objects (figs. 93-95) spanning more than a century (1793-1900) and covering a vast expanse of territory stretching from Eastern Galicia to New York City all display similar guardian lions.



Figure 93: Johann Matthias Lang, Torah Shield, Rampant Lion Motif, 1793-95, Augsburg, Germany
Reproduced from www.thejewishmuseum.org/onlinecollection (accessed 20 December 2012).

¹¹⁸ Kanof, 143.



Figure 94: Hanukkah Lamp, Rampant Lion Motif, 19th c., Eastern Galicia
Reproduced from www.thejewishmuseum.org/onlinecollection (accessed 20 December 2012).



Figure 95: Torah Ark Fragment, Rampant Lions Motif, c. 1900, New York
Reproduced from www.thejewishmuseum.org/onlinecollection (accessed 20 December 2012).

The Lion as Motif in Jewish Gravestone Art

As with other Jewish tribal symbols, the image of a lion on a Jewish gravestone may have been used if the family was descended from the biblical tribe of Judah, or if the deceased's family name was 'Judah (Yehuda), Leib, Lebb, or Ari.'¹¹⁹ As seen on two gravestones from Jewish cemeteries in eighteenth and nineteenth century Poland, the lion motif was often combined with other gravestone motifs important to the Jews, such as 'a tree cut down' representing a man who died too young (fig. 96) or 'drooping flowers' indicating the grave of a young woman. (fig. 97)

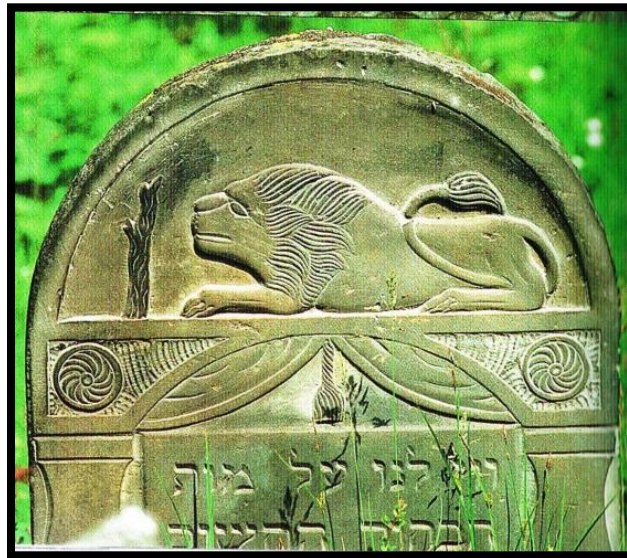


Figure 96: Grave of a Young Man, with Lion and 'Tree Cut Down' Motif, 18th c., Poland
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman. *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 74.

¹¹⁹ Schwartzman, 70.

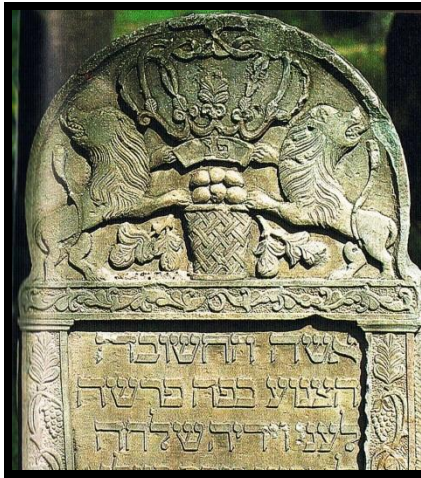


Figure 97: Jewish Gravestone of a Young Woman, with Rampant Lions and ‘Drooping Flower’ Motif, 1831, Mszczonow, Poland Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 72.

Because Christian symbolism identifies a winged lion as the emblem of St. Mark,¹²⁰ this winged lion (fig. 98) on an undated gravestone in one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in Europe – in Prague – is something of an anomaly. Since the lions of the Jewish world in general and the *Ashkenazi* world in particular are rarely depicted with wings, it is likely that this carving has been misidentified; it may be a griffin, particularly so since the realm of mythical beings also has a prominent place in Jewish decorative iconography.

¹²⁰ Keister, 97.



Figure 98: Jewish Gravestone with Winged Lion Motif, Undated, Prague Old Jewish Cemetery
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 75.

14. MYTHICAL BEINGS AND THEIR SYMBOLISM

The Origins of the Griffin

For three thousand years, the griffin has appeared in the artwork of numerous cultures and religious contexts. With the body of a lion and the wings and claws of an eagle, this beast is seen as having access to both the earth and the skies and is believed to have originated in the folklore of western Asia. However, the griffin had already found its way into the ancient cultures of Persia, Assyria, and India prior to appearing in Christian iconography. Initially, the Christians perceived the image of the griffin as evil, as a demon who oppressed Christian believers. However, by the fourteenth century, Christian iconography had adjusted this meaning, and the griffin was seen as a metaphor for ‘the dual nature of Christ – as both human and divine – because of its ability to master both the earth and the heavens.’¹²¹

The Jews and the Griffin...Hazy Origins

Without exact information about when the griffin first arrived in the vocabulary of the Jewish decorative arts, clues can be gathered from artifacts that have survived through history. The first mention of a griffin – in any connection to the Jews – appears on the base of the *menorah* depicted on the Arch of Titus, which illustrates the capture of

¹²¹ Keister, 93.

Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D.¹²² (fig. 1, p. 5) Since the *menorah* was recognized as the definitive symbol for Jews, it can be assumed that the griffin image carved on its base is an accurate representation, but this is only conjecture. Moreover, the Arch of Titus was not the work of Jewish carvers, so the decorative elements put onto the base of this *menorah* may not be entirely accurate. Since the griffin has old, exotic roots, the carver of this famous monument may have had other inspiration for this decorative motif.

The Griffin in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts of the Middle Ages

A much clearer link can be drawn between the presence of the griffin along with numerous other mythical beasts and the illuminated Hebrew manuscripts of the Middle Ages. As already mentioned, these manuscripts were often a product of several different hands, both Jewish and Christian. As members of the guild system, the Christian illuminators would have had considerable training in illustrative work, whereas the Jews' main talent lay in the hand-lettering of Hebrew script. Moreover, with the added restriction of avoiding human imagery in these Jewish texts, the illustrators (presumably Christians) would have had to select from their decorative vocabulary of imagery, using only the non-figural or non-human design options. Grotesques were popular choices, as were mythical beasts – such as the griffin. Since Christian interpretation of the griffin had undergone a complete change by the fourteenth century, this beast began to take on the positive attributes of 'Christ as both human and divine...' and as a result, there may have been a large influx of griffin imagery into the illuminators' handiwork of this period.

¹²² Kanof, 69.

Jewish references to ‘winged beasts’ are biblical, and they are mentioned in several contexts that refer to Jewish theological concepts. After Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, it is said that the entrance to this idyllic place was forever after guarded by ‘*cherubim*’ (angels), however not resembling the angelic putti of frequent Christian imagery. The *cherubim* installed at the entrance of the Garden of Eden to prevent the return of Adam and Eve are described as ‘winged lions or bulls.’¹²³ This motif was a popular one, even for the ancient Jews; similar creatures are said to have guarded the ‘entrance to the Holy of Holies’ (the area containing the Ark of the Covenant) in the period of Solomon’s Temple.¹²⁴

Two Hebrew manuscripts from the late middle ages – the *Oppenheimer Siddur* (prayer book), completed in 1471, and an earlier work – the *Hamilton Siddur* (c. 13th century), display some qualities indicating the popularity of both the griffin and other zoomorphic creatures (including dragons) in the illuminated manuscripts of this period. As was typical of southern German Hebrew manuscripts of this time, The *Oppenheimer Siddur* contains an entire zoo of animals – both imaginary and true-to-nature (fig. 99) while the *Hamilton Siddur* (fig. 100) displays another characteristic popular at this time in Hebrew manuscripts – zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms built into actual letters of the manuscript.

¹²³Kanof, 14.

¹²⁴Soltes, 23.



Figure 99: Two Details from the *Oppenheimer Siddur*, 1471, Germany
 Reproduced from Sabine Arndt and Piet van Boxell, ed, *Crossing Borders: Hebrew Manuscripts as a Meeting-place of Cultures* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2012). 73.

The second example, the *Hamilton Siddur*, was produced in thirteenth century Spain and thus, is a *Sephardic* work, but valid in this case, as both the *Ashkenazi* and the *Sephardi* illuminators utilized this design technique during the Middle Ages. The main difference here, as is evident in the *Hamilton* piece, is that the anthropomorphism of the

letters displays human faces that have not been distorted. As discussed earlier, throughout history, *Sephardic* artisans were not, and have never been particularly concerned with the avoidance of human imagery in their decorative arts vocabulary.



Figure 100: (L) Page from Hamilton Siddur, 13th Century, Spain (R) Detail, Reproduced from Bezalel Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*. (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1960), 56.

The Griffin in Jewish Ceremonial Art

Unlike the collaboration of Jewish scribes and Christian illuminators in the production of Medieval Hebrew manuscripts, there were many Jewish artisans involved in the production of metal work. As mentioned earlier, since the Middle Ages, some Jewish artisans formed their own, unofficial ‘guilds’ or workshops and thus, they would have been capable of producing high quality metal ceremonial objects.¹²⁵ The inclusion of griffins, dragons, and other mythical beasts as part of the design vocabulary of Jewish objects such as on this nineteenth century *Hanukkah* menorah of East European origin – with a prominent griffin motif – appears to be a deliberate decision on the part of the presumed Jewish artisan. (fig. 101)



Figure 101: Hanukkah Lamp with Griffin motif, 19th Century, Eastern Europe
Reproduced from www.thejewishmuseum.org/onlinecollection (accessed 10 December 2012).

¹²⁵ Wischnitzer, 81-82.

However, since few Jewish ceremonial artifacts – particularly in metal work – made prior to 1600 have survived,¹²⁶ the examples from which to draw are considerably later, primarily nineteenth century in origin. This raises the question of the popularity of the griffin (and other mythical beasts) as decorative ornament throughout those areas in which such Jewish artisans worked. Moreover, due to the Christian shift in its association of the griffin to a positive meaning after the fourteenth century, the occurrence of this motif had become more frequent in all manner of Christian decorative arts. Jews undoubtedly saw such pieces and may have adopted these designs, although in the Jewish context, they conveyed an entirely different meaning.

The Griffin or Dragon Motif in Jewish Gravestone Art

Due to the popularity of the ‘mythical beast’ motif in both the Christian and the Jewish contexts, the presence of such beings in Jewish funerary art is understandable, although it is rare. In fact, in the few instances of such gravestone decoration, as illustrated on one nineteenth century German Jewish gravestone, (fig. 102) the image appears as a name cognate rather than as having any deeper, religious meaning. The German word for ‘dragon’ is ‘Drache’ – the family name on this particular gravestone.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Rafi Grafman and Vivian B. Mann, ed. *Crowning Glory: Silver Torah Ornaments of the Jewish Museum, New York*. (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1996), 18.

¹²⁷ Schwartzman, 88-9.

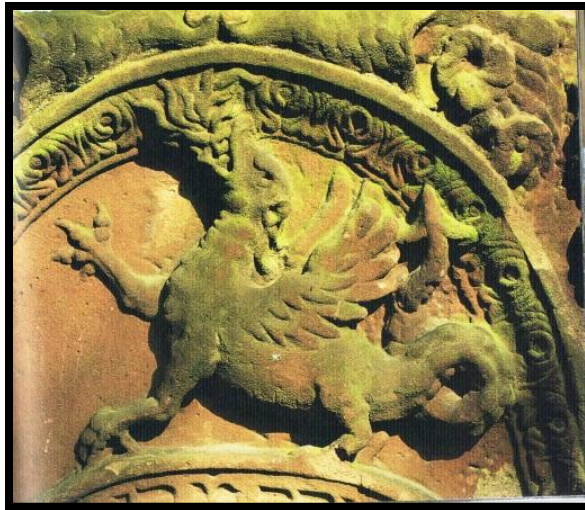


Figure 102: Jewish Gravestone with Dragon Motif, 19th Century, Frankfurt, Germany
 Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 89.

The Origins of the Unicorn

Although part of Chinese legend for the past three thousand years, most western associations with the unicorn are Christian, and these concepts have been reinforced by the plethora of famous artworks produced in glorification of this treasured beast. The unicorn's elevation to star status occurred in the middle ages, when the unicorn as metaphor for the crucified Christ was a frequently told tale, embellished with stunning artwork in various media. One of the most famous, the Brussels tapestry series of "the Unicorn Hunt," (fig.103) is a common reference point for art historians. In addition to implying the death and resurrection of Christ, the general legend of this period suggests

that the unicorn – only able to be captured by a virgin – is an allegorical reference to the Virgin Mary and Christ himself.¹²⁸ (fig. 104)

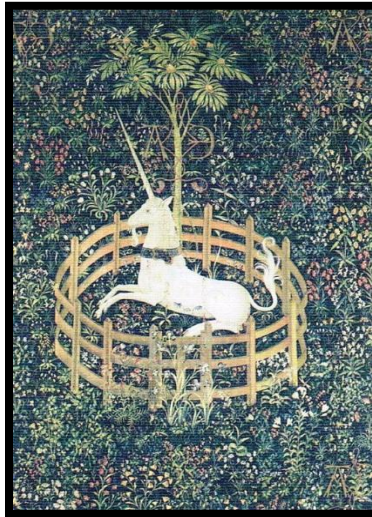


Figure 103: *The Unicorn in Captivity* (Detail), 1495-1505, Brussels, Belgium Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 697.



Figure 104: *Unicorn in Maiden's Embrace* (Detail), 15th Century, Veneto, Italy Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 697.

¹²⁸ Ronnberg, 696.

What is the Unicorn Doing in Jewish Art? Is This Beast Kosher?

Given the strong Christian overtones, it is a puzzle as to how and why the unicorn found its way into the Jewish decorative arts. The first Greek translation of the Hebrew bible (c. 250 B.C.) may in fact have mistranslated the Hebrew word for “horned beast” by suggesting the Greek word for the unicorn.¹²⁹ However, the eighteenth and nineteenth century *Ashkenazi* world of Eastern Europe and the Russian Pale occasionally depicted the unicorn, the griffin, or the leviathan as messianic symbols, sometimes guarding the ark of a synagogue, together with the more traditional lions and other animals of the natural world.¹³⁰ One example of a heavily carved ark from Lithuania (eighteenth century) is so awash with decorative ornament that it is difficult to take in all the visual decoration. (fig. 105) This illustrates another common aspect of the *Ashkenazi* decorative arts of this period; ‘*horror vacui*’ – aversion to empty space¹³¹ – which is evident throughout the Jewish decorative arts.

¹²⁹ Ronnberg, 696.

¹³⁰ Murray Zimiles, *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions*. (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 40.

¹³¹ Maurice Berger et al. *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004), p. 40.

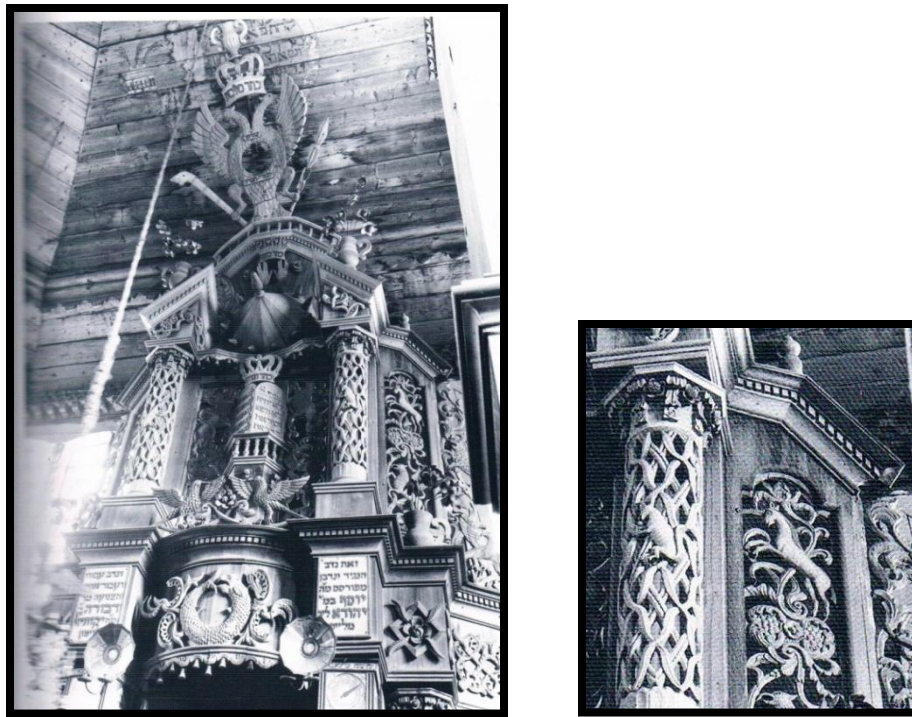


Figure 105: (L) Torah Ark with Unicorn motif, 18th c., Olkienniki, Lithuania (R) Detail
 Reproduced from Murray Zimiles, (*Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 47.

The Unicorn in Jewish Gravestone Art

As a messianic symbol, the unicorn found a place in the decorative vocabulary of Jewish gravestone art in the *Ashkenazi* world, but only up until the nineteenth century, and only in the ‘old world.’ The fantasy quality of the unicorn was further embellished in one example from the Ukraine, dated 1840; the animal portrayed on this gravestone has the head of a unicorn and the tail of a leviathan. (fig 106) The unicorn’s popularity as a Jewish motif faded away as Jews began their massive immigration to the United States at the close of the nineteenth century. It has been suggested that perhaps due to its

messianic association, the unicorn was left behind by these Jews who were finding a better life in the ‘new world’ and no longer sought messianic deliverance to a place much improved from their miserable existence in the Russian Pale. They had arrived in America, their nineteenth century answer to the ‘Promised Land.’ In the late nineteenth century, the land of Israel was not yet a viable option for most of them. For whatever reason, the ‘guardian’ animal motifs that have become ubiquitous on Jewish ceremonial and decorative arts since immigration to North America and other places out of the Russian Pale evolved almost exclusively into the rampant lions.¹³² In another example from the same ‘old world’ locale, the gravestone portrays a unicorn battling a lion – an apt analogy for the coming transition to the ‘new world,’ in which the unicorn lost its place in the Jewish decorative arts. (fig. 107)

¹³² Zimiles, 20.

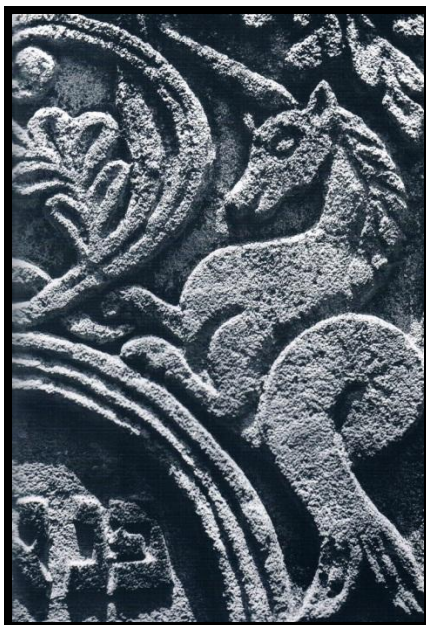


Figure 106: Jewish Gravestone with Unicorn motif, 1840, West-Central Ukraine
 Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
 (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 58.



Figure 107: Jewish Gravestone with 'Unicorn Battling Lion' Motif, 19th c., Ukraine
 Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
 (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 61.

The Leviathan and the Jews

Ancestral Jews and other ancient peoples had a great fascination with sea monsters and other creatures described in their bible as having great powers. Due to their unfamiliarity with the appearance of a whale, early artists imagined Jonah's predicament as having been swallowed by something resembling a giant, ferocious fish since this was their best guess as to what this great beast must have resembled.¹³³ Furthermore, in the Jewish world, the legend of the leviathan predicted that 'the righteous would feast on the leviathan on the day of the Messiah's arrival on earth.'¹³⁴ This was clearly one impressive fish. In addition to the presumed powers of great strength, such a symbol – when depicted on a Jewish gravestone – either conveyed a message of messianic redemption or indicated that the deceased was a person of great strength; a righteous man.¹³⁵ In fact, the first lines of the epitaph on this mid-nineteenth century gravestone from the Ukraine read “Here lies a righteous man...” (fig. 108)

¹³³ Ronnberg, 204.

¹³⁴ Kanof, 55.

¹³⁵ Goberman, 66.



Figure 108: Jewish Gravestone with Leviathan Motif, 1850, Kutu, Western Ukraine
Reproduced from David Goberman., *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
(New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 66.

Carried into the Christian world, similar gravestone imagery had a different significance. In this context, any imagery related to the biblical tale of Jonah was understood to symbolize the crucifixion and subsequent resurrection of Christ. The three days in which Jonah was believed to have spent inside the whale had evolved into a metaphor for Christ's three days in the tomb prior to his resurrection.¹³⁶ (fig. 109)

¹³⁶Keister, 88.



Figure 109: Christian Gravestone with 'Jonah and the Whale' Motif, Undated, San Michele Cemetery, Venice, Italy.
Reproduced from Douglas Keister, *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography* (New York: MJF Books, 2004), 88.

15. A POPULAR MOTIF NEITHER FIGURAL NOR ANIMAL: THE HUMAN HAND

The Hand as Iconographic Symbol

Even to prehistoric man, the hands were a symbol of great power. From cave paintings dating back 20,000 years, (fig. 110) images of the human hand are believed to have indicated some kind of shamanic energy or power.¹³⁷ American Woodland Indians



Figure 110: Cave Wall Painting with Hand Motif, c. 25,000 years old, Cbrerets, France
Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Image*
(Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 381.

¹³⁷ Ronnberg, 380.

viewed the symbol of the hand as divine, representing one who creates, ordains, blesses or destroys.¹³⁸ (fig. 111)

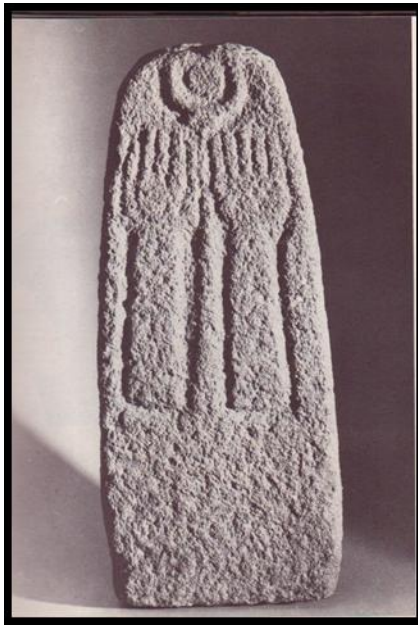
As early as 1,500 B.C., evidence from a religious shrine possibly honoring a moon deity, in a Canaanite temple in ancient Palestine, depicts a carved motif of raised human hands.¹³⁹ (fig. 112) Even though the reason why these ancient peoples portrayed their symbol of divine protection *only* as hands may remain a mystery, this practice has continued to this day throughout the decorative arts vocabularies of all three of the Abrahamic religions.



**Figure 111: ‘Hand of Creator’ Motif, 200 B.C. – 400 C.E., American Woodlands Indians, North America
Reproduced from Ami Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*
(Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2010), 83.**

¹³⁸ Ronnberg, 383.

¹³⁹ Naphtali Avnon, *The Israel Museum, Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Japhet Press, 1965), p. 52.



**Figure 112: Stele with Raised Hands, Hazor, Late Canaanite Period,
Reproduced from Naphtali Avnon, *The Israel Museum, Jerusalem*
(Jerusalem: Japhet Press, 1965), 52.**

Islam and Judaism's *Hamsa* Motif

The protective motif of the human hand – the *hamsa* – is important in Islamic beliefs and is prolific in their visual culture as well. Some scholars believe the origins of this amuletic form are Phoenician and may have been introduced by traders in the seventh century to Islamic North Africa, from where the form spread prolifically. Today, the presence of the protective *hamsa* amulet is ubiquitous throughout the Islamic World of the Middle East and the Near East.¹⁴⁰ As '*hamsa*' is the word for 'five' – in both Arabic and Hebrew – the motif has been interpreted by both cultures as either the protective

¹⁴⁰ Vivian B. Mann, ed., *Morocco: Jews and Art in a Muslim Land*. (London: Merrell Publishers Ltd., 2000), 138.

hand of Fatima, daughter of the prophet, Mohamed (for the Muslims)¹⁴¹ or the protective hand of God (for the Jews).¹⁴² (figs. 113 & 114) Obviously, the cultures are close,



Figure 113: Door Knocker in the Form of Hamsa motif, Late 19th – Early 20th Century, Morocco
Reproduced from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamsa> (accessed 20 December 2012).



Figure 114: Jewish Amulet in the Form of Hamsa, 20th Century, North Africa
Reproduced from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamsa> (accessed 20 December 2012).

¹⁴¹ Carel J. Du Ry, *Art of Islam*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1970), p. 10.

¹⁴² Kanof, 62.

the motif may have similar roots, and since both the Islamic and *Ashkenazi* cultures respectively shun the use of human imagery, this one symbolic hand covers a lot of ground for both.

The ‘Hand of God’ Motif in Jewish Art

The depiction of a large, single hand – indicating the ‘protective hand of God’ – appears in both the *Ashkenazi* and the *Sephardic* decorative arts, albeit with one interesting difference in their two approaches. Two Jewish manuscripts of the late middle ages, both from approximately 1300, illustrate this example. In the previously discussed *Birds’ Head Haggadah* (fig. 115) and a *Sephardic* manuscript – *the Hispanic Moresque Haggadah* (fig. 116) – the presence of God is indicated by a large hand reaching down from the heavens. While the message of a divine presence is unmistakable, the *Ashkenazi* illuminator chose to depict the images of the people receiving the Ten Commandments as composite beings – part human and part animal. There is no such effort in the *Sephardi* example; the participants in this particular scene – Abraham and his son, Isaac – are depicted with normal human features. Although, as we have seen before, human imagery has never been a constraint in the history of *Sephardic* decorative arts, it is significant to note that in no cases has an image of God ever taken human form. It appears that in spite of their major differences in some religious rites, as well as in ethnic and social background, the *Ashkenazi* and the *Sephardi* have both avoided a figural representation of their God. So, it would appear that the Second Commandment had some impact on the *Sephardi* as well.



Figure 115: *Bird's-Head Haggadah*, "The Giving of the Law," (Detail), c. 1300, Germany
 Reproduced from Bezalel Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*
 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1960), 97.

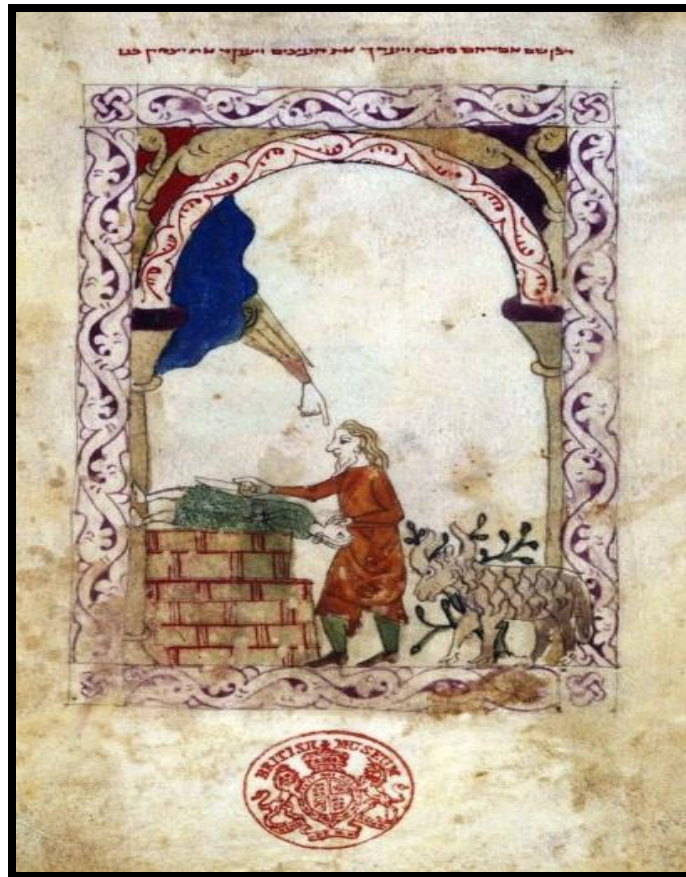


Figure 116: *Hispano-Moresque Haggadah, 'The Binding of Isaac,'* c. 1300, Spain
 Reproduced from http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/castilems_lg.html
 (accessed 20 December 2012).

The Hand Motif on Jewish Ceremonial Objects: Torah Pointers

Used by both *Ashkenazi* and the *Sephardi*, every functioning synagogue has a 'Torah pointer' for use during the *Torah* reading in the course of religious services. The parchment on which the *Torah* is inscribed is sensitive to the oils from human hands, and thus, touching the scroll would accelerate decay. But the alternate reason for avoiding

touching the scroll is due to its ascribed 'holy' attributes.¹⁴³ Today, even the rabbis refrain from touching the scroll, and they use an elaborate *Torah pointer* as a guide when



Figure 117: Assorted Torah Pointers, 19th-20th c.
Reproduced from Cissy Grossman, *The Jewish Family's Book of Days*
(New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1989), 22.

reading from the scroll during religious services. As is true with so much of the Jewish decorative arts design vocabulary, the shapes and materials used for these sacred implements are stylistically varied. (fig. 117) However, the human hand motif is the traditional iconography used almost exclusively for *Torah* pointers. While the hand motif appears in so many different genres of the Jewish decorative arts, it is also a design used by non-Jewish artisans in a variety of contexts. The question of who borrowed the motif from whom may never be resolved, although in the Jewish context, the meanings conveyed by its usage differ from the others.

¹⁴³ Werblowsky and Wigoder, 407.

Judaism's 'Hands of Blessing' (*Kohanim*) Motif

Despite its twentieth century reference to the 'Star Trek' generation of the 1960's, Leonard Nimoy was not the originator of his now infamous symbol of the "Vulcan Salute" – which conveys a message of blessing. (fig. 118) The symbol of two hands raised together represents the hands of blessing, performed by the priests (the *Kohanim*) in the days of Solomon's Temple. (fig. 119)



Figure 118: *Leonard Nimoy* as the 'Spock' character in the 'Star Trek' epic, Date Unknown
Reproduced from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulcan_salute (accessed 20 December 2012).



Figure 119: Synagogue Mosaic with "Kohanim/Blessing" Motif, Date Unknown
Reproduced from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulcan_salute accessed 20 December 2012).

The *Kohanim* are the group of the Jewish people who believe themselves to be descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses. In addition to being one of the most universally recognized Jewish symbols within the Jewish world, the sign of the *Kohanim* conveys status; anyone with the name of Cohen or any variant of Cohen, or any Jew descending from a Cohen family is believed to carry this priestly lineage.¹⁴⁴

The presence of the *Kohanim* motif in the Jewish decorative arts is prolific, both on ceremonial objects used in the home (fig. 120) and on a variety of decorations and ceremonial objects used in the synagogue. (fig. 121) In the latter case, the motif on synagogue objects such as this late eighteenth century *Torah* crown from Germany, indicated that the donor was of *Kohanim* lineage. As such, this probably gave added status to both the donors and to the objects themselves.



Figure 120: Hanukkah Lamp with Kohanim Motif, 18th c., The Netherlands.
Reproduced from www.thejewishmuseum.org/onlinecollection (accessed 20 December 2012).

¹⁴⁴ Kanof, 63.

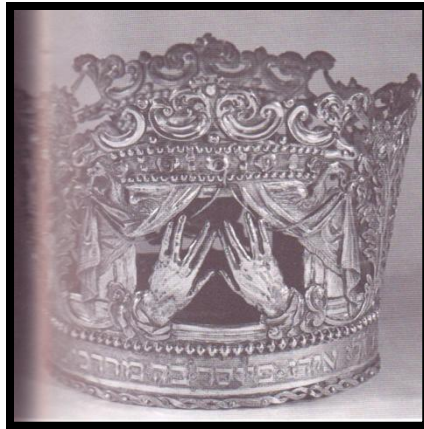


Figure 121: Torah Crown with Kohanim Motif, 1793, Germany
 Reproduced from Elie Kedourie, *The Jewish World: History and Culture of the Jewish People*
 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979), 86.

The *Kohanim* Motif on Jewish Gravestones

Just as in life, the symbol that distinguishes those Jews as descendants of the high priests of Solomon's Temple in ancient Israel, also distinguishes the deceased. Those buried under the sign of the *Kohanim* possess a gravestone of status in the Jewish community. In addition to the motif of the hands raised in blessing, (fig. 122) another symbol of the *Kohanim* in the design vocabulary of Jewish gravestone art is the crown (fig. 123), although in some instances, the crown motif has also been used to mark the grave of a person who was known to be especially learned and righteous, the family lineage notwithstanding.¹⁴⁵ On this mid-nineteenth century example from the Western Ukraine, the epitaph reads (in part) "Isaac, son of the deceased, Zvi, ...went twice to the synagogue every day..." Thus, we have a gravestone of composite symbolism; the stag motifs flanking the upper right and left corners of this gravestone represent the

¹⁴⁵ Kanof, 60.

deceased's father (the name 'Zvi' was often represented by the stag), and the crown of the *Kohanim*, represents the deceased's highly respected status in his community.



Figure 122: Jewish Gravestone with Kohanim Motif, Undated, Guru Humorului, Romania
 Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), front cover.



Figure 123: Jewish Gravestone with Crown (Kohanim) Motif, 1850, Western Ukraine
 Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
 (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 134.

Numerous examples of *Ashkenazi* gravestones with both the ‘hands of blessing’ and the *Kohanim* motifs appear on Jewish gravestones in both the ‘old world’ and the ‘new world.’ Remarkably, these two represent the very few traditional iconographic symbols that continue to decorate Jewish gravestones in the twentieth century – in any country. Possible reasons for both the decline in Jewish gravestone decoration in general and the lack of traditional motifs used in Jewish gravestone art in the United States will be discussed shortly.

Other Hand Symbolism on Jewish Gravestone Art

A single hand appears as part of Jewish gravestone design vocabulary in two contexts. As previously mentioned, the ‘hand of God’ motif was common on *Ashkenazi* gravestones in the cases of ‘the hand of God plucking a flower’ or ‘severing a tree’ – in both instances indicating the death of either a young man or a young woman, respectively. But there seems to have been no hesitation in the *Ashkenazi* depiction of a single hand as representative of a person. In the previously mentioned example from eighteenth century Poland, the hand of a philanthropist (fig. 124) – in the process of donating money – is depicted, while another example from approximately fifty years later in the Ukraine depicts the hands of a Levite washing the hands of (presumably) a high priest from the tribe of the *Kohanim*. (fig. 125)



**Figure 124: Ashkenazi Tombstone, Philanthropist Motif (Detail), 18th c., Poland,
Reproduced from Arnold Schwartzman *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1993), 50.**



**Figure 125: Ashkenazi Tombstone, Levite Motif (Detail), 1868, Chernovtsy, West Central Ukraine
Reproduced from David Goberman, *Carved Memories: Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*
(New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 2000), 101.**

Like the *Kohanim* reference, a Jew descended from the tribe of the Levites (those who assisted the high priests in the days of Solomon's Temple) assumed a certain degree of status and often utilized the sign of the laver/ pitcher as a tombstone motif or as a motif in other areas of the Jewish decorative arts. In many cases, the pitcher was the primary

decorative motif used, without the presence of a hand holding it, such as shown on this nineteenth century *Hanukkah* lamp from the Netherlands. (fig. 126)



Figure 126: Hanukkah Lamp with Levite Motif, 19th c., The Netherlands
Reproduced from www.thejewishmuseum.org/onlinecollection (accessed 20 December 2012).

The Hand Motif in Christian Gravestone Art

The motif of a human hand is prolific in Christian gravestone art, but it carries entirely different symbolism. In the case of a hand pointing upward (fig. 127), the motif indicates that the soul of the deceased has risen up to Heaven. However, if the hand is pointing downward, it is an indication of ‘the hand of God’ or the ‘presence of God in Heaven.’ However, unlike the Jewish reference (such as in the examples of the fourteenth century manuscripts cited previously), the Christian hand reference usually symbolizes the holy trinity – sometimes by three fingers pointing downward, or occasionally holding a flower or a broken chain. (fig. 128) Finally, the motif of clasped

hands may indicate either an earthly farewell or a heavenly welcome. However, if the pair of clasped hands suggests one wearing a masculine sleeve and the other hand wearing more feminine clothing, the motif indicates matrimony.¹⁴⁶ (fig. 129)

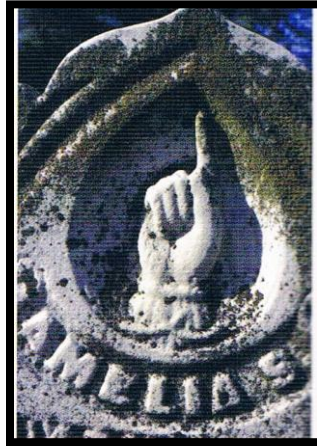


Figure 127: Christian Tombstone with 'Resurrection' Motif, 19th c.
Reproduced from Douglas Keister, *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography* (New York: MJF Books, 2004), 108.

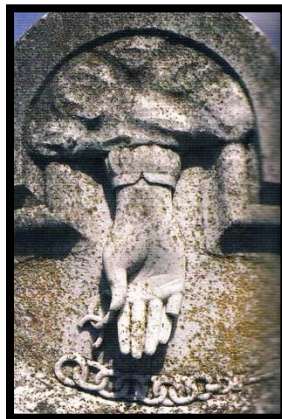


Figure 128: Christian Tombstone, with 'Holy Trinity' Motif, 19th c.
Reproduced from Douglas Keister, *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography* (New York: MJF Books, 2004), 108.

¹⁴⁶ Keister, 108.

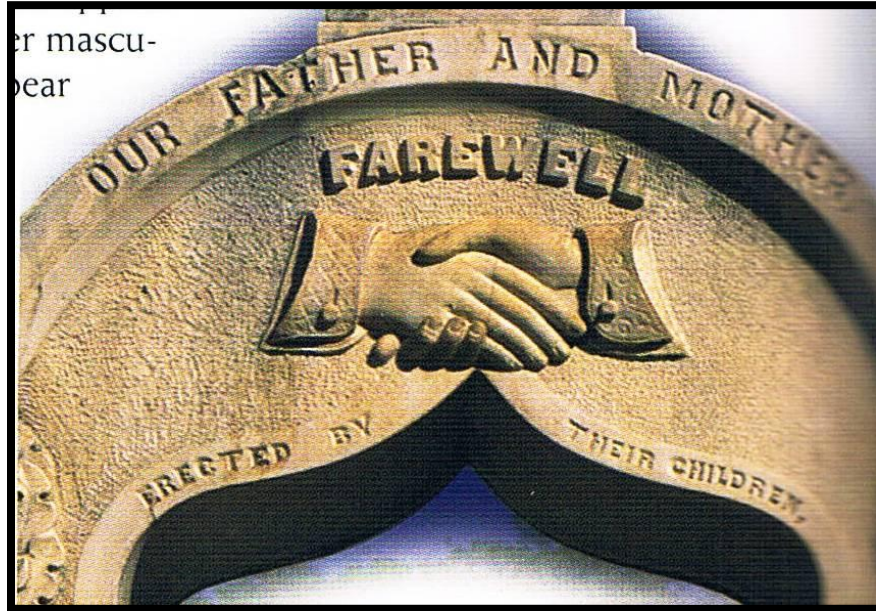


Figure 129: Christian Tombstone with 'Clasped Hands' (Matrimony) Motif, 19th c., California
Reproduced from Douglas Keister, *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*
(New York: MJF Books, 2004), 108.

16. THE USE OF TEXT AS DECORATIVE ORNAMENT IN JUDAISM AND ISLAM

Sacred and Material Objects

For centuries, the use of calligraphic text as a decorative element has been prolific in both Jewish and Islamic visual culture. Since most Muslims and the *Ashkenazi* Jews have a shared artistic tradition that avoids figural imagery, the use of decorative script has provided additional options in their effort to beautify significant objects while keeping within the parameters of their respective religious restrictions. From hand-copied religious texts, such as this fourteenth century Hebrew prayer book from Germany (fig. 130) to the ornate inscription on this eighteenth century Ottoman palace tile, (fig. 131), both cultures have demonstrated a high level of creativity in the decorative usage of their own written languages.

Moreover, both Hebrew and Arabic scripts stem from the same ancient source – the Proto-Canaanite alphabet – and thus, share similarities in structure. Neither language embeds vowels within the text, but rather, they add the vowels in the form of dots and dashes either above or below the line of consonants, if they add them at all. In fact, most mature readers of either language are capable of reading without the use of vowels. Thus, without the interruption of these additional diacritical marks, the calligraphic

scripts of both languages are extremely conducive to design, and can be easily manipulated into ornamental decoration.¹⁴⁷



**Figure 130: Page from Jewish Festival Prayer Book, 14th c., Germany,
Reproduced from Vartan Gregorian *Treasures of the New York Public Library*,
(New York: The New York Public Library, 1985), 77.**

¹⁴⁷ Robert K. Logan, *The Alphabet Effect: The Impact of the Phonetic Alphabet on the Development of Western Civilization*. (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1986). p. 36.



Figure 131: Ottoman Calligraphy (Tile), 18th c.
 Reproduced from Tim Stanley, Mariam Rosser-Owen & Stephen Vernoit,
Palace and Mosque: Islamic Art from the Victoria and Albert Museum
 (London: V & A Publications, 2004), 60.

Micrography as Art

Another method of manipulating written text into decorative designs – micrography – has been used historically by all three of the Abrahamic cultures¹⁴⁸ although more so by the Jews and the Muslims for the reasons just described. In the age when books and manuscripts were still hand-copied, both Jewish and Muslim scribes became extremely skilled at maneuvering tiny calligraphic script into intriguing shapes and designs; geometric motifs, in the case of the Muslims, and in a broader area of design choices, in the case of the Jews. On this title page from a thirteenth century *Ashkenazi* bible (fig. 132) compared with an eighteenth century fragment of a Sephardic marriage

¹⁴⁸ Leila Avrin, *Micrography as Art* (Jerusalem, The Israel Museum Department of Judaica, 1981), 66.

contract, (fig. 133) similar lion motifs are depicted, in both cases formed entirely by tiny Hebrew text.



Figure 132: Title Page from Ashkenazi Bible, 13th Century, Germany
 Reproduced from Elie Kedourie, ed., *The Jewish World: History and Culture of the Jewish People*
 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), endpaper.



Figure 133: Sephardic Marriage Contract Comprised Entirely of Micrography (Detail), 1744, Italy
 Reproduced from Linda Altshuler, ed., *In the Spirit of Tradition*
 (Washington, DC: The B'nai Brith Klutznick Museum, 1988), 35.

There are several likely origins for the Jewish interest in micrographic writing. Because the *Ashkenazi* Jews avoided human imagery, micrography was sometimes utilized as a decorative solution since this tiny calligraphy could be coaxed into numerous decorative shapes, including animal forms. In addition, since Jews historically have relocated countless times – either voluntarily or involuntarily – portability was often a concern, and compact books with very small text were easier to carry. Numerous examples of hand-copied miniature Hebrew books appear to support this theory. Finally, micrographic writing often appears concurrent with Jewish interest in superstition, magic, and mysticism. While such interests can be traced back to biblical times, Jewish mystical teaching and studies developed far more widely following the expulsion of the *Sephardic* Jews from Spain and Portugal during the final decade of the fifteenth century.¹⁴⁹ A popular decorative method utilized in the late Middle Ages, micrography was utilized by both the *Ashkenazi* and the *Sephardi*.

¹⁴⁹ Marcia Reines-Josephy, *Magic & Superstition in the Jewish Tradition* (Chicago, Spertus College of Judaica Press, 1975), 2.

17. BRANCHING OUT: THE MIGRATION OF THE *ASHKENAZI* AND THE *SEPHARDI* TO THE NEW WORLD

The 'When' and the 'Why' of Jewish Immigration Patterns

The historical development of the Jewish community in the United States paints a somewhat schizophrenic picture of a population that has been continually evolving while trying to clarify its identity in the process. As early as 1776 there were between 1,500 and 2,500 Jews living in the United States, most of whom were descendants of the financially successful and sophisticated *Sephardic* Jews who had ultimately made their way to the Americas after having been expelled from Spain and Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century. However, by the late nineteenth century (c. 1880), the American Jewish population had expanded to over 280,000 due to the immigration of a prosperous class of highly educated (*Ashkenazi*) German Jewish merchants and bankers. This was followed by a flood of *Ashkenazi* immigrants fleeing Czarist Russia and Eastern Europe. (fig. 134) Between 1880 and 1924, the American Jewish population had increased to over 2.6 million, the majority of whom represented this third group of poor and minimally educated *Ashkenazi*.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Ronald Lauder, "Jewish Communities of the World," *About the World Jewish Congress*, www.worldjewishcongress.org 15 October 2011



Figure 134: ‘Steerage Passengers’ – Ashkenazi Jews bound for America, 1893.
 Reproduced from Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo,
How We Lived; A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America, 1880-1930
 (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, Inc. 1981), 18.

With these statistics in mind, the latter years of the nineteenth century through the early years of the twentieth century present an extremely fertile ground for the study of American Jewish social history given the huge increases in population and the introduction of an entirely different segment of Jewish life into the already established, financially comfortable, primarily German Jewish population. Moreover, by the end of the nineteenth century, the “new world” was also becoming home to millions of non-Jewish, primarily European immigrants seeking a better life in the United States – to a large extent fueled by the industrial revolution. Thus, the previously established homogenous population of upper middle class Jewish immigrants was ‘integrated’ by a

huge wave of a dramatically different, impoverished, and largely uneducated mass of unsophisticated Jews and non-Jews alike. Most, if not all of these European immigrants from this period shared the belief that life in America presented the opportunity for ‘liberation’ from the miserable economic circumstances that had defined daily life in their various countries of birth.

Yet for the Jews who had come to America, this was an “integration” that was not without its share of social tensions. In nearly every aspect of social life, the established *Ashkenazi* German Jews avoided and excluded their newly arrived ‘lower class brethren’ who had come primarily from the *Ashkenazi* Russian Pale of Settlement – believing them to be “inferior....un-American.....*Bolsheviks*.”¹⁵¹ The invisible, yet palpable ‘divide’ that separated these two *Ashkenazi* American Jewish communities must have been difficult to cross. Photographs comparing these two groups of immigrant *Ashkenazi* Jews in the course of establishing themselves into the American social and economic landscape of late nineteenth century America speak volumes about their self-perceived class differences and the likely separation that existed as a result. (figs. 135 & 136)

While it may be true that all Jewish immigrants in nineteenth century America were eager to “modernize” and become part of the new social order of their adopted homeland, they went about it via different routes. The German Jews of the ‘second wave’ of American immigration arrived to the United States with the financial means that allowed them to establish businesses and ultimately, to acquire the social status

¹⁵¹ Stephen Birmingham, *The Rest of Us: The Rise of America's Eastern European Jews*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), 23-24.

appropriate to the economic class of Americans into which they had arrived. The later arrivals from the Russian Pale settled into over-crowded neighborhoods – primarily on the east coast – already teeming with others from similar origins and backgrounds.



Figure 135: Jewish-owned Department Store, (2nd Wave of Immigration) c. 1870, Columbus, Ohio
Reproduced from Howard Muggamin and Sandra Stotsky, ed.
The Immigrant Experience: The Jewish Americans
(New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1996), 53.



Figure 136: Hester Street Market, (3rd Wave of Immigration) Lower East Side, New York City, 1899
Reproduced from Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers:
The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*
(New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 149.

These were the peddlers and sweat-shop workers of the last years of nineteenth century America, working in conditions that were far from ideal, but still better than the lives (and the *pogroms*) they had left behind.¹⁵²

As with every preceding chapter in the lengthy history of the Jewish Diaspora, most of the Jews who immigrated to America quickly began to shed their (external) distinguishing characteristics of their former lives. There was a strong desire to “blend in” with the outer society of their new country. To some extent, they adopted American fashions, the English language, and the American dream of success for those who were willing to work hard.¹⁵³ Yet, there was a tendency to settle into neighborhoods where Jews were already present, and as a result, these new environs sometimes resembled replicas of the forcibly segregated Jewish villages in the ‘old world’ of the Russian Pale. However, in the American context there was a big difference; the American Jewish neighborhoods of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were formed by choice. Not unlike the “Little Italy” or “China Town” neighborhoods that developed around other newly arrived ethnic communities, the Jews of this period found comfort in the familiarity of the foods, the newspapers, and the sometimes recognizable faces from the ‘old world.’ This 1938 photograph of a Jewish-owned tobacco shop in New York City – advertising its goods in both English and Yiddish – shows a balanced blend of two worlds coexisting in the languages representing both the world left behind and the newly

¹⁵²Howe, 84.

¹⁵³Irving Howe, *How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America: 1880-1930*. (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, Inc., 1981), 193.

adopted country, all on the same street. (fig. 137) Yet there was a new enthusiasm present that propelled these immigrants' lives forward.¹⁵⁴

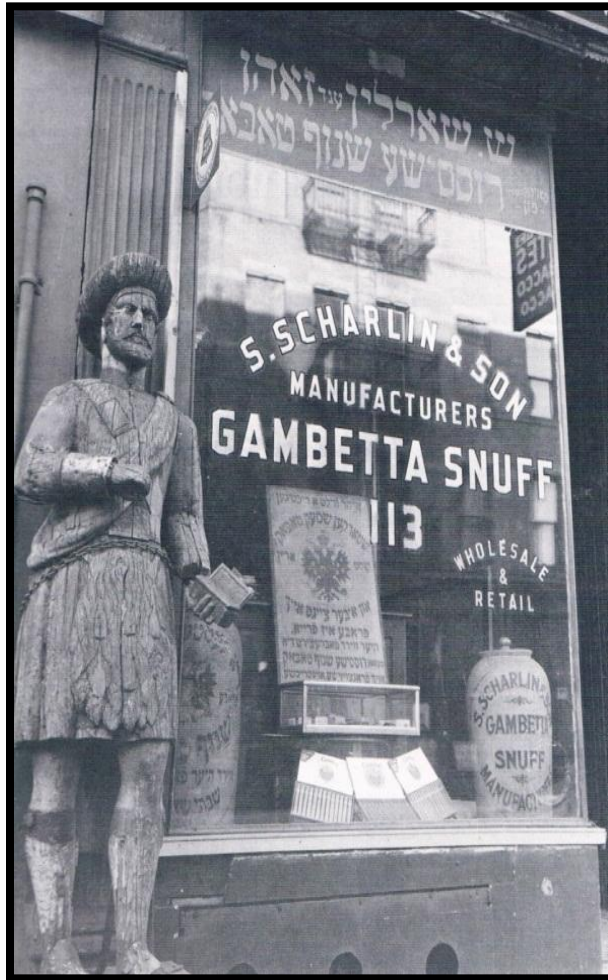


Figure 137: Snuff and Tobacco Shop (with signs in Yiddish & English), New York City, 1938.
Reproduced from Norman L. Kleeblatt and Gerard C. Wertkin, *The Jewish Heritage in American Folk Art*.
(New York: Universe Books, 1984), 12.

¹⁵⁴ Abraham J. Karp, *Haven and Home: A History of the Jews in America*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 54-55.

18. THE GRADUAL SHIFT IN THE DECORATIVE ARTS OF THE *ASHKENAZI*-AMERICANS

By the dawn of the twentieth century, Jewish-American life was already taking shape into a composite of the familiar traditions of the old world merged with some of the socio-political aspects of the new. The motifs that conveyed American freedom were popular ornamental choices; the American eagle, the American flag, and the Statue of Liberty became part of the decorative vocabulary of this new Jewish visual culture. Much in the same way that a previous *Ashkenazi* generation in the old world had adopted the insignia of the Hapsburg dynasty (the double-headed eagle) on Jewish ceremonial objects such as this previously cited nineteenth century German *Hanukkah* lamp, (fig. 138)



Figure 138: Hanukkah Lamp with Double-Headed Eagle Motif, 19th c., Germany.
Reproduced from Susan L. Braunstein, *Luminous Art:: Hanukkah Menorahs of the Jewish Museum*
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). 82.

American Jewish items, from the sacred to the every-day, took on new design motifs. Two early twentieth century examples, a Jewish New Year greeting card (fig. 139) and a Jewish brotherhood association membership charter (fig. 140) display a newly-found American patriotism introduced into items intended for traditionally Jewish use. For many from this immigrant generation, America represented a new interpretation of their long-awaited ‘Promised Land.’ Not unlike the Lower East Side Jewish shop window advertising goods in both Yiddish and English, the brotherhood charter combines English and Hebrew text among decidedly American motifs of the flag, the eagle, and the clasped hands that may indicate a Masonic reference. During the nineteenth century,



Figure 139: Jewish New Year Greeting Card with Statue of Liberty Motif, Early 20th c., United States. Reproduced from Grace Cohen Grossman, ed., *New Beginnings: The Skirball Museum Collections and Inaugural Exhibition*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 116.



Figure 140: (L) Jewish Brotherhood Association Charter with American Eagle Motif, 1936, California
 (R) Detail – with Hebrew Inscription
 Reproduced from Grace Cohen Grossman, ed.,
New Beginnings: The Skirball Museum Collections and Inaugural Exhibition.
 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 96.

Jewish immigrants in large numbers joined Masonic lodges in their efforts to become involved in an organization believed to “promote brotherhood and foster morality,” believing that the United States provided the best environment to foster both traditionally Jewish *and* Freemason ideals¹⁵⁵

Through the evolution of the Jewish decorative arts of this period, a picture of American Jewish life emerges that indicates a (once again) relocated people, eager to be accepted and eager to fit into the mainstream ‘host culture’ but at the same time, existing with their “cultural blueprint” intact. The decorative items produced during this period

¹⁵⁵ Grossman, 91.

reflect this duality in predictable ways; adaptability has been a constant in the history of Jewish survival regardless of geographic circumstances.

Two Ashkenazi Marriage Contracts – American Style

While symbolism has always been an important component of the Jewish decorative arts, items made in America by immigrant Jews frequently integrated a wide variety of adopted and adapted motifs. A marriage contract (*ketubbah*) prepared for a Jewish couple married in Utica, New York in 1863 (fig. 141) displays the traditionally Jewish crown of the *Kohanim*, while the entire document is set between two columns – a common reference to Solomon’s Temple. However, this piece also introduces motifs that were likely borrowed. Both clocks at the top of this important document indicate the hour of 6:13 – believed to be either the time of the marriage ceremony or perhaps the hour of birth of one of the nuptial pair. If so, this would have come out of the Pennsylvania German tradition of including an auspicious clock symbol in a decorative piece; to them, a clock set at a particular time represented good luck.¹⁵⁶ Finally, the central image of ‘the clasped hands of matrimony’ appears to be taken straight from the previously discussed Christian gravestone iconography indicating a married couple. Or, it may be another allusion to the Freemasons, who also favored the ‘clasped hands’ motif, albeit in an entirely different context.

¹⁵⁶ Grossman, 57.

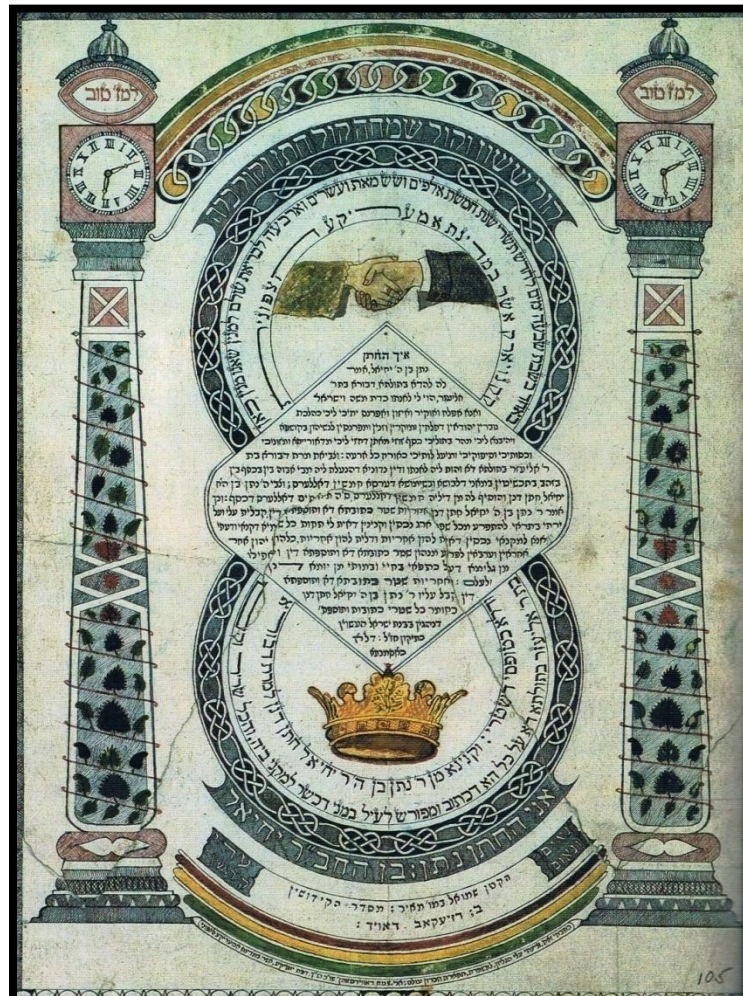


Figure 141: Ashkenazi Marriage Contract, 1863, Utica, New York
 Reproduced from Norman L. Kleeblatt and Gerard C. Wertkin
The Jewish Heritage in American Folk Art. (New York: Universe Books, 1984), 68.

An earlier Ashkenazi marriage contract – also from New York – dated 1819, resembles the style of an early American sampler or embroidered quilt, whether intentionally or not. (fig. 142) Although Jewish marriage contracts have a rich, decorative history, the *Sephardic* documents are historically more embellished than those

of the *Ashkenazi*. Reasons for this are primarily due to the differences in dowry customs between the *Ashkenazi* and the *Sephardi*; the latter documents contained lengthy enumerations of the bride's possessions, whereas the *Ashkenazi* did not. Some scholars believe that the *Sephardic* marriage contracts were lavishly made to mirror the context of the marriage – frequently between wealthy families with considerable means.¹⁵⁷ Therefore, this *Ashkenazi* piece is distinctive because of its decorative attributes.



Figure 142: Ashkenazi Marriage Contract, 1819, New York.
 Reproduced from Grace Cohen Grossman, ed.,
New Beginnings: The Skirball Museum Collections and Inaugural Exhibition.
 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 101.

¹⁵⁷ Vivian B. Mann, Vivian B. Mann, “*Jewish Ceremonial Art in Context*,” Lecture, The Jewish Theological Seminary, 7 October 2008.

Since decorative samplers with embroidered Hebrew lettering were produced in nineteenth century America, this art form must have been absorbed by the Jewish communities in which they were created. One such sampler (fig. 143) indicating the name “Bek Berta” displays the maker’s proficiency in embroidering both the English alphabet across the top of the piece and the Hebrew alphabet across the bottom.



Figure 143: Bek Berta, *Sampler with Hebrew and English Embroidery*, 19th c., United States
 Reproduced from Norman L. Kleeblatt and Gerard C. Wertkin, *The Jewish Heritage in American Folk Art*.
 (New York: Universe Books, 1984), 41.

While little is known about this maker, her family’s circumstances, or the exact year in which the sampler was created, this piece of American folk art displays the merging of

two sets of cultural influences, as interpreted through the work of a young girl practicing her embroidery skills in both alphabets of her developing identity as a Jewish American.

Religious Commissions: Carved Synagogue Furnishings

Yet for all the attempts at blending in with the mainstream society, the American Jews of the late nineteenth century observed an entirely different practice in the private world of their synagogue interiors. While things that were ‘externally’ Jewish – such as synagogue exteriors – were evolving into more secular statements, the interiors of synagogues were exploding with a burst of traditional creativity that was rooted firmly in the rural countryside of Eastern Europe and the Russian Pale. This population, which comprised the bulk of the enormous wave of late nineteenth century/early twentieth century Jewish immigrants, came from entirely segregated, rural villages, having had little formal education and even less contact with the urban centers of their home countries. These rural settlements were often surrounded by dense forests, and as a result, some of these Jews became master wood carvers.¹⁵⁸ Although few structures have survived, these populations constructed their synagogues (fig. 144) out of the local resources – wood – and decorated their interiors with elaborately carved Torah arks such as the previously cited eighteenth century example from Lithuania (fig. 145) and one of the same period from Poland, (fig. 146) rich with animal and foliate motifs similar to those that were popular in the gravestone iconography already discussed.

¹⁵⁸ Murray Zimiles, *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: the Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), x-xi.



Figure 144: Synagogue Exterior, 18th c., Wolpa, Belarus.

Reproduced from Murray Zimiles

Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions
(Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 41.



Figure 145: Torah Ark, 18th c., Olkienniki, Lithuania.
 Reproduced from Murray Zimiles *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses:
 The Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions*
 (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 47.



Figure 146: Torah Ark (Detail), 18th century, Cracow, Poland.
 Reproduced from Bezalel Narkiss, ed., *Picture History of Jewish Civilization*
 (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., Publishers, 1970), 153.

These carved synagogue furnishings were one aspect of the *Ashkenazi* Jews' "cultural blueprint" that clearly did make the transition from the old world to the new; elaborately carved torah arks were commissioned by a number of nineteenth century North American synagogues including one from Sioux City, Iowa, with an American eagle placed prominently at the top, (fig. 147) and a slightly more subdued piece from Montreal, Quebec, produced by a carver known simply as "Mr. Cohen from Montreal." (fig. 148)



Figure 147: Abraham Shulkin, *Torah Ark*, 1899, Sioux City, Iowa
Reproduced from Murray Zimiles, *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions*. (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 107.



Figure 148: "Mr. Cohen from Montreal," *Torah Ark*, 1923, Montreal, Canada
 Reproduced from Murray Zimiles, *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses:
 The Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions.*
 (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 110.

Secular Commissions: The Carousel Industry

Despite the booming business in synagogue interior commissions for the Jewish immigrant wood carvers in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, the profession, possibly like the immigrants themselves, began to shift towards commissions of a more secular nature. Thus, the master woodcarvers of the former Russian Pale and Eastern Europe drifted from producing synagogue ornamentation towards more lucrative undertakings, carving horses and other fanciful animals that flanked the circus carousels of early twentieth century America. There were a few Jewish woodcarvers particularly known for their work on the circus carousels of Coney Island – Marcus Charles Illions, Solomon Stein, and Harry Goldstein.¹⁵⁹ For these carvers and numerous others, what began as a new world profession of synagogue carving had morphed into the fantastic legacy of their carousel animals. (figs. 149 & 150)



Figure 149: Solomon Stein and Harry Goldstein, *Carousel Horse*, 1913, Coney Island, New York, Reproduced from Murray Zimiles *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions*. (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 152.

¹⁵⁹ Zimiles, 15.



Figure 150: Marcus Charles Illions, *Carousel Horse*, 1915, Coney Island, New York
Reproduced from Murray Zimiles *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses:*
The Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions.
 (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 152.

The Jewish expertise in carving animal forms should come as no surprise. As previously mentioned, the observant Jews of old-world *Ashkenazi* heritage generally observed the biblical second commandment forbidding the making of human images. In doing so, their developed skill using a rich design vocabulary of animal imagery was considerable, and the transition from religious carving commissions to those of a more secular nature was a logical step. Marcus Charles Illions, who was active in the New York area, was particularly known for his lion carvings, as evident in both his religious and secular commissions. (figs. 151 & 152)



Figure 151: Marcus Charles Illions *Synagogue Ark (top portion)*, Early 20th Century, Brooklyn, New York
 Reproduced from Murray Zimiles, *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions*.
 (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 115.

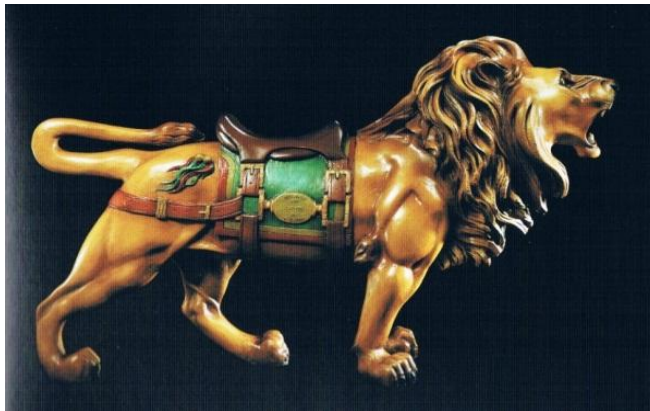


Figure 152: Marcus Charles Illions, *Carousel Lion*, 1910, Coney Island, New York
 Reproduced from Murray Zimiles, *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel: Jewish Carving Traditions*.
 (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 153.

***Ashkenazi* Gravestone Carvers: A Dying Profession**

Not surprisingly, along with so many of the modernizations introduced in numerous facets of life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, even the *Ashkenazi* Jews began to bend the rules implied by the second commandment. The new and fashionable custom of including cameo photography on gravestone designs became

an acceptable practice on Jewish gravestones as well, and by the end of the nineteenth century this type of embellishment for Jewish gravestones in America was common.¹⁶⁰ (fig. 153) Whether this practice was introduced in order to make the Jewish gravestones more 'secular' in appearance is not known. This option may have been introduced into the offerings available from American Jewish funeral homes as part of an array of choices for the family of the deceased when they were asked to select a gravestone style. Yet photography, while existent since the middle of the nineteenth century, was not widespread in the remote areas of the Russian Pale, and would probably not have been acceptable on Jewish gravestones during this period, even if it were.

By 1880, Italian immigrants in America began to adorn their tombstones with either carved portrait-likenesses of the deceased, or photographic likenesses in a cameo-insert on the stone. For those with limited financial resources, the photographic cameo was the less expensive choice and in no time, immigrants of various ethnic backgrounds had adopted this 'modern' custom.¹⁶¹ (fig. 154)

¹⁶⁰ Meg Greene, *Rest in Peace: A History of American Cemeteries*. (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2008), 68-69.

¹⁶¹ Meg Greene, *Rest in Peace: A History of American Cemeteries*. (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2008), 68-69.



Figure 153: Jewish Tombstone w/ Cameo Photo, Early 20th c., Ohio
 Reproduced from Meg Greene, *Rest in Peace: A History of American Cemeteries*
 (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2008), 68.

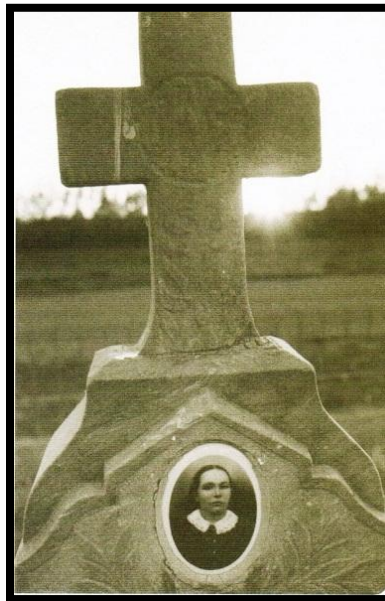


Figure 154: Italian Catholic Tombstone w/ Cameo Photo, Early 20th c., North Dakota
 Reproduced from Meg Greene, *Rest in Peace: A History of American Cemeteries*
 (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2008), 69.

Affordability aside, however, it is unlikely that the Jewish stone-carvers in the old world would have developed their craft in the direction of carving portrait likenesses of the deceased, based on centuries of their avoidance of human imagery in this or any other art form. While the advent of photography had made inroads into so many aspects of “modern” life, some traditions die slowly. It appears that the Jews’ urge for a more secular appearance – even in their cemeteries – was primarily American, and primarily driven by assimilation.

The Ashkenazi Jews of nineteenth century Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union had left behind their previous world(s) motivated by the possibility of economic prosperity and a chance to escape religious persecution. For these émigrés, the price of their relocation may have been assimilation – by choice – since the path to social inclusion, economic success, and finally, community status, was best pursued by fitting in, rather than by standing out. The marginalized nature of Jewish life in the old world allowed them none of these choices. The Russian Pale, by the very nature of its design, was a conscious arrangement that separated a vast population of largely rural, poorly educated and economically disadvantaged Jews from mixing with the larger world that existed outside of their villages and towns. Thus, with no possibility of ever fitting into the secular society, there would have been no reason to adapt their tombstone designs to those of the outside world with which these Jews had little – if any – positive interaction.

It appears that the freedoms embraced by the immigrant Jews in nineteenth century America caused them to shed those outwardly identifying characteristics that indicated their differences from the American mainstream population. By the early

twentieth century, Jewish cemeteries in general, and Jewish tombstones in particular became visually plainer and even more secular, having shed the old world motifs and elaborate carvings that distinguished the *Ashkenazi* Jewish gravestones of the Russian Pale and Eastern Europe. With few exceptions, this is one aspect of their “cultural blueprint” that did not appear to make the transition to the new world. While the elaborate works of the traditional wood carvers were very much in demand for synagogue decorations in the interiors of these houses of worship, the more public displays of a Jewish presence, such as cemeteries, were quick to shed these same cherished folk-motifs.

However, in a strange twist of design history, the most common identifier of a Jewish gravestone today, as well as the one symbol that evokes universal recognition of Jewish association, ironically, is the six-pointed star, a symbol that evolved over three millennia ago in a pagan context, with no affiliation whatsoever with Judaism. (fig. 155)



Figure 155: Jewish Tombstone with Star of David Motif, 20th c., Massachusetts
Reproduced from <http://www.jcam.org/> (accessed 20 December 2012)

Red, White, and Blue ...and Jewish?

In other areas of the American Jewish decorative arts, an amalgam of Jewish themes and American symbolism has been and continues to be reflected. One of the most popular emblems – the American flag – has often been used to adorn items of both sacred and material culture. Morris Weinberg's 1912 (Chicago) Book of Psalms (fig. 156) displays an American flag at the top of its title page, with the words "Flag of the United States" written in Hebrew directly beneath it for added clarity.

Later twentieth century items making a strong "American" statement include a *torah* mantle (textile covering) by artist Peachy Levy (1991) (fig. 157) and a decidedly modern take on the *Hanukkah* lamp – by Mae Shafter Rockland, in 1974. ([fig. 158) The fact that both of these pieces carry the theme of "liberty" is appropriate. Levy's overtly American statement "Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land" reflects one of the most significant initial reasons for a Jewish presence in this country – the underlying motivation for relocation to a more compatible, religiously tolerant environment.

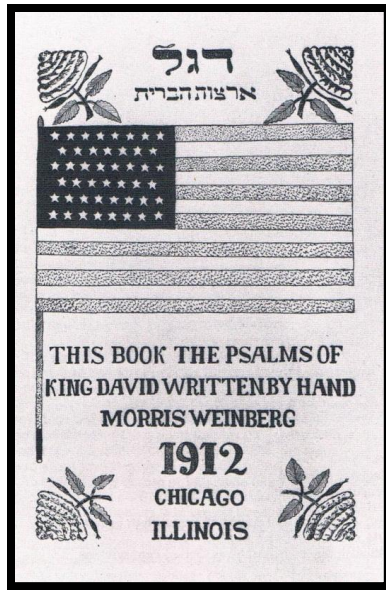


Figure 156: (L) Morris Weinberg, *Psalms of King David* (Cover), (R) Detail, 1912, , Chicago, Illinois
Reproduced from Norman L. Kleeblatt and Gerard C. Wertkin, *The Jewish Heritage in American Folk Art*.
(New York: Universe Books, 1984), 96.



Figure 157: Peachy Levy, 'Proclaim Liberty' Torah Mantle, 1991, United States,
Reproduced from Grace Cohen Grossman,
New Beginnings: The Skirball Museum Collections and Inaugural Exhibition
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 175.

Rockland's *Hanukkah* lamp carries this theme a step further; a grouping of Statues of Liberty – universally understood by any American as the icon of freedom – populates this modern ceremonial piece used to commemorate a historical Jewish victory against the oppression of a foreign power. In this context, all of these artist's design choices are creative, yet thematically appropriate.



Figure 158: Mae Shafter Rockland, *Hanukkah Lamp*, 1974
Reproduced from Norman L. Kleeblatt and Gerard C. Wertkin, *The Jewish Heritage in American Folk Art*.
(New York: Universe Books, 1984), 76.

Finally, in an effort to combine the present with the past, another *Ashkenazi* artist /metal worker – Manfred Anson – fashioned an unmistakably American *Hanukkah* lamp (fig. 159) with overtly patriotic symbols, yet with significant references to the Jewish

past. At the base of each Statue of Liberty/candle holder a pivotal event in Jewish history is marked (“*Israel: 1948, Holocaust, 1939-1945, Herzl Zionist Congress, Basel, 1897... ”*”).



Figure 10: (L) Manfred Anson, *Statue of Liberty Hanukkah Lamp*, 1985, United States (R) Detail
Reproduced from Grace Cohen Grossman,
New Beginnings: The Skirball Museum Collections and Inaugural Exhibition
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 118.

CONCLUSION:

The story of Jewish acculturation to modern American life is just one chapter in the lengthy history of the Jewish Diaspora. However, it is worth noting – with a certain irony – how successfully integrated the American Jewish population has become – economically, culturally, socially, and to some extent, even politically. In short, in almost every aspect of mainstream society in which religion is not typically the first identifier of a person's status, prominence, or worth, the American Jews have found a place. It is in this context that Jewish life appears to have transitioned from the segregated villages of the old world and flourished in the environment of the new world, where countless possibilities for success and the freedoms to pursue them were – for the *Ashkenazi* Jewish immigrants – usually the standard by which their new lives developed. It may be because of this unique context that the American Jewish decorative arts have developed and continue to evolve to this day in a manner that may also be unique. However, without the strong 'cultural blueprint' from which to draw, these successes may not have been possible.

On several levels, the *Hanukkah Lamp* by Mae Shafter Rockland underscores this point. At first glance, it appears as a radically different approach to a traditional Jewish ceremonial object and could be considered as a modern day commentary on the evolution

of the Jewish decorative arts as a whole. Although the products of an *Ashkenazi* Jewish maker, this design is awash with human forms. Yet the piece is also in keeping with religious doctrine regarding the acceptability of its usage for Jewish ceremonial purposes. This *Hanukkah* lamp contains the correct configuration of candles as traditionally required; eight lights all on equal level, with an additional light standing apart and at a higher elevation than the others. This has been the ‘law’ as stated in the ‘*Shulhan Arukh*’ (‘The Standard of Jewish Code and Practice’) for nearly five hundred years and the law has been satisfactorily followed. The rest is merely about the creativity of the maker and as such, this piece represents Rockland’s personal, artistic statement. In other words, there is a tremendous degree of flexibility in place which could be misconstrued as a ‘modern’ practice. But we know better. For centuries – if not millennia – Jews have produced their ceremonial and material arts within a broad range of decorative styles, of which many have been ‘borrowed’ from the non-Jewish world. Yet within this extensive array of styles and forms, there has always been the addition of, or the adaptability to a strong underpinning of Jewish tradition. The question of human imagery aside, we stand in the initial years of the twenty-first century looking back on a remarkable body of decorative arts that convey a complicated message of design amalgam, yet always preserving cultural identity at its core. This is the constancy among the religious arts and practices of an ancient people living a modern existence.

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BIOGRAPHY

Susan Lockwood graduated from Doherty Memorial High School, Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1973. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Tufts University in 1978 and then taught English in the Peoples Republic of China. She received her Master of Science in Linguistics from Georgetown University in 1983. In 1988 she began her federal career at the United States Information Agency, first as an exhibit designer and then as Deputy Cultural Attache at the American Embassy in Moscow, Russia. From 2000 to the present she has been working as a program officer for the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. She received her Master of Arts in the History of Decorative Arts from George Mason University in 2013.