

The First Exhibition of the Art Collection of the Jewish Community Berlin¹

From the report on the opening day

by Moritz Stern

Out of the great wealth of precious material our collection contains, only part of it can be exhibited due to limited space: an exhibition, I assembled from Albert Wolf's donation, from acquisitions made, and from loans from the Community with the addition of several library treasures². A so-called "Guide through the Exhibition," it is to be hoped, will soon provide the necessary orientation. For today, the following overview shall offer a kind of substitute.

Only few antiquities from Palestine can be found in Europe. These are solely owed to excavations. Wolf managed to acquire several that give us insight into private life in ancient Palestine. Reminding us in its shape of the worship in the time of the older kingdom is an idolatry figure (Astarte) from clay, even though it might originate only from the Maccabean period. The subsequent period, when the Second Temple was still in existence, emerges before our mind's eyes thanks to an oil lamp, also from clay. We can see the inventory of Palestinian houses in the Roman period through various valuable glasses, a small gold chain, a little bronze lion, and other items.

A valuable coin collection gradually assembled by Wolf is transferring us into the public life of the Jewish state. It is an excellent visual and educational example for our laypeople, but also a treasure trove for the archeological science; since it forms a complement to the collections of the Münzkabinett (Numismatic Collection) in Berlin and the British Museum in London. After all, in our collection are pieces that are neither recorded by de Saulcy nor by Hill! Here, almost all of them appear before our eyes: the bronze coins of the Hasmonean princes and kings: Simon Makkabi, Johannes Hyrkan, Juda Aristobul, Alexander Jannäus, and Antigonus; of the Herodean rulers Herodes I., Herodes Archelaus, Herodes Antipas, Agrippa I. and II., the Roman coins of the governors, and especially the famous coins of the Jewish Revolt, the silver shekels and half-shekels from the years 66 to 70 BCE with the inscriptions "Yerushalaim kedusha" (Holy Jerusalem) and "Cheruth Zion" (Zion's freedom). The Roman gold denarii and numerous silver and bronze coins of the emperors Vespasian and Titus glorified Rome's victory and the downfall of the Jewish state with the inscription "Judaca capta" and the depiction of a captured mourning Jewess beneath a palm tree. One more time, the small Jewish state revolts against the almighty Rome, and Bar Kochba has his silver and bronze denarii and tetradrachms minted in dedication to Israel's and Jerusalem's redemption and freedom, then the curtain falls in sorrow and death on the last remainder of the Jewish state. The Roman imperial coins

1 Stern, Moritz: Die erste Ausstellung der Kunstsammlung der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin. Aus dem am Eröffnungstage erstatteten Berichte, in: *ibid.*: Die Kunstsammlung der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin. Mitteilungen zur Eröffnung der Sammlung, Berlin 1917, pp. 11–26.

2 Exhibited are rare books (5 Hebrew incunables, 8 writings on the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn dispute, 2 writings by Reuchlin on Hebrew grammar and diacritics, Hebrew Bible 1517), illuminated prints (German Bible 1483, Pesach Haggadoth 1629/30, among others) and collotypes of Bible- and Talmud manuscripts, etc.

for the Palestinian cities and the coins Palestine's autonomous cities minted themselves illustrate the country's history during the initial post-Christian centuries, while at the end, the Varia department is guiding us once again through Greek and Syrian coins back to the time of the Seleucid rulers and, on the other hand, through crusader coins from the Christian kings of Jerusalem deep into the Middle Ages. Thus, our coin collection encompasses a period of fourteen centuries of the history of the Holy Land and bestows a wealth of instruction on anyone who knows how to read and to contemplate. –

Outwardly related to the Jewish coins of antiquity even though entirely distinct in their nature from them are the medals or—as they are now called—the medallions of Judaism. From the beginning of the 16th century, they guide us into the present age of the World War and constitute in their totality a possession as cannot be found in any other museum, in any art collection in such completeness. This collection is inarguably a sight worth seeing. I was already able to complement it in various directions and strive to continue its expansion. The fact that the study of medals is an abundant source for the knowledge of history has been acknowledged in recent times; however, who would have anticipated that there are so many and such beautiful medals that have been minted in honor of a broad range of individuals, institutions, and events in the context of Judaism!

Obviously, the small group of medals on “Biblical figures and events” cannot teach us anything new, but individual medallions, such as the 16th century Joachimsthaler, greatly captivate our artistic interest. But then follows the long line of medals printed in honor of individuals of Jewish creed and Jewish origin. To name just a few: the philosopher Mendelssohn, the philologist Theodor Gomperz, the physicians Karl Weigert, Paul Ehrlich, and Sigmund Freud, the politicians Gabriel Rießer, Adolphe Crémieux, Ferdinand Lassalle, and Karl Marx, the philanthropist Moses Montefiore, the industrial magnates Ludwig Loewe und Wilhelm Herz, the banker Daniel Itzig and the various Rothschilds, the poets and writers Ludwig Börne, Heinrich Heine, Salomon von Mosenthal, Ludwig August Frankl von Hochwart, the composers Giacomo Meyerbeer, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Jacques Offenbach, Anton Rubinstein, Karl Goldmark, and Ignaz Brüll, the architects Samuel Jesi, Max Fleischer, and Oskar Marmorek, the painter Jozef Israels, the musicians and singers Giuditta Pasta, Joseph Joachim, and Hermann Levi, the actors Elisa Rachel-Felix, Adolf von Sonnenthal, and Ludwig Barnay. Wherever we look, our eyes are captivated, whether by the portrait's artistic execution or by the depictions or texts symbolizing the significance of the individuals or explaining the reason for the minting.

Usually, the celebration of a jubilee provides the external reason for the minting. This applies also to the following group, the medallions in honor of Jewish institutions. Medals were minted honoring synagogues, schools, and foundations. Frequently, already the inauguration of these institutions provided the occasion for minting. Thus, large Jewish communities in Munich, Frankfurt a. M., Cologne, and Amsterdam, but also smaller ones such as Teplice, Szeged, Bordeaux, and Vercelli have not missed the opportunity to immortalize in medals their synagogues' construction and later their anniversaries. Thus, as early as in 1791, the Jewish Wilhelmsschule in Breslau and, in recent times, the two Jewish high schools in Frankfurt a.M. and even the Lämél School in Jerusalem had medallions minted. The same was done by charitable foundations such as the Israelitisches Vorschußinstitut and the Heine Hospital in Hamburg in 1841 and later on by several orphanages and old-age homes in Germany and the Netherlands.

With such abundant medal minting in honor of individuals and institutions, it is only natural that also individual sorrowful and joyful historical events have found their immortalization in silver and copper. One lamented in 1711 the fire on Judengasse in Frankfurt a.M., but one equally rejoiced in 1745 when Maria Theresa rescinded her edict intended to expel the Jews from Bohemia. The Edict of Tolerance of Emperor Joseph II was celebrated in 1782 with a medal as was the 1808 emancipation of the Jews of the Kingdom of Westphalia and shortly before, the memorable assembly of the Grand Sanhedrin summoned to Paris by Napoleon in 1807. We own a medal the Russian Jews had minted in 1805 in gratitude for Emperor Alexander I's Jew-friendly legislation and also a similar medal endowed by Italian Jews in 1848 in honor of their defender Roberto d'Azeglio, and a third one from the American Jews on the 250-year-celebration of the first settlement of Jews in the United States in 1905. Thus, all countries are represented, everywhere has grateful sentiment immortalized itself in metal.

Placed at the end of the medal collection, quasi as appendage, were non-Jewish medals by Jewish medalists as since the 18th century, Jews have been active in the service of the medalists' art and done commendable work in this realm. I need only mention from the 18th century, the Schwerin medalists Philipp Aron, Abraham Aron, and Meier Löser, the Berlin court medalists Jacob Abram and Abraham Abramson, and from the 19th century, Jakob, Karl, and Leopold Wiener of Brussels. –

The Jews' pursuit of engraving and hardstone carving (Steinschneiden) goes back to antiquity. In Germany, engraving was among the few trades Jews were legally permitted to practice. In almost every larger Jewish community there were one or several Jewish makers of seals. The frequency of the name "Steinschneider" attests to this. Albert Wolf has collected a great number of seals and signets. Probably the most interesting one because of its aristocratic Jewish owner is the silver leaf seal of Jakob Batsevi von Treuenberg in Prague from 1623. There are further older seals from Prague: the old community seal from steel with the inscription "Sigillum antiquae communitatis Pragensium Judeorum," the brass seal of the former Jewish court of Prague with the inscription "Israelitische Oberjuristen in Prag," the steel seal of the local Jewish butchers' guild, the brass seal of the Israelite boys' orphanage, etc. Particularly noted among the donations and acquisitions that have been added to Wolf's seal collection should be the brass seal of the former Jewish court in Altona.

There have been Jewish goldsmiths in almost all countries and at all times, yet, it remains an open question whether the golden wedding bands from the 15th to the 18th centuries included in Wolf's collection issue from Jews or Christians. In any case, these pieces of jewelry with their ornaments and attached little temples constitute valuable inventory, on which our gaze may rest with justified delight.

Wrought silver and engraving combined are presented to us in the two large cups of the Berlin Chevra Kadisha. Privy councilor Geiger has noted in 1871 in his *Geschichte der Juden in Berlin* that as benefactors of the burial society Gemilut hasadim, various persons are named on a still extant cup probably manufactured in 1726. All investigations regarding this cup remained futile until my efforts to expand our art collection with ritual objects from Berlin synagogues brought about a pleasant surprise. In a cabinet in the New Synagogue, the searched for cup was found and not just this one from 1734, but also another one from 1777, large association cups made from heavy silver with numerous mounted escutcheons displaying the engraved names of the founders and members: both of them now showpieces of our collection.-

The objects primarily manufactured by Jewish artisans are those specific to Judaism: the ritual objects for synagogue and home. Anyone wishing to get acquainted with them must visit our houses of worship and observe the ritual devices in use here. As yet, these items are not just museum objects. Therefore, our collection is only minor in this regard. Only those pieces are considered for this purpose that are no longer in use due to their age or have fallen out of use due to the change in shapes or are only of historic or artisanal interest. However, it shall be among the tasks of our collection to acquaint a broader public with outstanding synagogal treasures of art—that cannot be appreciated in the houses of worship due to lack of time and opportunity—in the rooms of our Art Collection through items on loan. Drawing attention among the exhibited ritual objects are the cups, boxes, jugs, plates, candlesticks, curtains, and wimpels. Particularly elaborate is a small silver filigree spice tower from the 17th century, two-storied with a spire, with six figures of musicians and little flags and rosettes. Older but simpler and characteristic because of its place of origin is a small, flat, square, silver spice box from Assuan in Egypt. Seven valuable Hannukah lamps come from Italy and Poland from the 16th till the 18th century in silver, bronze, brass, and wood, each piece with its unique character. The brass Hannukah lamp surpasses all the other in size and weight; it is still in use here at the Old Synagogue and was donated in 1713 by Aaron Isaak, the first head of the community, and his wife to the then newly built synagogue. An impressive piece of the art of brass-and-bronze founding in Berlin, which upon my request, after I had determined its manufacturing date, the chairman of the Old Synagogue gave our Art Collection on loan. While until now it had served solely ritual purposes, its great value unrecognized, this splendid Hannukah lamp has now moved from the venerable rooms of the old house of worship into the bright daylight of public life, receiving only now its full appreciation.

We owe two more loans to the Old Synagogue: A valuable Torah curtain with abundant silver embroidery, which was donated in 1764 on the occasion of the synagogue's fiftieth anniversary by the first head and Oberlandesältester Daniel Itzig, and a second, even older and more valuable Torah curtain, which I requested from the chairman of the synagogue: it was donated by no one less than King Frederick William I. Both curtains are still in use in religious services. The latter is used only for Simchat Torah, the feast of rejoicing in the law; strangely, until now, it was called at times the Turks' flag or Turks' carpet, at times the gift of old Fritz. Still, the report in König's *Annalen der Juden in der Mark Brandenburg* (annals of the Jews in the Margraviate of Brandenburg) should have sufficed to teach the correct story; here it is told that in 1714, on the occasion of the inauguration of the new synagogue, the Jews had received from the territorial lordship a valuable silken cover of particular beauty that had been woven under the rule of Prince-Elector Johann Georg. Hence, this is a present from King Frederick William I. to the Jewish Community and not a Turkish flag, but a silk carpet made under the rule of Johann Georg. In fact, it is embroidered with the Brandenburg coat of arms and beneath it, we can read: "Initium sapientiae timor Domini 1590. - I fear the Lord in all things.[sic!]" With this assessment and recognition, a magnificent masterpiece has been added to Brandenburg's history of art and it is a delightful adornment of our collection that deserves a visit all of its own. The carpet was made in 1590 for the elector's hunting lodge, which is indicated by the embroidered images of animals and hunting scenes. The Jewish Community had a royal crown and a Hebrew inscription sewn on the silk cover, lengthened the entire piece, top and bottom, with velvet seams, added small

bells on top, and the Torah curtain was ready. Now it will delight the eyes and hearts of our Art Collection's visitors in the months when it is not used at the synagogue.

The cursory overview I have offered so far included antiquities and artworks from clay, glass, wood, metal, and textiles. Still requiring a brief appreciation is the collection of the graphic arts as far as they are displayed in the current exhibition.

In the group of illustrated manuscripts, 122 interesting colorized pen and ink drawings for the Pentateuch must be emphasized that originate from 16th-century Italy. In 1521, the Council of Ten in Venice granted the Jewish painter Mose de Castellazzo and his sons, who had studied the art of woodcut, the privilege to have the Five Books of Moses including woodcut images printed. It is possible that the pen and ink drawings acquired by Wolf served as preparatory work for this publication that likely was never executed. Also belonging to 16th-century Venice is the Hebrew prayer book with colorful drawings written by a woman. Written in a Northern Italian community with German rite in the mid-15th century are four sheets of a Machzor for the New Year's Day with splendid, gold-coated, colorful initials. The viceroy of Egypt presented them to his personal physician Dr. Schledehans, and Wolf has acquired them at an auction in Munich in 1905. Interestingly, now ahead of the opening of the Art Collection, seven more sheets of this artistically designed prayer book have been offered to us. It is to be hoped that these sheets, too, will enter our collection whether through acquisition or donation. We would hereby obtain a treasure that offers a wealth of instruction for the history of Jewish manuscript illumination.³ Also from Italy is the precious marriage contract issued in Rivarolo near Mantua in 1727, abundantly framed in colors, gold, and silver and containing several illustrations of Biblical stories and Psalm 168. An unsurpassable calligraphic masterpiece from Poland is a copy of Chaim Vital's Kabbalist work *Etz Chaim* with adorned letters and numerous full-page pen and ink drawings created at the beginning of the 19th century. The time and effort, the diligence and skill that were devoted to the adornment of this manuscript are unbelievable. What rare self-denial this diligent scribe of Torah scrolls must have exercised who has spent day and night with the calligraphy of this to him holy book of Kabbalah! And this self-sacrificing artist has not even left behind his name to the marveling and admiring posterity!

From Wolf's extensive picture collection, which holds valuable material, I have selected for this year's exhibition portraits of notable Jewish personalities from the 16th to the early 19th century. Copper engravings, etchings, and mezzotints, also drawings with pen and ink, sanguine, and watercolor offer abundant occasion for the enjoyment of art and, through the individuals depicted, an instructive contribution to the knowledge of Jewish intellectual life and Jewish cultural activity. A second exhibition will show eminent Jewish men and women of the 19th century, especially in Berlin, a third will assemble our historic pictures, a fourth, synagogues and cemeteries, a fifth will present types and costumes, and a sixth—and it will certainly not be the last—the works of Jewish illustrators and painters. Unfortunately, as tempting as this might be, I have to refrain from going into greater detail about several items of the picture exhibition. At least, some names such as Zacutus Lusitanus, Leon

³ The wish expressed above was fulfilled immediately after the lecture. A member of the audience provided the amount necessary to purchase the seven sheets. Sincere thanks are given here to the noble donor publicly who does not wish to be named.

Templo, Manasse ben Israel, Baruch Spinoza, David Oppenheimer, Moses Mendelssohn, Salomon Maimon, David Friedländer, Israel Jacobsohn, Anselm Maier von Rothschild should be mentioned.

There is only one person we cannot and will not pass by so silently: Moses Mendelssohn, the German Sokrates, the defender and intellectual liberator of German Jewry. His portraits hang exactly in the middle of the row of portraits: an engraving by Bause after Anton Graff, an engraving by Müller after Johann Christoph Frisch with the caption: “Most humbly dedicated to King Frederick William II by the Jüdische Freischule in Berlin 1787,” an engraving by Haas also after Frisch, and an original sanguine drawing by Daniel Chodowiecki. Next to it, among all these eighty engravings, is an odd sight: an oil painting of Mendelssohn. It is not from Wolf, but has been in the ownership of our Community for a long time. Until now, it was regarded as the original picture painted by Graff. This, however, was quite impossible since Graff’s original is hanging in the university library in Leipzig. But neither is it a copy. Upon my suggestion, I received the picture as temporary loan to the Art Collection. A thorough investigation revealed another lucky surprise. A comparison of the available engravings by Graff and Frisch immediately showed that the oil painting is not by Graff but by Frisch and that Johann Gotthard Müller’s engraving was created after the latter in 1786; moreover, further investigation even revealed the oil painting to be the long and painfully missed original created by the director of the Berlin Academy of Arts around 1770. Thus the opening of the Art Collection has brought us a discovery that is significant for art history and for Mendelssohn’s biography: the retrieval of Frisch’ original, the best portrait of Mendelssohn. It entered our Community’s holdings in 1840 from David Friedländer’s estate.

Love, kindness, and gentleness can be gleaned from the features of the original that glows and shines as if the painter’s hand had put down the brush only yesterday. Johann Kaspar Lavater has aptly described Mendelssohn’s head: “An affable, luminous soul in the piercing gaze, a good, fatherly, confidence-inspiring face full of bonhomie and ingenuousness.” Tassaert’s marble bust, which stands in the Community board’s conference room, definitely belongs to this oil painting. What effect Tassaert’s masterpiece might have in combination with Frisch’ masterpiece! The Community board was kind enough to grant my request to temporarily loan the marble bust to the Art Collection. Thus, this wonderful work, this animated, expressive marble is now enthroned in the midst of the portraits, with Ramler’s inscription on its pedestal: “Moses Mendelssohn, born in Dessau in 1729 of Jewish parents. A sage like Socrates, true to the ancestors’ laws, teaching immortality, immortal like him.”

Professor Georg Benjamin Mendelssohn wrote in his biographical introduction to Moses Mendelssohn’s *Gesammelte Schriften* (Collected Writings) that Tassaert had crafted this bust five or six years before Mendelssohn’s death; this would be around 1780. This information is wrong, the back of the bust displays the date 1785. Several of Mendelssohn’s friends had joined together one year before his death and commissioned the then director of the Prussian Academy of Arts Johann Peter Anton Tassaert to create a marble bust of Moses Mendelssohn. The artist received for his marble work and for thirty plaster casts a honorarium of 80 Friedrich d’or. Ownership of the bust, immediately described as “very similar,” was transferred to the Jüdische Freischule.

With his Mendelssohn bust, Tassaert has created with his chisel an artwork acknowledged both by contemporaries as well as posterity. That which was inscribed in the noble face of the short, plain Moses

and that which Lavater wished to read in the plastic representation: the inquiring mind, the seer's prophetic force, purity of heart, depth of mind, humility—all this, the last representative of the Dutch art school in Germany has expressed in our bust. Unity, harmony, wisdom are reflected in all features. Mendelssohn seems to open his mouth as if wishing to delight us with his lenient worldly wisdom, with his critical sharpness of mind, with some pearl from the depth of his soul.

Here is the highlight of our exhibition. Here is a place of peace, of recovery, of inner bliss derived from the enjoyment of art. Of Moses Mendelssohn his biographer says: "Everything in his writings is light." May Mendelssohn's spirit hover over our library and art collection, may both become a source of scholarly insight and art appreciation, a source of light, enlightenment, instruction for all.

(Translation: Lilian Dombrowski)