

The Depiction of the Human Figure and the 2nd Mosaic Commandment¹

By Architect Prof. Dr.-Ing. Alfred Grotte, Breslau

I wrote in depth on the singular artistic activities of Eastern European Jews and their influence in Germany and especially Bavaria in the fifth issue of the *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft* in 1918. Such surprising ornamentation: the joyfulness of those in the ghettos who remained untouched by the influence of the Gothic, the Renaissance, and later cultures, is dealt with there at length. The decorative Romanesque motifs introduced by emigrants from their German mother country were passed down from one generation to the next and distorted through inbreeding—ornamentation itself being just as much an antithesis to established religious law, like that of Arabs, to whom the Mosaic ban on images equally applies. Stylized, vegetal ornamentation, mixed with lines written in the magnificent script of the people, are for Jews and Arabs indispensable to an art that endeavors to flourish but is artificially kept in check by religion.

By seeming to turn away from the major tasks and demands of the visual arts, Jews were accused of being positively hostile toward art, giving rise to a thoroughly damning criticism of their achievements in the field of art as a whole:

“In their case (synagogues) the hostility toward art is not asceticism but an abhorrence as a result of religious teaching that welled up from the depths of the national character and has inhibited the education of a whole people for two-and-a-half thousand years. Whoever is pious in a Mosaic sense has to hate art.”

Such was the opinion of Cornelius Gurlitt expressed in the *Handb. d. Architektur* IV, 8, 1, page 138. This erroneous belief—which, I believe, I sufficiently proved wrong in my essay, as mentioned above—seems to me to be worth mentioning again as it was propagated by a leading art scholar who was highly-esteemed in the widest of circles, both in Germany and abroad. As such, Gurlitt’s opinion demands an explanation as it was probably prevalent at the time. Artistic activity, history tells us, always goes hand in hand with a country’s political peaks. The utter helplessness of Jews at the time of King Solomon in the field of art could, however, be seen as a sign of inferiority at that time; it is expressed in a noticeable manner in the artistic devices borrowed from the Phoenicians on the order of the otherwise art-loving king. It does not seem improbable to me that his wife—the daughter of the pharaoh—in particular, played a role in attracting artistic motifs from her native country, as seen in the winged cherubims. Several examples of the influence of foreign queens on the art of a country appear later in history. Gurlitt’s words are especially applicable to the times of the Jewish Kingdom; only in this way can the artistic negativity of a people be explained, which, unlike in neighboring nations, contains all forms of idolatry and senses a danger for monotheism in every depiction which includes animal or figurative motifs. The people, having grown up with Egyptian artworks, experienced a forty-year period of quarantine in the form of the wandering through the desert and, artistically-ascetically trained, reached the Promised Land. However, two-and-a-half thousand years have removed some of the rigidity in the interpretation of the 2nd Mosaic Commandment. Triggered through an intimate

1 Grotte, Alfred: Die Darstellung der menschlichen Gestalt und das 2. mosaische Gebot, in: Ost und West. Illustrierte Monatsschrift für das gesamte Judentum, vol. 22 (1922), pp. 7–14.

knowledge of Hellenistic and Roman culture, friezes were already being added to synagogues in Galilee around 200 AD,² which are something of a surprise with their wealth of heathen, figural ornamentation, in which even the unscrupulous use of the human figure is obvious. And all of this, as Dalman writes, was clearly on view to the most devout of rabbis!

Were this Palestinian deviation to the biblical commandment to be explained by the circumstance that these places of worship were imperial acts of grace, against whose detailing one was powerless, then how are the following pictures of Jewish decorative art to be interpreted, especially the items in figs. 1 and 2, which were intended to decorate the outside of Torah scrolls, in other words the very same “teaching” which contains the categorical commandment in its first section: “You shall not make for yourself an idol.”?

A variety of brass and silver ritual objects with figural ornamentation, which were primarily used for washing the hands of the Kohanim who recites the Priestly Blessing in front of the congregation on major feast days, can be found in old synagogues. Such a case is a jug in Miłosław (Posen) which depicts a woman and the devil together with the inscription: “My life and end is in God’s hands.” The Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam has a basin which shows Venus and the Apple.

2 Kohl-Watzinger, *Antike Synagogen in Galiläa*, Leipzig., I.C. Hinrichs. Cf. also my essay in issue 3/4, 1920, of this magazine.



fig. 1. *Tass* (Torah shield) in chased silver (Prague, Maisel Synagogue)

I came across candelabra with human figures on the shafts in old synagogues in Bohemia and Bavaria,³ and finally a brass wash basin in the wooden synagogue in Kórník (Posen), built in 1767. The basin has Gothic ornamentation, now much worn, and the inscription around the edge: “God be with us.” All of these items are of ecclesiastical origin and were probably forfeited pledges— many Jews having been “privileged” pawnbrokers up until the Jewish emancipation. In this way, old baptism bowls and similar objects with figural decoration to which, as we saw, little attention was paid, frequently found use in Jewish religious rituals.

It would, therefore, stand to reason that the origin of the items depicted in figs 1–5 is the same. This assumption, however, is incorrect, as proven by the following. I came across fig. 1 in 1913 in Prague in the synagogue, completed in 1592, which was built by Marcus Meysl,⁴ court banker to Emperor

³ Cf. Grotte, *Synagogentypen vom 11.–19. Jahrh.*, “Der Zirkel,” Berlin 1915.

⁴ Grotte, *op. cit.* The rich paraments and ritual objects that Meysl (English: Maisel) donated to the synagogue named after him are of extraordinarily artistic value and are yet to be researched and the findings published. They are among the most exquisite embroidered items of the 16th century from Bohemia.

Rudolf II (according to a Letter of Majesty dated August 13, 1591). This *tass* (Torah shield) is—as can readily be seen from its design—a crafted work of art from the Baroque period.

It is shaped like a triptych and on both sides of the very striking central section (as we will see later) are the naturalistically rendered figures of the High Priest, fully robed, and Judith with a sword and the head of Holofernes. Both figures are standing on a pedestal under a kind of baldachin in the Gothic manner; the crown is a final element positioned above each figure. Two columns entwined with vines and lions flank both sides of the central section. Floral decoration occupies the uppermost pendentive, crowned by the double-headed eagle of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The halos around the heads of the heraldic animals have prudently been omitted. An additional shield with exchangeable inscribed plates (probably of a later date), indicates the appropriate feast day for which the *tass* is used; here the inscription reads “Sukkot.”

The assumption that such an idiosyncratic figural ornament was also part of a former ritual object stands to reason. The item was definitely made for use in a synagogue from the outset. The candelabra in the central section, a symbol also frequently used in churches, always has seven arms, analog to the archetypical version from the Temple (Essen, Magdeburg, Frankfurt a. O., Reims, etc.). This candelabra, which was doubtlessly designed to have nine branches, is however a ritual object from a synagogue intended for use at the Festival of Lights, the annual commemoration of the rededication of the Temple by Judah Maccabee.

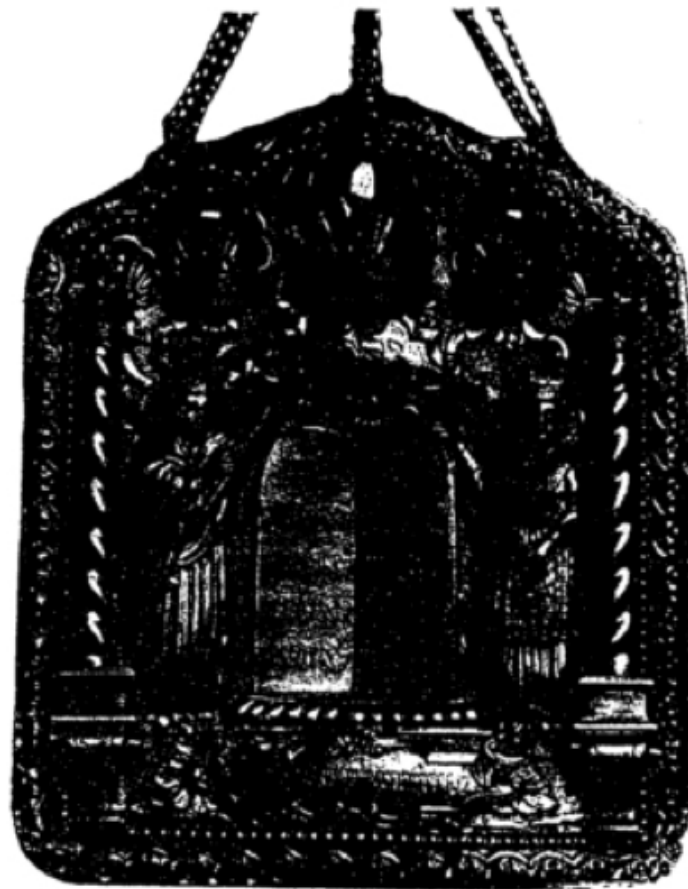


fig. 2. *Tass* (Torah shield) in chased silver (Sklower Synagogue, Breslau, now Wrocław)

Accordingly, it can safely be assumed that this was a commission for a synagogue, doubtlessly given to a Christian master craftsman who created the item modelled on Christian religious art and, without any qualms, chased the apocryphal Judith in silver—a popular figure in Christian art throughout the ages.

While I assumed until a little while ago that the Prague *tass* was to be considered singular in its design within Jewish religious art, I surprisingly found a counterpart to it in Breslau. It is in the Sklower School, a synagogue built some 100 years ago. I would like to thank the head of the synagogue, Mr. Willy Falk, in my discovery of this unique shield. Compared to the Prague silver shield it was made almost at the same time. The composition, however, is clearer and simpler.⁵ Symbolically, the Decalogue is supported by two figures. To the right is the high priest as the guardian of the law; to the left its mediator, Moses, dressed as a monk. The stiff, almost medieval-like shape and posture of the figures strongly contrast with the otherwise animated Baroque ornamentation. The upper decorative shield includes the letters of the holy name of God, JHWH; the lower one, an inscription with letters that reveal the date of the donation. Strangely enough, this points to the mid 14th century—this has to be a mistake which would be obvious to any expert, bearing the nature of the composition of Hebrew numbers in mind. The stiff bearing of the figures and the Romanized ornamentation around the edge suggest that this was the work of a Jewish artistic craftsman. One is tempted to think of one of the many goldsmiths in the town of Krotoszyn (formerly in Posen) whose work still displayed the unusual combination of Baroque cartouches, etc. with Romanesque ornamentation in the 18th century.⁶ A second motif also speaks in favor of attributing the silver shield to a Jewish artist.

5 The pillars to the sides and the supports were added at a later date. These have been screwed onto the silver shield and show Boaz and Jachin from Solomon's Temple, as indicated on the pommel on the capital.

6 Cf. my essay on the Jewish cemetery in Krotoschin in "Die Denkmalspflege," no. 8/1919, Min. d. öff. Arb., Berlin.



Abb. 3. Kupferner Wasserkessel

fig. 3. Copper boiler

Of note are the three crowns instead of the two baldachin-like ones in Prague which ritually-speaking have been completely misunderstood. The Christian maker of the latter item was obviously not familiar with the symbolic meaning of the crowns; he presumably only used this motif at the request of the client. An Eastern Jewish goldsmith, however, would have known the significance of the crowns according to the Word (Chapters of the Fathers II:17): “There are three crowns: the crown of scholarship (knowledge of the Commandments of Moses and the Talmud), the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship.” Quite rightly he gives the crowns a fitting place, making the central one (scholarship) appear especially large.

Another religious object, which the present author came across in the entrance hall of the Remah Synagogue in Kraków,⁷ is shown in fig. 3. It is a cylindrical vessel made of chased copper and fitted with a valve so that the water can be emptied into a basin, used for the symbolic washing of hands when entering the house of prayer (consecrated water). The outside of the cylinder is divided into eight fields by rounded pillars with eight figurative depictions: Moses, Isaac, and other figures from the Old

⁷ Taken from the Prague-born rabbi Moses Isserles.

Testament. In this case, too, it would appear to be the work of a Jewish craftsmen; especially bearing the figure in the left-hand field in mind—a man dressed as a slave carrying a heavy burden (fagot) on his shoulders and a water vessel in his right hand. The indistinct object to the left of the figure could also be a jug or a well. The choice of this motif, which is rarely found in the history of art, can only be attributed to someone familiar with the holy scriptures. A better choice could hardly have been made for such an ornamental item to be used as a basin in a Jewish house of prayer.

The slave is a Jebusite⁸ carrying water to the holy site, as described in Joshua 9:23:

“Now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God.”

The figures’s faces have been disfigured. Similar “eruptions” by fanatic zealots resulted in damage to the beautiful brass wall plates in Boimow Synagogue in Lemberg (Lwiw). In the case of the three figures shown here and their delight in figural ornamentation, it is especially interesting to note that these are items used in religious services. From this, it can be assumed that Judaism at that time was not opposed to art as such. The biblical commandment is directed much more to sculpture made in the round and not to reliefs.

(Translation: Christopher Wynne)

⁸ I would like to thank the former rabbi of the town of Rawicz, Posen, Dr. John Cohn, Breslau, for his explanation of the figures and their symbolism.