

## Ritual objects<sup>1</sup>

By Karl Schwarz

Virtually nothing is known of ritual objects from early times. The various items which were produced with great care seem—at least in part—to have been made by Christians, as Jews were forbidden from working as artisans to a large extent.

Gold and silversmiths existed in virtually all countries. They had their own places in the large synagogue in Alexandria. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century in North Arabia, the Jewish tribe Qaynuqa worked as goldsmiths and in 1042 Archbishop Guifred sold the Narbonne church treasure to Jewish goldsmiths from the Languedoc. They must have carried out this craft in Spain and Portugal as well, as they are to be found in Hamburg among those expelled and in Mexico among the Marranos. Different mentions of the name Zoref, “goldsmith,” can be found in inscriptions in Prague cemetery. It is to be assumed that this word, which soon became a family name, resulted from the prevalence of the craft. However, no works created by these craftsmen have survived. As a result, the extent to which their work was based on artistic qualities cannot be ascertained. Just how widespread the goldsmith’s craft was among Jews in Poland can be seen in a plea handed to King Sigismund I (1505–1548): “Ad Querelam mercatorum Cracoviensium responsum Judaeorum de mercatura,” in which statistic evidence reveals that, after clothmakers and furriers, goldsmiths were in third place. In 1857, the “statistic calendar” of the Kingdom of Poland cited the number of Jewish goldsmiths in the kingdom, excluding Warsaw, as 533.

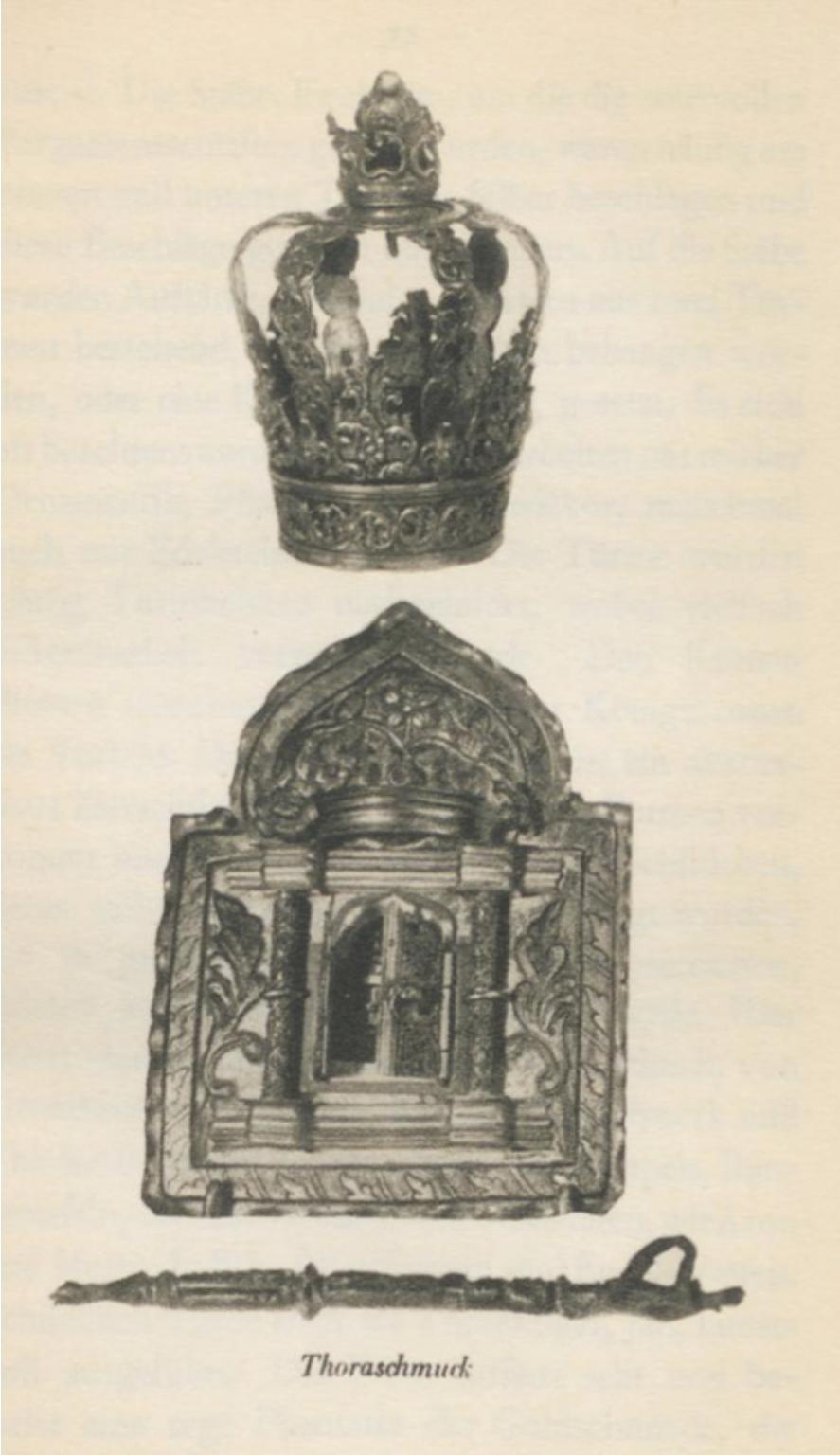
Many worked predominantly on making ritual objects and advanced to become true masters of their craft. The manifold shapes and artistic execution of the various objects testify to a skill that went beyond that of a mere craftsman, revealing the rich imagination in the design of decorative and symbolic embellishments.

The Torah required a number of different items. The poles, the *etz chaim*, on which the precious written parchment is rolled, were frequently fitted with silver objects at the top and bottom decorated with chased or repoussé work. Finials, *rimonim*, generally comprising two towers hung with little bells, or a crown—a *keter thora*—were fixed to the poles. These are often remarkable examples of goldsmithery with rich ornamentation, decorative plants and animals, sometimes also incorporating precious stones. The towers were often modeled on spires and, in many examples, include filigree work. Imperial or royal crowns occasionally served as models. The Torah shield, the *tass*, is a decorative ornamental shield which appears in all shapes and sizes and ranges from a small, amulette-like shield, of which several are hung on a Torah scroll, to a large, ostentatious and richly decorated, highly precious object. In these, the most interesting combination of ornaments, pillars, and crowns, interlaced embellishments and depictions of animals, objects from the Temple, tablets of the covenant, as well as human figures including Aaron and Moses, Judith, knights and angels’s faces can be found. On top of these, the Torah pointer, the *yad*, was similarly artistically executed. Shapes vary

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1 Schwarz, Karl: Die Juden in der Kunst, Berlin 1928, pp. 73–82.

considerably and testify to the fantasy of the goldsmiths who carried out such work in miniature. For smaller Torah scrolls in poorer congregations and for use on week days, pointers were carved in wood.



*Thoraschmuck*

fig. 1: Torah ornamentations.

These are often quite crude and primitive, but more delicately worked examples exist as well. Silver pointers were frequently gilded and the hand with its outstretched index finger, added to the lower end, fashioned in stone, a precious stone, glass or coral. There are also some examples carved completely out of coral, amber, bone or ivory and decorated with ornaments and figures. Spice or besamim boxes were generally made of silver and exist in countless different shapes. They were made in the form of flowers or fruits and, in many cases, towers. Small hanging boxes were also made, often with filigree work, frequently even including grotesque shapes, with besamim boxes in the form of the most extraordinary of objects.

Kiddush and Havdalah cups as well as Seder cups with chasing and repoussé work were richly decorated with floral patterns and inscriptions. Etrog boxes for storing the fruit were artistically made in the shapes of cans, bowls, small containers or the fruit itself. Exquisitely worked silver *megillah* cases can similarly be found. Covers for prayer books were also made in silver as well as many other objects serving ritual purposes, such as circumcision instruments fashioned in precious metals and artistically decorated by hand. Wealthy Jews had silver containers made which are equally richly chased, with repoussé work or engravings, in which *tefillin* are kept—little boxes containing specific prayers, fixed to the head and arms, for use at weekday morning prayers.

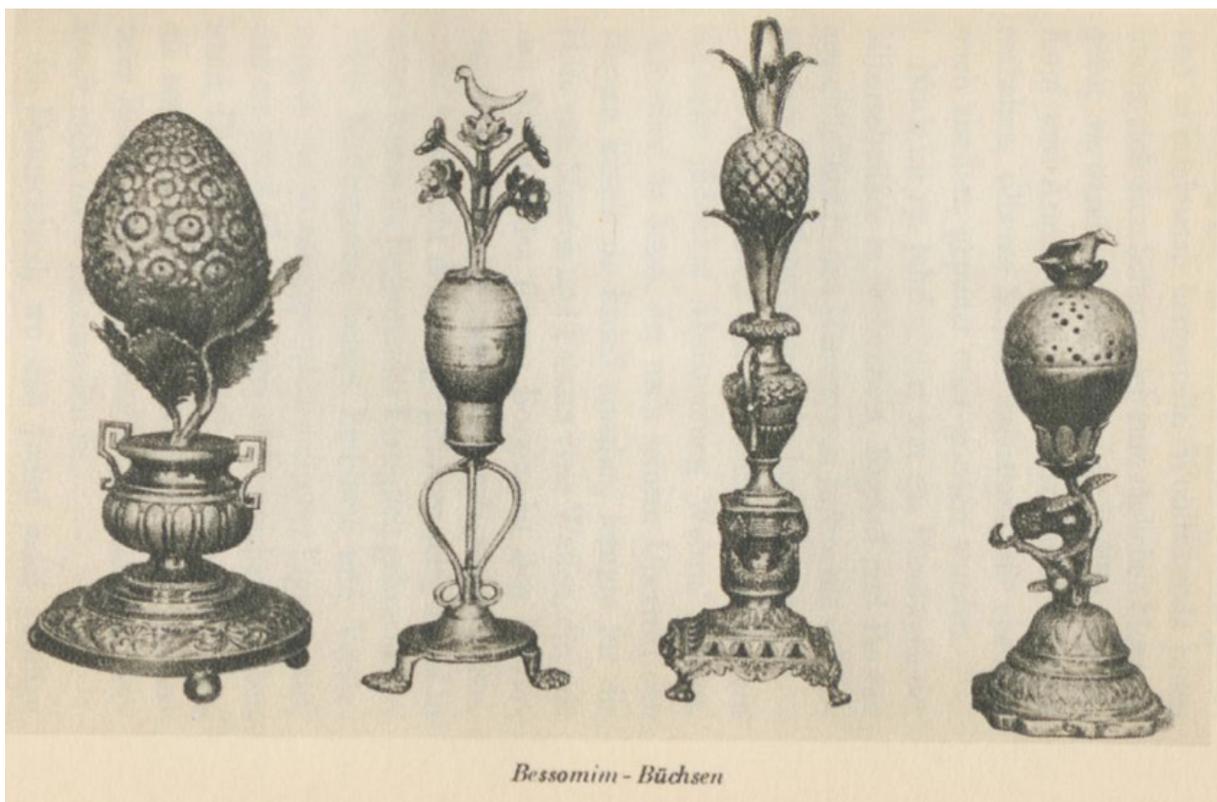


fig. 2: Spice boxes.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the silversmith craft in South Arabia, Baghdad, and Persia was exclusively in the hands of Jews who excelled in creating decorations for weapons.

One artist of Jewish heritage working in the field of weapon engraving gained world fame. Salomone das Sessa, who assumed the name Ercole de Fedeli after his forced conversion to Christianity, made many weapons for the courts of Mantua and Ferrara, which—like the sword of Cesare Borgia—are among the most outstanding masterpieces of the Renaissance.

He will not have been the only one who reached such a significant level of skill in this field of art. Many ritual objects have emblems and ornamentation of such a decidedly Jewish style that could not have been fashioned by someone of a different religion. The laws governing guilds, however, forbade Jews from adding their master silversmith's stamp as a hallmark. As a result, the origin of such works cannot be ascertained.

In Germany, where Jews were forbidden from practicing the craft of any guild until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were also no Jewish goldsmiths.

Ritual objects were also made of copper, brass, and pewter, especially brass candelabra and objects used in synagogues for washing, Shabbat lamps, Seder bowls or Purim and Havdalah plates. According to Obadiah from Bartenura in his descriptions of his travels, there were Jewish coppersmiths in Palermo in 1488. At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Poland, larger numbers could be found including the especially outstanding coppersmith artist, Baruch of Pogrebishche, who was active in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and who made the two famous lamps which can still be seen in the wooden synagogue there to this day.

Lamps played a special role in the synagogue as well as in the private home. In the house of god the eternal light, the *Ner tamid*, burned, as laid down in the commandment in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Book of Moses. It was generally hung in front of the Aron Hakodesh. In Polish synagogues, however, it was placed in a special niche mostly on the west wall. Characteristic light holders in rows or individual lights were used as *yahrzeit* lamps. Particular value was placed on Hanukkah lamps which are found in two different styles: the eight-branched menorah based on the seven-armed Temple lamp, used primarily in synagogues—especially beautiful examples are the lamps made of brass in the synagogues in Pogrebishche and Padua—and the so-called house menorah, the Hanukkah iron which was hung on the wall. A strip with hollows or small added oil containers was fixed to a backplate like a kind of Blaker lamp as can be seen on wall brackets. These are always decorated with rich ornamentation, symbols, and ritual depictions, as well as figurative embellishments and inscriptions. Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century these have been the most popular and widely produced ritual objects, whereby the fantasy of the artist, goldsmith, and chaser frequently invented the most bizarre objects. Small oil containers were created in the shape of vases, lions, birds or even as chairs and the such like; the casings in the shape of artistic attachments, as portals, as the façades of whole buildings, as fabulous creatures, etc. Synagogues were magically illuminated by the addition of many lamps randomly fixed on the walls. As these were mostly oil lamps the room was bathed in a blurred, mystical light. Devout donors gifted them—the blessing of the light with which the Shabbat and holidays were welcomed in. And in the home, the lady of the house would light the lamps on the table and the Shabbat lamp which—generally made of brass—had branches for oil lights arranged like a star.

Earthenware objects were also made for ritual use. Diverse Seder bowls from Italy bear the signatures of Jewish artisan potters from the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century and the name Azulai, the best known family which carried out this craft over several generations, can be found on such a work of art from Pesaro dating from 1730.

More often than not the ritual objects we are familiar with display the uncertain ability of craftsmen who lacked any systematic training. The exclusion of Jews from social life and the economic development of the Middle Ages also isolated them from all trades organised around guilds. This resulted in their being reliant more and more on themselves and an ever greater backwardness was inevitable. Role models and teachers were lacking. Christian master craftsmen were not allowed to take on Jews and Jews were even forbidden from visiting museums. As a consequence, talented craftsmen developed their own idiosyncratic styles which reflected the mixture of various stylistic forms that they happened to come across by chance. Objects can be found in which Renaissance ornaments are combined with Baroque embellishments and Romanesque animal figures, archaic recollections merged with modern influences with naïve depictions frequently revealing the haplessness of a technically skilled master craftsman who lacked knowledge of different styles.



fig. 3: Silver Hanukkah lamp.

These objects, however, may not always stand up to strict art criticism; they are however perhaps among the most valuable of cultural treasures that medieval Judaism has bequeathed. The spirit of Jewish folk art is alive in such objects. Whether valuable or not, whether made of precious or simple materials is just as unimportant as the purity of their style and the perfection of their execution. They are beautiful due to their simplicity and originality and because they do not intend to be anything else other than what they are. They are objects that were created through a loving devotion for people on whom they lavished affection and for whom they cared.

Many ritual objects, especially from the past three hundred years, have hallmarks or the marks of master craftsmen, and are therefore the works of Christian masters. There are, however, also some examples of objects fashioned by a Christian with engravings and chasing executed by a Jew.

Engraving in metal and on precious stones was an art practiced by Jews in many countries. It was already very widespread in Alexandria and passed from there to other countries, too. Diamond cutting and polishing later became a kind of Jewish monopoly in Antwerp and, to this day, is still largely in Jewish hands. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Moravia and Silesia most engravers were Jewish. The seal maker Levin Josef was paid 1000 thalers by Frederick I of Prussia for cutting the royal coat of arms in a diamond which he “executed very interestingly and artistically, such being difficult to better, through the cutting and polishing of the diamonds; however, they cannot be gouged through fear of splitting the same.” The art of engraving coats of arms as can otherwise be seen among many Jews, was upheld in this family over several generations as the father, the brother and his sons, grandchildren and great-grandchildren bore the title “seal maker to the court with all related immunities, freedom, rights, and justice.”

*(Translation: Christopher Wynne)*