

PROLOGUE

“The basic questions must be asked. Is there a dishonesty implied by the very name Jewish Museum? That is to say, can one link a religious or ethnic group with a museum in its proper sense as a place of the muses? And if so, how can it perform its function?” So wrote a loyal donor of the Jewish Museum of New York in 1971, less than seventy years after its origin as a collection of ritual objects and a decade after it began exhibiting avant-garde art that lacked visible Jewish content, often by non-Jews.

Displays of Jewish ritual objects in public, nonreligious settings by Jews were still a comparatively recent phenomenon at the time. So too was their institutionalization with the establishment of Jewish museums. Both initiatives occurred with growing frequency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, first in Europe and then the United States. Fruits of the Enlightenment and emancipation, they were created for various reasons that entailed differing ways of explaining the objects. Most often organizers used ritual objects to secure the advances of emancipation by interpreting Judaism to non-Jews and to nourish pride among fellow Jews in the richness and history of their material culture. As a result, the objects were deployed as evidence of religious observances, ethnological specimens, historical artifacts, or works of art. The Jewish Museum of New York, because of its age and prominence, exemplifies nearly this entire story. Seeded with a modest Judaica collection donated to the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1904, it grew into one of the world’s leading and oldest continuously serving institutions of its kind and possesses the largest Judaica collection outside Israel. During the 1960s, however, the museum expanded its purview and building to present a series of exhibitions featuring avant-garde art devoid of Jewish content and created mostly by non-Jews. The exhibits were celebrated in the art world, and many are still renowned today, but they were also attacked by Jewish community members objecting to what they considered mystifying, provocative, and sometimes profane works of art. How was it, Jews asked, that a museum established to preserve and display Jewish

ritual objects, and associated with a rabbinic seminary, had strayed so far from its founding mission?¹

Studies have addressed that question by starting with brief reviews of the museum's origins in 1904, its relocation off the seminary campus in the late 1940s, or the advent of the avant-garde era per se in the late 1950s. Though most are excellent, these studies share certain oversights. For example, they bypass the profound changes in Jewish life during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries brought about by the Enlightenment and emancipation that made possible the first public displays of Jewish ritual objects arranged by Jews. This omission is important for three reasons. First, because the nature of those changes, and the displays they enabled, set the terms for how such objects and, later, artworks created by Jews, might be presented and interpreted down to the present. Second, there is a direct lineage from those earliest displays to the museum's founding and early development. Third, the advent of the avant-garde era is made to appear as an anomalous product of immediate circumstances rather than as a logical and inevitable outcome of the prior eight decades of cultural history. Presenting a more extensive or accurate account of that story is not, however, the only objective of this book. Rather, it is also to unpack the values and concerns of the individuals who organized exhibits, supported and helped guide the museum, and commented on its programs over the years. From them, it is possible to glean insights into the sociocultural circumstances of the museum and its antecedents during a period of significant change in Jewish history. The story of the museum's avant-garde era is about a museum, to be sure, but it also about the people for whom it was a locus, with all the inconsistencies, contradictions, and disagreements of the community they comprised. Giving voice, in their own words, to as many of them as possible—be they rabbis or lay persons, museum professionals or visitors, scholars or the less well-educated, cultural critics or the casual observer—is a priority throughout this book. So too, is understanding the broader and evolving historical, cultural, and social contexts of what they said.²

There are several throughlines in the following narrative that are approached from the perspective of those responsible for arranging displays or leading the museum: a concern for audiences and what, today, would be called “stakeholders” and how exhibits might best serve them; the aims of exhibits as expressions of organizers' beliefs and perceptions; questions over what things to display; options for how best to arrange and interpret those things; and—as this study proceeds through the twentieth century—issues of governance, policy, personnel, facilities, and finances as the work of exhibitions and museums were professionalized.

Having worked for over a decade in museums and collections and then teaching museum studies, I view these sites as places where history, ideology, theory, and practice intersect. One cannot write responsibly about the subject of this book without acknowledging these interpenetrations. While museums express an array of sociocultural ideals, and the Jewish Museum is no exception, it would be unjust to those associated with it over the years to ignore the instances in which those ideals ran aground in the practical problems any such organization confronts daily. When, in the early 1970s, the Jewish Museum terminated its avant-garde exhibitions, it was a fiscal crisis that tipped the balance against them even though other policy concerns remained undecided. To capture these nuances, primary published sources, previously unpublished archival records, and oral histories are used to illuminate the perceptions and desires of the individuals participating in policy debates and practical day-to-day decisions. At the same time, this evidence is set in the context of studies that illuminate the historical circumstances, social and cultural theories, and broader critical debates underway throughout the period encompassed by this book. Finally, although it culminates in a case study of an emblematic institution and the developments that brought it about, this book is informed throughout by salient concerns within the Jewish community during the era: tensions between religion and secularism, particularism and universalism, and ethnicity and assimilation. These questions surface in museum debates over what objects most fully express Jewish values, its nature as a cultural history or art institution, and ultimately whether it should prioritize Jewish solidarity, or service to non-Jews as a means of promoting relations between them and the Jewish community.

This story begins with the earliest presentations of Jewish ritual objects, or Judaica, in three late-nineteenth-century public exhibitions. Each display was arranged by Jews to address somewhat different communal objectives, but all shared an interest in helping secure the social gains of Jewish emancipation. The exhibits also modeled for other Jews the appeal of Judaica collecting and the value of creating Jewish museums. The one begun at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1904 grew into the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial and Historical Objects by 1931, and evolved into the Jewish Museum in 1947. The last step, which entailed a reconceptualization of its collections as art, set the stage for the museum's turn to the avant-garde beginning in 1957, a daring experiment that culminated in 1971. By starting with the origins of Judaica collecting and display among Jews as these activities accelerated in the late nineteenth century, I draw into focus social and cultural changes that transformed Jewish ritual objects from sacred accouterments for synagogue and home observances

into collectibles for expositions and museums. Those changes evolved in similar ways in different locations, but it was in New York that they first coalesced into the ideas that propelled the museum's avant-garde experiment. There were other influences, to be sure, especially New York's intelligentsia, the city's art world, and the Jewish community's rapid assimilation and relative prosperity during the post-Second World War period.³

Fidelity to these matters demands attention both to the Jewish community's sociocultural circumstances during this period and to the granularity of their expression through the museum. Evidence resides not only in the face the museum presented to its public through collections, exhibits, catalogues, and educational programs, but in internal records of its debates over mission, budget priorities, opportunities and risks, and actual and desirable audiences. As the following narrative proceeds from the late nineteenth century into the early and then middle decades of the twentieth, there is a gradual shift in emphasis from secondary accounts and interpretations to primary sources. The latter increasingly include correspondence among key figures and their recollections captured in oral histories thanks to an increasing abundance of archival records as the story progresses. When the avant-garde program became a reality, different opinions emerged, and passions were aroused among people most closely associated with the museum. Those documents reveal the sometimes-counterintuitive beliefs that drew advocates, critics, and others into conflict, convictions that published accounts often obscure or oversimplify. The beliefs that led the Jewish Museum into the avant-garde were deeply held and urgent for their advocates who, as Jews, felt they were fulfilling Judaism's destiny in modern society. Jewish collectors and curators discovered profound meaning in new art, something they wanted to share with a larger public via the Jewish Museum, in part as an expression of Judaism's humanitarian values. That the art had nothing to do with Judaism per se and was often made by non-Jews did not matter to them. That the Judaica in the museum's collection, or works created by Jewish artists on Jewish topics, were far less meaningful for those collectors and curators than they were for other Jews was, for a time, a troubling but manageable issue. Though the museum subsequently backed away from its once-unqualified commitment to the avant-garde, it never entirely moved on from debates over how to balance contemporary art with its treatment of traditional Jewish visual culture, especially its vast collection of ritual objects. The Jewish Museum continues to be haunted by the question of what it ought to do just as the Jewish community struggles with questions of assimilation, religious solidarity, and, ultimately, survival.

The earliest public Judaica displays arose from the spread of secularism, starting with the Enlightenment, which fundamentally altered Jews' relationships with the surrounding societies in which they resided, the nature of Judaism itself, and Jews' understanding of their sacred objects. One result, toward the end of the nineteenth century, was the advent of Jewish collecting and public display of those objects—at an exposition in Paris, a historical exhibition in London, and a world's fair in Chicago—most rescued from declining synagogues or waning domestic use. Significantly, the displays were mounted to secure Jewish standing in societies where it remained tenuous. When these practices were institutionalized in museums, the Jewish Museum became the longest lived and leading example. There, the uses of ritual objects to inform non-Jews evolved into showing modern art by Jews exploring Jewish themes. This effort occurred during the immediate post-Second World War period when—between the Holocaust and the Cold War—the hopeful cultivation of universal fellowship, mutual understanding, and freedom called for new ways to promote interfaith dialogue. The turn to modern art was encouraged by the rabbi heading the Jewish Theological Seminary at the time who already had initiated programs to advance his vision of Jewish participation in and leadership of intergroup discourse on topics of concern for all Americans. He viewed the museum as playing a useful role in pursuit of these ideals and gave his blessing to efforts that enlarged its purview to art devoid of Jewish subjects and art by non-Jews, opening a door to the avant-garde.

This brief narrative, while seemingly about Jewish objects and the sites where they were collected and shown, is more accurately about the uses of such objects to navigate Jewish relations with a non-Jewish world. When the objects featured in the Jewish Museum's exhibits expanded from ritual accouterments and contemporary Jewish art to avant-garde works by non-Jewish artists, art-world denizens and the Jewish community took note. But the rationale for the avant-garde shows was not substantially different than it was for the ritual-object displays nearly a century prior. Ideally, the public presentation of such works might foster better relations between Jews and the societies in which they live. The various stages in this story correspond to the evolving circumstances of Jewish life in the times and places where Jews dwelled. Underlying these developments was the secularizing ethos of modernity both outside and within the Jewish community. A rabbinic seminary's acceptance of a museum within its precincts might be read as indicative. In adopting the institutional form of the museum for its ritual-objects collection, the seminary inadvertently acquiesced to museums' history of desacralizing religious objects

and fostering their “resocialization” for nonreligious purposes. For these reasons, it will be helpful to explore the museum culture Jews entered, its secularizing machinery, and how notions of sacredness concerning Jewish ritual objects might function within it.⁴

Museum Culture

The notion of “museum culture” gained currency with an anthology edited by Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff that situates studies of museums and exhibitions in the broader contexts of cultural history, theory, and criticism. Their approach led them to conceive of these sites as comprising an “intricate amalgam” of historical narratives, display strategies, and the demands of governing ideals as a way of relating them to other cultural discourses. Their formulation invites us to understand a museum and its exhibits as forms of cultural expression and, from that vantage point, to see how the Jewish community used them to communicate its values and aims. Yet, as with other languages, museum culture possesses its own syntax. Sherman and Rogoff discern within it four components: collections and their classification, the spheres of interest collections represent, the audiences museums aim to serve, and the ways in which museum audiences receive or understand what those institutions do.⁵

Starting with collections and their taxonomies, a museum’s classification of a given thing as a ritual object, historical evidence, or work of art might seem to arise naturally from the thing per se. But that determination might just as easily be shaped by an institution’s self-identification. Applicable here may be “the law of the instrument” derived from the adage “If one’s only tool is a hammer, one will regard everything as if it were a nail.” Thus, an art museum will treat all objects coming its way as works of art regardless of their original uses or makers’ intentions. This observation is relevant for Jewish ritual objects because, from their earliest public displays, organizers chose among one or more classifications and interpretive frameworks. Those choices reveal useful clues about the organizers’ aims. Moreover, just as the categorization of objects is variable, so too are the purposes of the repositories in which they are housed. The predecessor of the Jewish Museum, which began as a religious-historical institution, was changed to an art orientation when it moved from the seminary campus to a separate site, even though the objects in the collection remained unchanged.⁶

Also relevant is Sherman and Rogoff’s understanding of museum culture as invoking “notions of community.” Embedded in the notion of

community is a tendency to regard an institution's audience as an undifferentiated whole. While a museum convenes an intended audience for its exhibits, the nature of the actual audience for, and the variety of responses within it to, such exhibits is by no means assured. The dynamics governing the reception of exhibitions afford insights into the unacknowledged assumptions museums make about their constituencies and vice versa. They can also reveal differing responses of audiences or, more accurately, the varied responses of separate interest groups within a museum's audience. There is also a two-way street along which a museum's professional and lay leadership—such as collectors and donors—attempts to satisfy its own desires, as though proxies for a larger whole, that run headlong into the differing yearnings of one segment or another of the institution's presumed community. Just as a museum can form a community around its mission or exhibitions, those same activities can fragment a museum's community. Either way, the give and take of a museum and its community offers rich veins of information about both the institution and its audience.⁷

When Jews began exhibiting their ritual objects in public, it was not in a museum, but rather in a nineteenth-century international exposition and subsequent similar displays in extra-institutional contexts. That fact requires us to zoom out from museums per se to consider the larger context of public exhibits in which museums participated. Tony Bennett coined "exhibitionary complex" to capture the many sites and interests whereby objects are collected, organized, displayed, and viewed. For Bennett, those sites include temporary ones such as world's fairs as well as more permanent settings such as museums; and among the interests associated with these are not only intellectual questions arising from anthropology, art history, and natural history but also economic and political ones. International expositions, less ambitious local-history exhibitions, and museums differ from one another, and at many points those differences included display mechanics, taxonomies for arranging objects, and publics. Understanding the wider context of the exhibitionary complex is thus helpful when tracing the uses of artifacts over time and across multiple venues, such as Jewish ritual objects as they were taken up in one setting after another. Over the course of nearly a century, it is possible to track the journey of an individual piece of Judaica from an international exposition to a national historical exhibition, and eventually a museum (Figures 2.4, 2.5, 3.10). As the sites and circumstances of their display changed, the concerns Judaica embodied for succeeding generations of Jews also shifted, even—and sometimes particularly—when those objects were withdrawn from view in favor of things Jews valued more highly. In

those circumstances, the exhibitionary complex also serves as a framework within which the absence of objects becomes apparent and can be as consequential as their presence, perhaps even signifying their neglect.⁸

Integral to the exhibitionary complex is the role of secularization in its formation. “We live in a secular age and museums are deemed secular institutions,” Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach have observed. This view holds that the exhibitionary complex reifies the secularizing ethos of modernity during which museums became a prominent feature of society. By “modernity,” I mean the period starting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe during which Enlightenment values of reason, equality, and freedom were articulated, disseminated, and enacted. The Enlightenment heralded the ascent of rationality and empiricism over religion as the best methods for understanding the world—a fundamental reorientation in Western thought that sparked revolutions in knowledge production and society. Just as the role of religion in society began to be cordoned off, so too religions’ objects came to be regarded separately from their sacred purposes, primarily as materials for collecting and learned inquiry. Secularization was a handmaiden of the exhibitionary complex and, as such, warrants particular scrutiny as it applies to Judaism’s ritual objects.⁹

The Contours of Secularization

Jews’ presentations of their ritual objects in world’s fairs, historical exhibitions, and museums both reflected and helped foster the secularization processes transforming Jewish life during the period of this study. The movement of Judaica from sacred to secular contexts, however, did not so much drain the objects of their sacral potency as periodically suspend it. Over time and in different places, the sacral aura of Judaica could paradoxically be reactivated. A museum storing away and neglecting ritual objects, thereby arousing latent religious sensitivities, exemplifies the instability of secularization. Recognizing secularization’s nature and flows is no easy matter, however, especially within Judaism. “The secular and the religious,” Irving Howe notes, “are in Jewish experience, hopelessly interwoven.” Additionally, as Todd Endelman argues, secularization is but one aspect of a complicated and multidirectional process of the Jewish community’s transformation that he separated into four components: emancipation, acculturation, secularization, and integration. Even so, the centrality of ritual objects here, and the contrast between their sacrality and the secular environments in which they are deployed, demands a

focus on the dynamics of secularism. Before continuing, however, a digression on secularism and secularization is necessary.¹⁰

“Secular,” in common usage, means temporal or worldly, essentially the opposite of religious. The differences in outlook represented by the two terms have hardened into what Larry Shiner calls a “secular-religious polarity” that manifests throughout modern society. As a social phenomenon, secularism is approached by Ari Joskowitz and Ethan B. Katz as an ideology aimed at suppressing religion in general and, in political practice, for separating church and state because of religion being perceived as uninformed, stifling, or at minimum antimodern. Such views are often grouped as “secularization theory.” Sociologists of religion critique the concept, however, for doing little more than, as Shiner put it, serving “partisans of controversy”—advocates of secularism and their opponents in organized religion. William H. Swatos and Kevin J. Christiano attribute the dispute to a widely shared conviction among the secularists that in an era of scientific advances, religion’s value is in decline, a position vigorously opposed by religionists. Shiner urges that secularization theory be abandoned as evidence accumulated of the mutability of both secularism’s and religion’s influence in contemporary society. Swatos and Christiano, for example, found scant evidence of an inexorable shriveling of religion’s influence, perhaps because of its adaptability and penetration in all spheres of life including cultural and social systems as well as personal beliefs. Despite the seemingly overpowering nature of secularism, religion has refused “to go quietly—or even to go at all.” This flux in the comparative sway of secularism and religion is evident as an underlying social phenomenon in Europe and the United States during the period leading up to the Jewish Museum’s formation and in the decades following as the avant-garde era unfolded.¹¹

Within the Jewish community, the secular | religious opposition can also be misleading. David Biale points out that as categories of personal belief they obscure actual behavior. Some Jews may retain religious beliefs but manifest secular behavior insofar as they do not observe Jewish law or participate in worship practices; others are fully observant and attend synagogues but abide by secular beliefs. Joskowitz and Katz also see in the Jewish community an ideological divergence with some embracing secularism and others opposing it, but within a broader debate over whether acculturation and assimilation are endangering Judaism’s survival. That split originated in the nineteenth century following the French Revolution, when Jewish intellectuals welcomed a transformation of Judaism from an all-inclusive way of life into one religious denomination among several within a newly secularized France. This transition

occurred because Jewish emancipation accompanied the secularization of France during the revolution. There was a price to be paid, however, and according to Joskowitz and Katz, one long-term result was a change among many Jews' practices and beliefs, from public manifestations of faith through ritual observances and religious attire to private spiritual pursuits.

While some might attribute to those changes the beginnings of assimilation and a withering of the Jewish community, Judaism did not fade away but rather evolved and survived. One tangible result of secularization, however, was the rendering of Jewish ritual objects less essential for religious purposes, releasing them to drift ever farther out of the orbit of sacral use, but without wholly stripping them of religious significance, with some landing in museums.¹²

Secularizing Sacred Objects

The first public displays of Jewish ritual objects by Jews followed a history of the sacred artifacts of other groups being presented in museums and expositions. The process, which often entailed their apparent desacralization, was an aspect of a broader phenomenon of deracination or "musealization" whereby objects were relocated from the contexts of their origins. This shift dates to the Renaissance, when voyages of discovery returned with the sacred artifacts of Europe's others acquired by scholars and monarchs collecting objects for learned inquiry or amusement. The acts of deracination and desacralization were not critically scrutinized, however, until the turn from the late 1700s to early 1800s, paradoxically concerning artworks created in the West. Questions arose in France amid debates over the Louvre. The collection of the soon-to-be-public museum was assembled during the French Revolution with art confiscated from the monarchy, church, and aristocracy within France, and from neighboring countries it subsequently conquered. Opening the Louvre to all French citizens signified the revolutionaries' egalitarian and nationalist ambitions. But pursuing those goals conflicted with another revolutionary aim, stamping out lingering monarchism and Catholicism after the revolutionaries deposed the king and suppressed the church. Among the artistic riches seized by the revolutionaries were portraits of former monarchs—that threatened to "reawaken royalist sentiments"; and depictions of religious miracles and martyrs—that undercut the government's aim of supplanting religious fanaticism with the "Cult of Reason." Purging the Louvre of inimical works was difficult, however, because too many were

venerated masterpieces, the absence of which would draw into question the revolutionaries' stewardship of France's artistic patrimony. A rationalization for displaying them was found, according to Andrew McClellan, in the Enlightenment method of marshaling works into a "visible history of art." This endeavor entailed arranging paintings by chronology and artistic school, resulting in a reconceptualization of the major works as art objects rather than as royal or religious symbols, thereby shifting the basis of their societal value from the subjects depicted to the aesthetic mastery of their depiction. This method of "eliding original meanings" by aestheticizing and thereby secularizing the works became an essential feature of museums as engines of modernity. It was not without criticism, however, from those opposing the seizure of religious works for museums because doing so meant ripping objects from their meaning-conferring contexts. "Yes, you have transported the physical matter," one critic declared, but "have you also . . . transported the interest and charm that they drew . . . from the religious atmosphere that surrounded them, from that sacred aura that added to their luster? . . . All these objects have lost their effect in losing their purpose."¹³

In truth, that kind of relocation was not as decisive as first appears. As Judith Porter notes, there can be a gradient of effects depending on how an object is subsequently interpreted: "transposition," when religious meanings are translated from the contexts of sacred use to daily experience; "desacralization," when sacred meanings are ignored; and "differentiation," when original religious meanings are distinguished from the beliefs of outside observers. Porter also underscores the permeability of each category, adding that these types of secularization do not effect the complete elision of an object's religious significance, but rather an altered one. As a result, the secular and religious are in reality "differentiated but interrelated spheres" that continue to inform each other. This fluidity in the status of religious objects in museums, shifting from "sacred to profane and back again," is mirrored in visitors' responses. Many might be in accord with a curator's secular interpretation of such objects while others find contemplation of the objects to be, regardless of curatorial intent, "truly a worship experience." The indeterminate nature of secularization as it applies to sacred objects is no less applicable to Judaica and forms a useful context for this book.¹⁴

Also relevant is the phenomenon of visitors regarding museums as akin to religious sanctuaries, places where even ordinary objects acquire a sacral aura. Crispin Paine, attempting to tease apart the elements of what he calls "museumification," observes that the entry of such works into museums can have "a striking parallel with 'sacralization'—the making

of an object sacred.” Scholars like Joan R. Branham and Paine evince an aesthetics of sacralization, such as “sanctifying spotlights” highlighting objects on display. These phenomena led Ivan Gaskell to ask “‘When is the sacred?’ rather than ‘What is the sacred?’” The potential for visitors to identify museums with religious settings concerned Helena Wangefelt Ström, who, viewing the matter as a subversion of museal secularism—especially among faith-community visitors, proposed display strategies to manage the dynamism and unpredictability of viewers’ perceptions. These issues are yet more complex in museums of religion, exemplified by the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, Scotland. Some, like St. Mungo, attempt to survey the beliefs and practices of many religions, while others represent—and are often sponsored by—individual religious groups. Relevant to the Jewish Museum is Paine’s observation that when museums present a religion, they often imply “a unity of practice and belief” that is nonexistent among that religious community’s faithful. How might, for example, a Jewish museum in the United States adequately represent the differing beliefs of Orthodox (including Haredi and Hasidic), Conservative, and Reform Jews? Another concern is the museological handling of religious traditions in which, as Chris Arthur points out, “concrete representation” of deities or other religious subjects are prohibited. Judaism’s Second Commandment prohibition against graven images (see below) is a recurring issue in discussions about the comparatively modest scale and nature of its ritual objects, one often coupled with questions about whether the objects possess sufficient visual appeal and variety to merit exhibition at all.¹⁵

At the outset, I mentioned that the very first Judaica exhibits were designed partly to explain Judaism to non-Jews. Those projects were not unique, though they may have pioneered uses of sacred objects to promote mutual understanding in secular societies or among different religious communities. That aim was taken up by the Jewish Museum and pursued throughout the period of this study. The Jews who led these efforts were mobilized by the recurring dangers of antisemitism and the hopes that by informing others they could cultivate social harmony, religious acceptance, or at least tolerance. This challenge never went away. When Paine introduced his 2013 book *Religious Objects in Museums* with the observation that “To our surprise, religion is once again challenging the secular world,” he was flagging a resurgence of religious advocacy in civic affairs, including an increase of religion-based conflicts between nations and within nations home to diverse religious communities. There is a deep historical resonance in the use of museums to ameliorate tensions fueled by religious differences. After all, the advent of the public museum

is a feature of the secularizing ethos of the Enlightenment, which, itself, was born of a longing to eliminate the causes of religious wars in Europe by, as in the French Revolution, curtailing the power of religious institutions in civil society. What may seem at first paradoxical—that the Jewish community would voluntarily submit its sacred objects for secular scrutiny in expositions and museums, is less so when understood in the context of the benefits Jews hope to reap.¹⁶

Ritual Objects and Art

When Jews began displaying their ritual objects outside the contexts of religious observances in synagogue and home, they did not face obstacles in Jewish law or tradition. But there are differences in sacral standards that could affect how certain things might be displayed that would have been taken for granted by observant Jews whose activities are recounted in this book. Those standards vary according to two broad categories in relation to which the objects are understood. The first covers intrinsically sacred objects (*tashmishey kedusha*); the second concerns less sacred religious accouterments (*tashmishey mitzvah*). All are used to honor commandments or perform duties (*mitzvot*, plural of *mitzvah*) set out in the Torah, which contains the first five books of the Old Testament, Judaism's most sacred text. *Tashmishey kedusha* include Torahs that are hand-inscribed on parchment scrolls, other similarly made texts, and printed works containing entire biblical books or excerpts—any containing the name of God. Also falling into this category are things that come into physical contact with Torahs, such as wrappings or covers. *Tashmishey mitzvah* are the several kinds of objects used in other ritual observances such as cups for blessings over wine, spice containers for marking the Sabbath's conclusion, or nine-branch menorahs for observing Chanukah.¹⁷

These distinctions both reflect and have a bearing on the objects' physical appearances. Consequently, they can also influence which objects are collected and displayed by museums. For example, despite their absolute centrality in explaining Judaism, Torahs are less likely to be displayed—or displayed less frequently—due to their sacral nature and the religious stipulations governing their handling in preparation for and during display in secular settings. Accordingly, depending on the *minhag* (tradition) of a community, people might be asked to stand when a Torah is moved for an exhibit installation; and if it were displayed so that one could see the sacred text within it, viewers might be asked to wear head coverings out of respect. A museum might also avoid displaying Torahs in groups

for want of visual variety from one to the next because their construction is governed by strict rules concerning materials and facture, the only variations coming in their sizes and letterforms used in their inscription. Thus, people unfamiliar with Torahs would be hard pressed to distinguish among different ones based on physical appearance. For all these reasons, Jewish exhibitors might prefer other religious objects to inspire Jews and/or inform non-Jews about Judaism.¹⁸

The objects categorized as *tashmishey mitzvah* are not subject to the same kinds of strictures regarding their facture and use. To the contrary, not only is wide latitude given for creating *tashmishey mitzvah*, but Jews are also encouraged to embellish these ritual objects based on the Torah verse “This is my God and I will glorify Him” (Exodus 15:2). Evidence shows that, indeed, throughout history Jews adorned them to the extent permitted by economic means, sociopolitical circumstances, and traditions. The results are often beautiful and worthy of display, although—because the objects were created for specific ritual purposes—not dramatically different one from another in form or size. Jewish communities often commissioned non-Jewish artisans to create their ritual objects or, if there were Jewish artisans available, the latter usually adopted the decorative materials and styles of surrounding cultures. The resulting objects are readily displayed as ethnographic specimens, historical artifacts, art, or all of the above. Given the nature and circumstances of their creation, however, aesthetic interpretation is typically in the context of decorative-art traditions of the eras and places Jews dwelled. These modest objects did not lend themselves to display as “high art” on a par with the paintings and sculptures created by non-Jews in Europe during the same periods. Not until the mid- to late-nineteenth century, thanks to the Enlightenment and emancipation, was there an efflorescence of creativity among Jews in painting, sculpture, and other media, some but not all addressing Jewish themes. Over time, their work furnished a larger context for scholars to conceive of a “Jewish art” comprised of a continuum of Jewish visual culture extending from ritual artifacts to modern paintings.¹⁹

The notion of “Jewish art” was advanced despite a history of thorny questions about the impact of the Second Commandment prohibition, specifically the use of figurative representations in Jewish ritual objects and art: “You shall not make for yourself a sculpted image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth” (Exodus 20:4). The issue arose both in non-Jewish speculations about Judaism’s scarce visual-art contributions to Western civilization—in comparison to those of Christendom—and in Jewish apologetics on the same topic. Adherence to the Second Commandment

was frequently cited by all parties as explaining the scarcity of figurative representations, the paucity of works—other than ritual objects—in Judaism’s material culture, and the visual clumsiness of those that *were* created. Only in recent decades have scholars shown that fidelity to the Second Commandment was not as strict as had been assumed and, to the contrary, rabbinic interpretations and community consensus welcomed visual expressions of Jewish beliefs. To the extent that Jewish output was limited, other factors such as oppression, exclusion from craft guilds, poverty, and periodic expulsions or pogroms were more likely to blame. Proof of those constraints, one might argue, is the flowering of Jewish visual arts and their reception in the wake of emancipation, what Richard I. Cohen called a “visual revolution in Jewish life.” Yet, as individuals gained the freedom and means to express themselves artistically, as well as entrée to larger cultural worlds, they increasingly turned away from subjects presumably meaningful for the Jewish community such as depictions of biblical stories or religious scenes in homes and synagogues.²⁰

This trend complicated matters when Jews gravitated from exhibiting ritual objects only, to featuring other works. With the creation by Jews of artworks that, visually, had nothing to do with Judaism came the “vexed question” of what qualified as Jewish art. While it was easy enough to discern the characteristics of Jewishness in ritual objects, related folk arts and crafts, or images depicting Jewish themes, it was not so obvious in works created by Jewish artists when they explored matters not visibly Jewish. Scholars’ attempts to address that phenomenon have been tortured at best and at worst confusing. Should an artist’s output be called Jewish based solely on her or his genealogy? What about works by non-Jewish artists on Jewish topics? For the purposes of a Jewish museum, would it be acceptable to display works without visible Jewish content by non-Jewish artists if they are nonetheless meaningful for Jewish curators or collectors? Though seemingly theoretical, these very questions arose as Jewish participation in museum culture shifted from an emphasis on displaying ritual objects to one on exploring avant-garde art. This book offers no new answers to that “vexed question.” Rather, it instantiates the many ways Jews thought, or—perhaps more accurately—made assumptions, about the kinds of things appropriate for display in a Jewish museum. As the institution evolved and grew, and its historical and cultural contexts changed, that sense of appropriateness played out in unpredictable ways. Each step in this evolution was well-reasoned in the moment. After the museum’s plunge into the avant-garde, however, fellow Jews began to question the judgment of the museum’s leaders, sparking fierce debates that continue to this day. While they sometimes devolved into either/or

disputes, pitting a fealty to Judaica or Jewish themes against a vision that appealed to underlying Jewish values or cultural aspirations, more often the clashes were over questions of balance. Was the museum “too Jewish” when it focused on Judaica and Jewish subjects? Or was it “not Jewish enough” when pursuing new art that spoke to Jewish art-world denizens? Though this story is centered on one emblematic museum, its telling reflects fundamental changes and formative debates in Jewish life from the mid-nineteenth to late-twentieth centuries. At stake is what a Jewish museum ought to exhibit and for whom. Like the “basic questions” that open this prologue, these concerns are suffused with nearly a century of struggles over religion and secularism, parochialism and universalism, and ethnicity and assimilation.²¹

Notes

1. For a worldwide historical survey of Jewish museums, including non-Jewish institutional collections of Judaica and related phenomena, a good starting point is still Fred Skolnik, ed., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd edn., s.v. “Museums,” by Grace Cohen Grossman and Avram Biran (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007).
2. On the JM’s prehistory, see Emily D. Bilski, “Seeing the Future Through the Light of the Past: The Art of The Jewish Museum,” in *The Jewish Museum of New York*, ed. Vivian B. Mann with Emily D. Bilski (New York: Scala Books, 1993), 8–21. For its avant-garde era, see Julie Miller and Richard I. Cohen, “A Collision of Cultures: The Jewish Museum and the Jewish Theological Seminary, 1904–1971,” in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, ed. Jack Wertheimer, 2 vols. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), II:310–61; and Matthew Israel, “A Magnet for the With-It Kids,” *Art in America* 95, no. 9 (October 2007): 73–83. See also, Hsiao-Ning Tu, “The History of the Jewish Museum in New York with an Emphasis on 1963–1971” (master’s thesis, City College of New York, 1996).
3. For brevity’s sake, I employ “Judaica” here and throughout the book for Jewish ritual objects used in synagogue and home religious observances. I recognize, however, that the term is also used more broadly for texts and material culture associated with Jewish history.
4. On “resocialization,” see Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3–19.
5. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, “Introduction: Frameworks for Critical Analysis,” in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), ix–xii.

6. On the law of the instrument, Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1964), 28. For a more accurate use of the adage, see Abraham H. Maslow, *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 15–16.
7. Sherman and Rogoff, “Introduction,” xii. The concept of community is itself problematic and warrants more investigation than is practical here. For a helpful exploration, though done in the context of nationalism rather than religion or ethnicity, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).
8. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 59–88.
9. Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” *Art History* 3, no. 4 (December 1980): 450. There is a long history of the distinction between sacred and secular (or profane) objects in displays. See, for example, regarding the Byzantine empire, Sarah G. Bassett, “Excellent offerings: The Lausus Collection in Constantinople,” *Art Bulletin* 82, no. 1 (March 2000): 6–25.
10. Irving Howe, *The End of Jewish Secularism* (New York: Hunter College, City University of New York, 1995), 3. Todd M. Endelman, “Jewish Self-Identification and West European Categories of Belonging from the Enlightenment to World War II,” in *Religion or Ethnicity? Jewish Ideas in Evolution*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 105.
11. Ari Joskowitz and Ethan B. Katz, eds., *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 6–7. Larry Shiner, “The Concept of Secularization in Empirical Research,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6 (Autumn 1967): 207, 218. William H. Swatos Jr. and Kevin J. Christiano, “Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 214, 216, 224. See also, Gordon Graham, “Secularity and Modernity,” *Philosophy* [Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy] 67, no. 260 (April 1992): 185. For the religion-going-quietly quote, “Materialities & Secularization Theory,” MAVCOR: The Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion, accessed January 2021, <https://mavcor.yale.edu/materialities-secularization-theory>.
12. David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 10–11; Joskowitz and Katz, *Secularism in Question*, 5–10. See also, Endelman, “Jewish Self-Identification,” 113.
13. André Desvallées and François Mairesse, “Musealisation,” in *Key Concepts in Museology* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 50–52; and the related essay “Object [Museum Object] or Musealia,” 61–64. See also, Chang Wan-Chen, “A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Musealization: The Museum’s Reception by China and Japan in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” *Museum &*

- Society* 10, no. 1 (2012): 15; and Andre Malraux, "Museum Without Walls," in *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 14. Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 108–14, 194–96. On aestheticizing objects, see Robert L. Nelson, "Art and Religion: Ships Passing in the Night?" in *Reluctant Partners: Art and Religion in Dialogue*, ed. Ena Giurescu Heller (New York: Gallery at the American Bible Society, 2004), 103. See also, James J. Sheehan, *Museums in the German Art World: From the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 18–42, the "visible history" quote is from p. 40; and Daniel J. Sherman, "Quatremère/Benjamin/Marx: Art Museums, Aura, and Commodity Fetishism," in Sherman and Rogoff, *Museum Culture*, 127–34. The Louvre, as an art museum, is one kind of example, but different types of museums handle religious objects in different ways; Crispin Paine, "Religion in London's Museums," in *Godly Things: Museums, Objects, and Religion*, ed. Crispin Paine (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), 151–70.
14. Judith R. Porter, "Secularization, Differentiation, and the Function of Religious Value Orientations," *Sociological Inquiry* 43, no. 1 (January 1973): 67–69. Ivan Gaskell, "Sacred to Profane and Back Again," in *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millenium*, ed. Andrew McClellan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 149–62; James Clifton, "Truly a Worship Experience? Christian Art in Secular Museums," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52 (Autumn 2007): 107–15. See also, regarding visitors' responses, Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 28–30, 32–33.
15. On "aura," the classic text remains Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–51. On the perception of museums as quasi-religious destinations, see Lily Kong, "Representing the Religious: Nation, Community and Identity in Museums," *Social and Cultural Geography* 6, no. 4 (2005): 495–96. On "museumification," Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums*, 2; see also pp. 13, 37–44, and 71–77. Joan R. Branham, "Sacrality and Aura in the Museum: Mute Objects and Articulate Space," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 52/53 (1994/1995): 33–47; and on "sanctifying spotlights," Susan Vogel, "Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 197. Ivan Gaskell, "Secularization and Consecration: Museums, Artifacts, and Transformation Through Use" (session response, College Art Association annual conference, Boston, MA, February 2006). Helena Wangefelt Ström, "How Do Museums Affect Sacredness? Three Suggested Models," *ICOFOM Study Series: Museology and the Sacred* 47, no. 1–2 (2019): ¶¶17–30. See, too, the observation concerning a museum's versus source community's values, Mary M. Brooks, "Seeing

- the Sacred: Conflicting Priorities in Defining, Interpreting, and Conserving Western Sacred Artifacts,” *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* 8, no. 1 (March 2012): 14. On the St. Mungo Museum, see Chris Arthur, “Exhibiting the Sacred,” in Paine, *Godly Things*, 1–27; see also, Alison Kelly, “St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow,” *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* 1, no. 3 (2005): 435–37. For a taxonomy of religion museums, see Ström, “How Do Museums Affect Sacredness?”: ¶6. See also a brief survey that features the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion’s museum in New York City (since renamed): “Dr. Bernard Heller Museum,” Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, accessed November 2023, <https://huc.edu/public-programs-events/museums/dr-bernard-heller-museum-in-new-york/>; Ena Giurescu Heller, “Religion on a Pedestal: Exhibiting Sacred Art,” in Heller, *Reluctant Partners*, 132–37. Regarding representations of religions’ unity of beliefs, see Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums*, 110. On eschewing “concrete representation,” see Arthur, “Exhibiting the Sacred,” 8. See also, Charles D. Orzech, *Museums of World Religions: Displaying the Divine, Shaping Cultures* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).
16. On promoting mutual understanding and community harmony, see Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums*, 93, 99; on education about religion, see Arthur, “Exhibiting the Sacred,” 4. See also, Mark O’Neill, “Making Histories of Religion,” in *Making Histories in Museums*, ed. Gaynor Kavanagh (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 188–99; Amanda Millay Hughes and Carolyn H. Wood, *A Place for Meaning: Art, Faith, and Museum Culture* (Chapel Hill: Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009); and Bruce M. Sullivan, ed., *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).
17. Virginia Greene, “‘Accessories of Holiness’: Defining Jewish Sacred Objects,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 31–39; Michael Maggen, “The Conservation of Sacred Materials in the Israel Museum,” in *Conservation of Living Religious Heritage: Papers from the ICCROM 2003 Forum on Living Religious Heritage, Conserving the Sacred*, ed. H. Stovel, N. Stanley-Price, and R. Killick (Rome: ICCROM, 2005), 102–6; Bernice Morris and Mary M. Brooks, “Jewish Ceremonial Textiles and the Torah: Exploring Conservation Practices in Relation to Ritual Textiles Associated with Holy Texts,” in *Textiles and Text: Re-Establishing the Links Between Archival and Object-Based Research*, ed. Maria Hayward and Elizabeth Kramer (London: Archetype Publications, 2006), 244–48. “Sefer Torah” (ספר תורה, usually translated as “scroll of the law”) is used by Jews when speaking of a Torah as a physical object. The term “Torah” also has a much broader meaning among Jews and can include, depending on context, rabbinic elucidations and commentaries on the root text; see Skolnik, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Torah,” by Louis Isaac Rabinowitz and Warren Harvey.

18. Skolnik, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Sefer Torah,” by Aaron Rothkoff and Louis Isaac Rabinowitz.

19. The traditional interpretation of Exodus 15:2 comes from the Talmud:

What is the source for the requirement of: “This is my God and I will glorify Him”? **As it was taught** in a *baraita* regarding the verse: “**This is my God and I will glorify Him [anveihu]**, the Lord of my father and I will raise Him up.” The Sages interpreted *anveihu* homiletically as linguistically related to *noi*, beauty, and interpreted the verse: **Beautify yourself before Him in mitzvot**. Even if one fulfills the mitzva by performing it simply, it is nonetheless proper to perform the mitzva as beautifully as possible. **Make before Him a beautiful sukka, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, beautiful ritual fringes, beautiful parchment for a Torah scroll, and write in it His name in beautiful ink, with a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric**. Shabbat 133b.5, Babylonian Talmud, Sefaria, accessed February 2021, <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.133a?lang=bi>.

The boldface passages are translations of the Aramaic text (a Hebrew cognate) of the Talmud and the remaining passages are interpolations elucidating it. The treatment of Jewish ritual objects as “art” has a long history. For a brief survey, see Joseph Gutmann, *Jewish Ceremonial Art* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964). Pioneering treatments of “Jewish art” are in Franz Landsberger, *A History of Jewish Art* (Cincinnati, OH: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1946) and, because of the contributing scholars’ stature, in Cecil Roth, *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History*, rev. edn. Bezalel Narkiss (Jerusalem: Massada Press, 1971) (an anthology by seventeen scholars). See also, Skolnik, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Art,” by Cecil Roth, Shalom Sabar, Ziva Amishai-Maisals, et al.; and Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver, *Jewish Art: A Modern History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011). Regarding the historiography of scholarship on Jewish art, see Skolnik, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v., “Art Historians and Art Critics,” particularly the subsection on “Historians of Jewish Art” by Herman S. Gundersheimer and Shalom Sabar. For current research on Jewish art and material culture, see *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* and *Ars Judaica: The Bar Ilan Journal of Jewish Art*.

20. For a fairly thorough introduction to the Second Commandment debate, see Joseph Gutmann, “The ‘Second Commandment’ and the Image in Judaism,” in *No Graven Images: Studies in Art and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Joseph Gutmann (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1971), 3–16. See also, Gutmann’s “Prolegomenon” and essays by other scholars in the same anthology. For a more recent treatment, see Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). That gradual turn away from Jewish subjects by Jewish artists is evident in the later chapters of Roth, *Jewish Art* and the sections on nineteenth- and twentieth-century art in Skolnik, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Art,” by Roth, Sabar, Amishai-Maisals, et alia; Richard I. Cohen, “The Visual Revolution in Jewish Life—An Overview,” in

Visualizing and Exhibiting Jewish Space and History, vol. 26, ed. Richard I. Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3–24.

21. The quote is from the flyleaf of, Baskind and Silver, *Jewish Art*. It echoes Milton W. Brown, “An Explosion of Creativity: Jews and American Art in the Twentieth Century,” in *Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York, 1900–1945*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt and Susan Chevlowe (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1991), 27: “The problem of a Jewish art or Jewishness in art remains vexing and possibly insoluble.” Exemplifying the difficulty of rendering a coherent account of Jewish art is, Cohen, “The Visual Revolution in Jewish Life,” cited above. See also chapter 7 of this book.