

The Menorah of the Hanukka Feast¹

By Erich Töplitz (*Frankfurt a. M.*)

The illustrations are from the exemplary sample collection of the Gesellschaft zur Erforschung jüdischer Kunstdenkmäler, Frankfurt a. M.

Editor's Preface

With this series of articles, we wish to acquaint our readers with the newest research on Jewish monuments of art. By means of exhibitions and occasional publications, investigations into Judaica objects have already been going on since the end of the last century. These works were consolidated and generously made accessible to the general public by the Gesellschaft zur Erforschung jüdischer Kunstdenkmäler, which was established by Mr. Frauberger, the director of the Düsseldorf Kunstgewerbemuseum (museum of applied arts) in 1896. As is the case when entering uncharted scientific territory, encyclopedic anthologies and explanatory volumes were at the start; the notes and *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft* are initially drawn up in this sense. Already Volume V/VI tried to go beyond and cover a more specific field (decorated Hebrew letters); Volume VII/VIII moved on to examine several types of synagogues. Following the turmoil of war, the intention now is to analyze the inner structure of the abundant collected material, which, at the same time, is expected to help explicate *pars pro toto* Jewish cultural history through the ages. Thus, besides purely literary reports, we want to provide our readers with a diversified and impressive picture of the Jewish past through portrayals of the material aspects of Jewish culture.²

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Hannukah is called both by the Talmud as well as by Josephus the Festival of Illumination resp. the Festival of Lights, and to this day, the kindling of the eight-flamed lamp is its distinguishing mark. In the age of technology, this custom is no longer as striking as it used to be in earlier times; we are surrounded by a sea of lights on a daily basis, and the mysterious miracle that the natural brightness of the day can be replaced by an artificial light means little to us. Yet, light still plays a large role in our customs, the more so as we Jews have a particularly subtle understanding of all differences and, therefore, know to appreciate the appeal arising from the distinctness of brightness and darkness. The rays of the Shabbat lamp announce the start of the day of rest at the end of the week and the start of the holidays. The housewife covers the newly lit flames with her hands and while slowly removing them, she delights during the blessing in the bright shine. At the end of Shabbat, the *paterfamilias* makes the separation—*havdalah*—between the holy and the mundane, between light and darkness, etc. The light

1 Töplitz, Erich: Die Menorah des Chanukafestes, in: *Menorah. Jüdisches Familienblatt für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur*, vol. 2 (1924), no. 2 (February 1924), pp. 2–6.

2 Illustrations after depictions from the collection of the *Gesellschaft zur Erforschung jüdischer Kunstdenkmäler* in Frankfurt a. M.

in commemoration of the deceased is upheld also by assimilated circles, and there is no synagogue without the Eternal Light, which according to tradition is linked to the lamp of the tabernacle and the Temples.

The rekindling of this lamp gave rise to our Festival of Lights. Throughout all times, Hannukah as the Festival of Lights has asserted itself wherever Jewish customs were upheld, and the Hannukah menorah is represented in every Jewish home in one or more exemplars.

The largest exhibition of menorahs was held in London at the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition whose excellent catalog³ is still the best reference book on these objects to date. It should be noted here that stylistic-historical classifications will not always stand up to current assessments; hence, it is recommended to consider only the indicated maker's marks within the reservations⁴ commonly applicable to Judaica objects. Under the same conditions, the catalog⁵ of the Strauß collection, now at the Musée Cluny in Paris, is still of significance even though the number of menorahs is not particularly large. On the holdings of the Jewish museum in Vienna, the catalog⁶ on hand provides rather vague information, on the holdings of the Jewish museum in Berlin, we are slightly better informed through several articles in "Ost und West,"⁷ the catalog for the new collection in Frankfurt am Main is still pending. In all smaller and larger museums there are several Jewish pieces, thus far, these collections, with the exception of that of the National Museum in Washington,⁸ have never been described extensively so that we are not informed about the menorahs in these places. Nor are any descriptions of the large private collections known so far, several depictions can be found in the "Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft zur Erforschung jüdischer Kunstdenkmäler."⁹ Kurt Freyer once reported in the "Chanukkabuch"¹⁰ on the art form of the menorah, however, this essay is based on too scant material to be exhaustive.

If we wish to trace the development of the menorah over the centuries, we have to first bring to mind that the abundance of extant types cannot be categorized solely according to stylistic-historical aspects. Not only in Jewish but also in Christian sacred art, old stylistic forms have been upheld for centuries despite not having been applied long since in secular art. Even though Jews may have been at all times much more conservative than their surroundings, a fact that can be evidenced not only in their artistic but also religious and philosophical creations, the conservative trait in their sacred art is not such a particular oddity. However, given the swaying to and fro, it is impossible for the researcher

3 Catalogue of the Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition, Jacobs and Wolf, London 1888.

4 Since Jews were prohibited from signing their works, they oftentimes had them signed by Christian masters; hence, determination of time and place according to maker's marks is at times misleading. Even so, they provide a *tempus ad quam*.

5 Collection de M. Strauss. Description des Objects d'Art Religieux Hébraïques, Stenne. Poissy 1878.

6 Guide through the Jewish museum, published by the advisory board, Vienna 1906.

7 *Ost und West*, 1922, V/VI.

8 The Collection of Jewish Ceremonial Objects in the United States National Museum, Adler-Casanowicz, Washington 1908.

9 Issue III to IV, p. 39 to 47.

10 Moaus Zur, Berlin 1918.

to attempt a definitive localization of the known objects as is partially possible in the examination of Hebrew letters. Even though styles always display certain similarities to those of the hosting populations, famous types have found imitators everywhere, not to mention donations and sales that, especially in the past hundred years, have frequently erased all traces.



From the collection Figdor–Vienna

Hence, in this first attempt to describe the development of the menorah, one has to start with the function itself. With the extant types, the evolvement of the menorah from simple wall lamp to abundantly adorned equipment of splendor can be demonstrated, a development that is actually in line with the few reliable age determinations and localizations available to date.

The liturgical provisions and religious regulations show the menorah to be a mainly domestic ceremonial device; this shall be discussed first. Its task is defined by the commanded eight lights and the required shamash,¹¹ it is expanded by the requirement to display the lights as visible as possible to the surroundings; in addition to the eight burners and the higher-positioned shamash, there is a reflector. The ritual provisions also inform us about the material that can be used. Clay should be

¹¹ Serves for lighting purposes in the surroundings of the menorah to prevent its light from being used for profane purposes.

avoided since it turns unsightly already after onetime usage and, therefore, each time a new lamp should be used; a practice that might be a bit too costly. Anyone able to afford it should preferably select a precious metal for the performance of the religious commandment, in honor of the law and of the day. Accordingly, lamps from clay have been used only rarely; a few samples have survived from rather uneducated rural communities in Hesse. They are designed similarly to the ink jars from rural potteries; they display at times also the same, that is, Christian-secular decorations, and stand out only through their crude workmanship and enamel. Most lamps are made either from bronze or yellow metal, in rarer cases from pewter or silver. The same types consist at times from one material then again from another so that only examination of the original can allow for precise findings; unfortunately, photographs have to be used most of the time since the originals are scattered in museums and private collections around the world. At least it is possible to say that the cast lamps are almost always from bronze, yellow metal, or pewter; the pewter lamps never feature openwork backplates, which are very frequent in those made from bronze and yellow metal. Chased backplates are usually from silver, more rarely from bronze and yellow metal; however, attached or added figures are mostly cast whatever the material used.

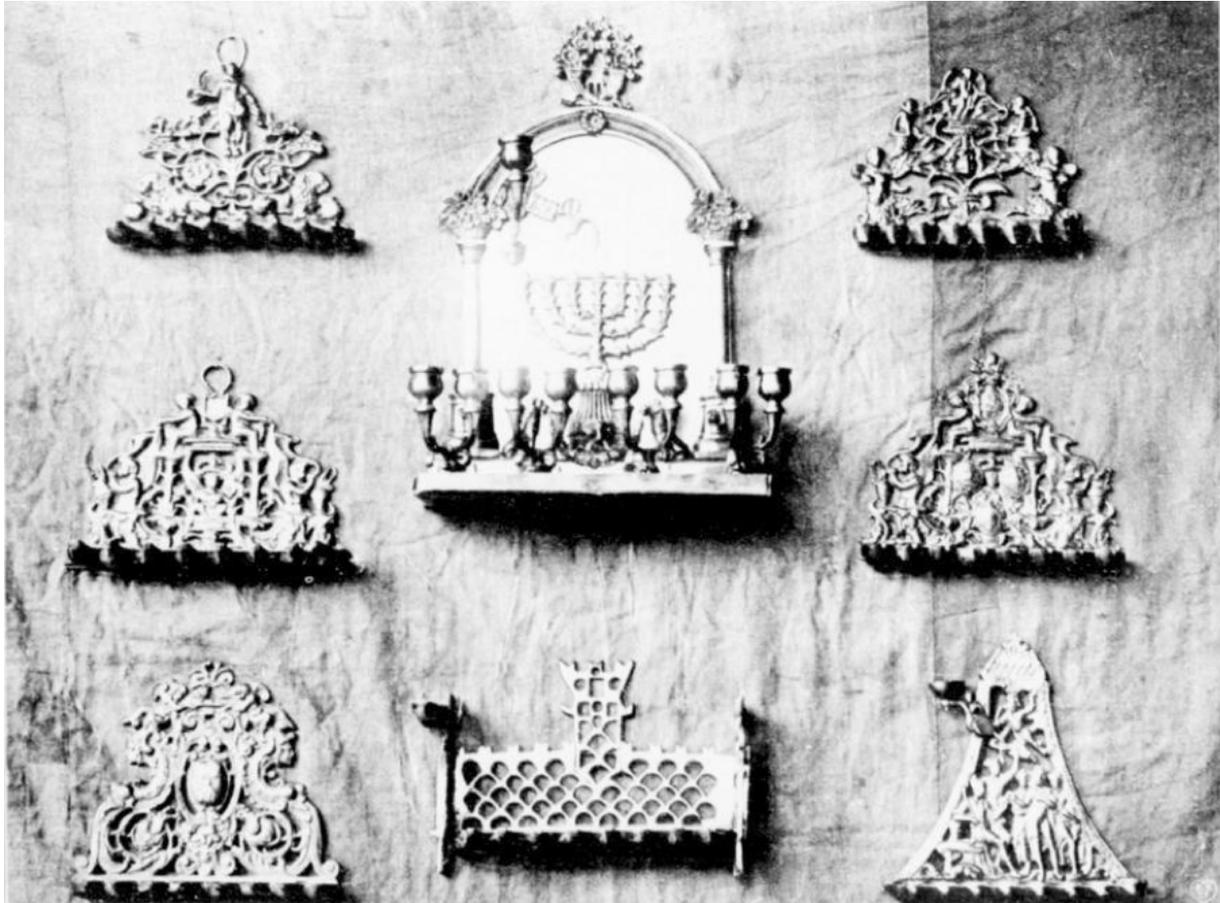
So far, no menorah is known from Palestine since the clay lamp with the eight nozzles depicted in the Jew.-Encycl. features no Jewish emblems pointing to a specifically Jewish use. Nothing is known about the site of its finding; hence, there is no reason to take this clay lamp for a menorah just because of the eight burners. Contradicting the assumption of this being a menorah is the material, which, as mentioned above, the Talmud did not exactly consider recommendable in late antiquity, the period in which it probably was created. Neither was it so far possible to find any Hannukah lamps from the Babylonian and Asian cultural regions; in case of several early objects, one might consider Spanish provenance. Also regarding early Ashkenazic menorahs, we derive knowledge only by means of few items; more exemplars exist only from later periods: whenever possible, information on the origins will be supplied each time. Any differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazic lamps, like those between other cultural assets of these two groups, have not yet emerged; only in Holland, the burners have apparently been occasionally arranged in a semicircle instead of in a straight line (see AJEH nos. 1731 and 1743).

The simplest menorah consists of a bar fitted with eight lamps, which already features a safeguard to catch the dripping oil, the backplate is missing (Nat-Mus. Wash, no. 112). The earliest shape of a backplate is a triangle, it appears on menorah AJHE no. 1914, which supposedly is from the 13th century and was found in Lyon.¹² The backplate is adorned with a frame-like decoration, beneath which a window row is discernible. The previous item, AJEH no. 1913, features a quote from Prov. 6:23: "For the commandment is a lamp, the teaching is a light;" otherwise, both objects are of the same type.

Hundred years younger is the lamp in the Figdor-Vienna collection, which displays three medallions, in the upper one there is a kind of dragon, the two lower ones feature a lion each, beneath is the quote from Prov. 6:23, and below is a row of columns. An enrichment of form appears in a triangular

¹² In determinations of date and place, the possibility of later copies in the appropriate style, which could have been made also in a different place, is left out of consideration.

backplate that replaces the straight edging with a somewhat curved border. The decoration here is always the same, beneath a mussel roof is always a vase from which a flame leaps upward, a lion on each side, beneath the Bible quote. These items can be found in numerous collections (for instance, AJEH no. 1913 in Berlin and at the Guggenheim), they seem to have been manufactured in Italy in the 16th century. There



From the collection Guggenheim - Venice

exists a very interesting example of this older type at the Laibach museum, in which the narrow shape of the triangle has already been expanded by two warrior figures attached to the left and right. Later, in keeping with contemporary taste, the backplate was pierced and masks, putti, cornucopias, and all sorts of strapwork were added while the mussel roof and Bible quote were omitted.



Bologna / bronze / yellow brass

All menorahs that are stylistically as well as in their formal repertoire clearly identifiable as representatives of the Italian Renaissance can be derived from this more recent type (see Guggenheim-Venice collection, I. and II.) In their artistic creations, Italian Jews, mostly Sephardim, were less remote from their surroundings than, for instance, German Jews, hence, the assessment in the AJHE catalog that no. 1911/12 was “un-Jewish” seems to be somewhat partial. Moreover, these putti, dolphins, Medusa heads, nymphs, centaurs, and other mythical creatures were decorations common at the time, about which no Renaissance person would think differently than about strapwork (Guggenheim collection, II. center) that can be also found occasionally. These strapwork decorations might lead to the assumption that these are Ashkenazic works especially since much less samples of them have become known (for the Sephardic, see AJHE no. 1717, signed “Pereira”). Unfortunately, there are no clues supporting this obvious hypothesis. Without exception, the Renaissance-like pieces belong to Italy where they were manufactured from the early 16th century until the end of the 17th century. The oldest ones still display the strict triangle shape, which gradually fades giving way to a horizontal rectangle. For this type, the menorah in the Turin museum is the most distinctive example; the backplate is adorned at the center with putti with a vase, a few dolphins with human torso, a cornucopia in the mouth, and caryatids—to the right with a shamash—sideways (Mitt. III/IV, p. 43). In the course of the development, the horizontal rectangle turns into a vertical with a round-arched upper border, the decoration changes just slightly: genii with palm branches, angels with coats of arms, crowns, dragons, flowers cornucopias, lion jaws, flower vases, later joined by strapwork and draperies. Hereby, we have already reached the mid-18th century and left Italy since these

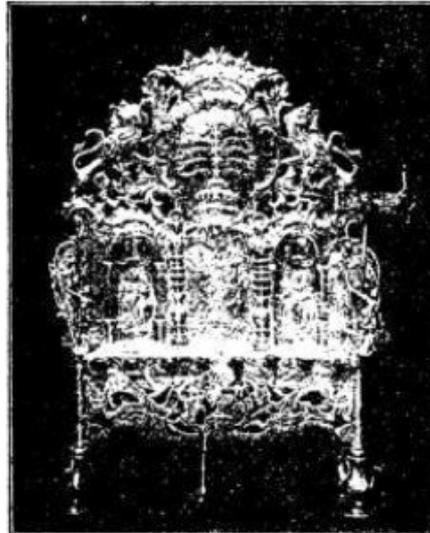


Back part of a Maccabean lamp, painted iron, Florence

pieces can also be found in Holland and England, that is, in areas outside Italy though still Sephardic. However, before we follow another series of types, it seems desirable to look at a late work of Jewish folk art in Italy that used to be in Florence and is now in the Kirschstein collection Berlin. Here, the known motifs are expanded by a fountain that is carried by winged horses and from which dragons are drinking. The fountain of life is a known and frequently depicted symbol of the Torah, the attachment on the menorah recalls the quote from Prov. 6:23, which we already know; the dragons could be seen as personifications of the church, to whose animosities the Jews of Italy had been exposed even longer than other Jews.



Bologna / Bronze / yellow copper



Maccabean lamp Menorah Frankfurt a. M. 1791, chased silver

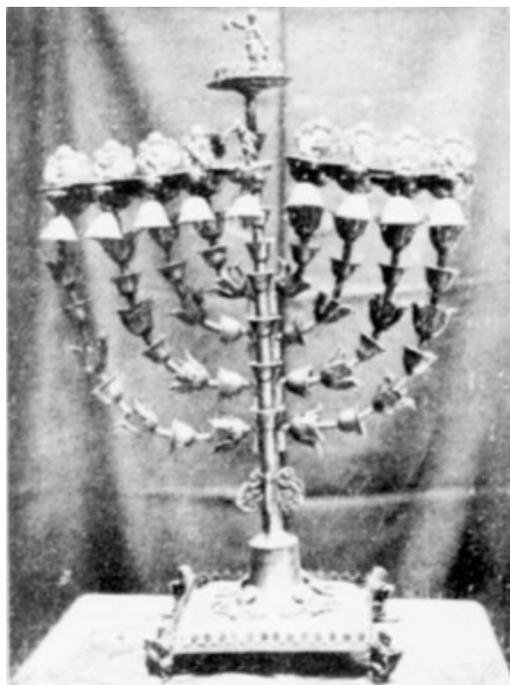
Let's now return to our medieval menorah whose triangular form gets pierced already in the Early Renaissance through the addition of horizontal strips that emerge in the course of the architectonic development. The Strasbourg collection owns various pieces of this type, of which one, like a similar piece at the Guggenheim, already clearly displays rustication; another already features the side towers that will later play a major role in the Baroque. All menorahs in Strasbourg still feature above the rectangle the attachment recalling the triangle, which has been omitted on the Guggenheim lamps. Apart from crowns, strapwork, and flowers, attached columns are the main decoration in the 17th century; besides that, especially in the early 18th century in Holland and Germany, chased, engraved, and attached figures can be found whose perfect design is indicative of good references. Menorah AJHE no. 1903 shows Moses and Aaron. No. 1743 additionally features the seven-branched candelabrum and Judith and Holofernes, which frequently adorn the backplates. Occasionally, a David replaces Holofernes since warrior figures tend to be a popular menorah adornment. Subject confusions have occurred as well, instead of Judith and Holofernes, Justitia and Fortuna can be found. First appearing concurrently with the Biblical and post-Biblical motifs, is the image of the seven-branched candelabrum, which later would become almost always the dominant emblem as we shall see. Moses and Aaron and the seven-branched candelabrum can be easily linked to the Hannukah stories. Judith and Holofernes hark back to the Midrash, which tells of a high priest's daughter in the Maccabean period, a story similar to that about Judith, with which it was later on combined as it seems. Hereby, we reach the heroic legends that gave rise to the representations of David and the warrior figures; the image of Samson with the lion on menorah AJHE no. 1740 might also be part of it. Another topic is added with the oil miracle; on object AJHE no. 1720, Prophet Elijah performs the oil miracle at the widow's place, on object AJHE no. 1737, the prophet is fed by the ravens. Thus, the joy of designing is not as alien to Jews as has been assumed so far. They have received a wealth of inspiration from the great masterpieces of their contemporaries (we know similar things from Haggadah images);



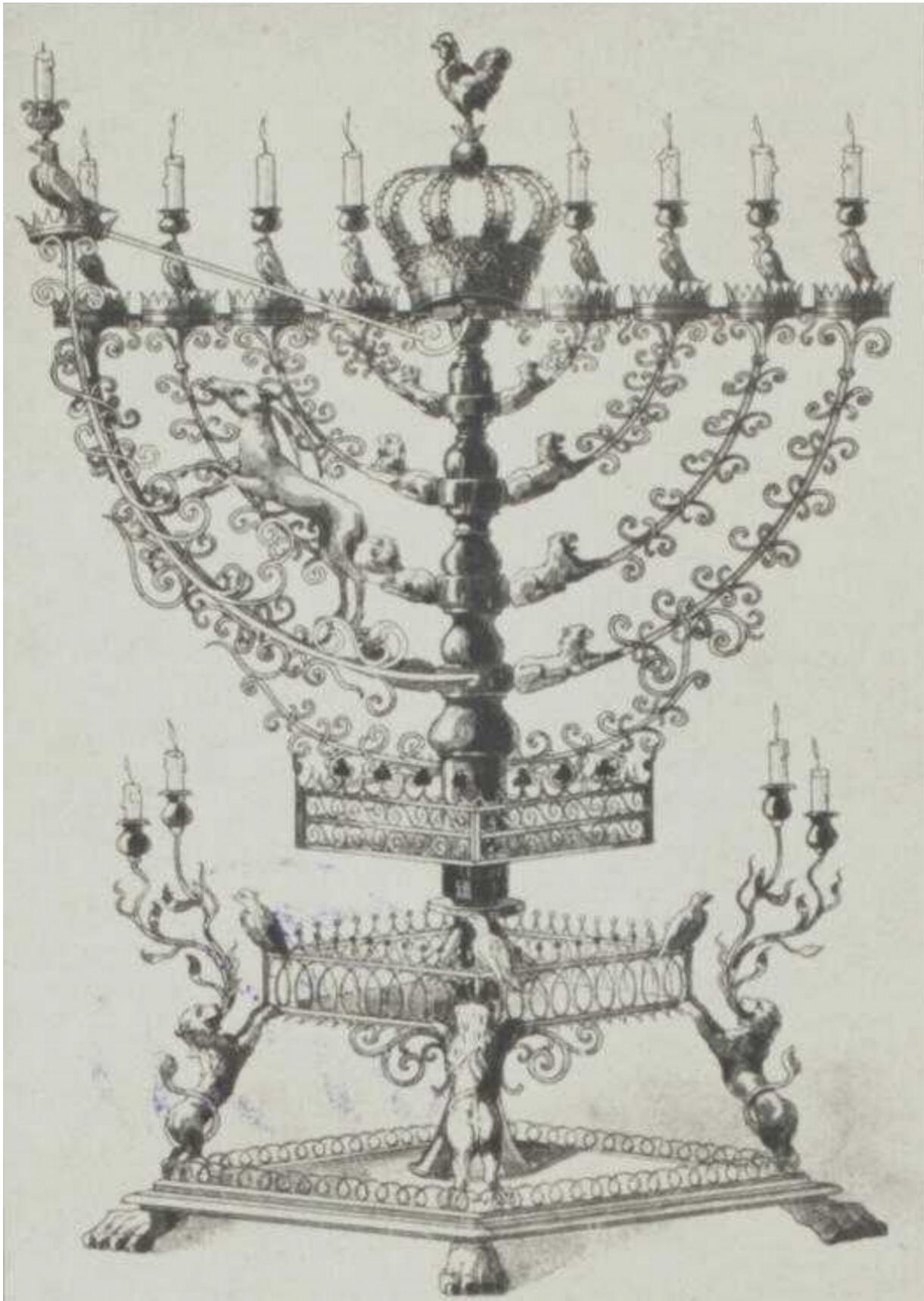
Padua / Synagogue menorah lampstand with unequally high arms

yet, an internal transformation from the heavily religious Middle Ages to the secular modern period seems to have taken place as well of which we know only little thus far. The menorahs with an upright rectangular shape and a rounded top display an entirely different wealth of forms that avoid the human figure. In the Strauß collection there is an item adorned with the Tablet of the Ten Commandments besides other, already known motifs. Jointly with these decorative forms, the lamps looking like a Torah ark can be mentioned. These are rare items from the end of the 17th century that, like those featuring a depiction of the Temple in Jerusalem, trace back to the baroque title pages. One object seems to emulate a Torah shield in which a small plate with the relevant day can be inserted like in a Tas; in this case, the first day of the new moon is indicated. The Tablets of the Law and seven-branched candelabra can also be seen on this item as is occasionally on a Tas; of course, the usually

twisted columns decorated with flowers are not absent either. All above-mentioned menorahs demonstrate in their imagery connections to the thoughts expressed in Prov. 6:23, which in the mid-18th century has to give way to genre pictures. This type starts with a lamp made from various sorts of metals and was executed, with the exception of minor variations, in an identical manner from the 16th till the end of the 19th century; a late object is in the Guggenheim collection. The imagery takes up the oil miracle; it shows a hand passing a jar from the clouds that fills a seven-branched candelabrum. Notable is the way the artist manages to represent God; the deity is never depicted on Jewish cultural artifacts, but always hinted at by a hand extending from the clouds (compare with baroque Torah arks, Torah shields, etc.). A variation of this type is possible to discern in the menorahs that have the seven-branched candelabrum held by two lions, frequently the candelabrum is set in a shield; angels, strapwork, flowers, and crowns are rarely absent here either. The connection to Prov. 6:23 is not yet forgotten as evidenced by AJHE no. 1906 where the quote appears on the foot of the candelabrum. Contrasting this notion are the lamps that feature the blessings for kindling the lights, occasionally also the prayer following the kindling. From here extends a connection to the lamps depicting the kindling itself. At the center, a menorah lampstand is seen, on each side a man, one busy kindling the lights, another preparing the lampstand. Two objects are at the Jewish museum in Berlin, both from late-19th-century Poland. Whether this type was known elsewhere as well cannot be determined in view of the small number of representatives of this kind that have become known so far. It would be premature to determine that all menorahs featuring the image of the seven-branched candelabrum between two lions are from Germany just because all those known thus far consistently originate in Frankfurt am Main. The greatest challenge is to locate cast Hannukah lamps from yellow metal, many of these works have definitely been produced by brass and bronze founders of the East; however, it is almost impossible to



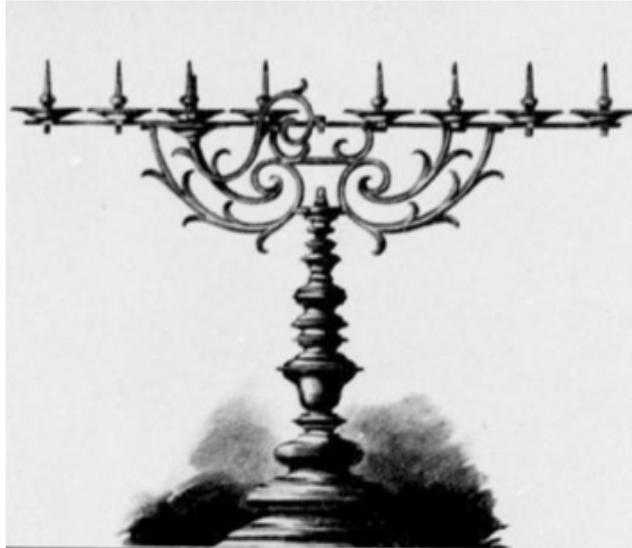
Frankfurt a. M; Jewish Museum / menorah lampstand with animal forms



Pogrebyszcze Synagogue

distinguish the styles of these simple objects. Early on, the decoration displays animals, tendrils, crowns, and thin strapwork, over time these shapes became worn so that the previously naturalistic imagery has morphed over time into completely abstract patterns, which later on can be traced back to their former shapes only with great difficulty. The latter are mostly derived from heraldic models and the naïve images of Eastern folk art, several animals have found their interpretation in Psalmist imagery, other seem to have been selected deliberately in connection with the zodiac. Incidentally, depictions of Sagittarius and Capricorn can be found at times on chased menorahs with the seven-branched candelabrum. Filigree works as well as the openwork casts aiming at light-dark effects can be regarded with some certainty as creations of the East; applicable in most instances is the term ‘Jewish art jargon’ coined by Albert Wolf; a designation one should, in my opinion, change to the less polemical ‘Jewish Baroque.’ In any case, already from this observation, an approximate age determination can be derived that starts with the 17th century and lasts until the onset of assimilation. The creations of the 19th century everywhere were less a continuation of old traditions than an artificial search for something never seen before, which is, incidentally, quite in line with contemporary taste. From the beginning of the century, we still find some well-proportioned objects. There is no reason to be astonished about a menorah from Silesia consisting of two small lampstands that are connected by the oil cup, above which an abundance of tendrils is ascending. This style from the Napoleonic period, in which parts are pieced together, deprives the ensemble of harmony; this lack cannot be remedied by the delicacy of its individual parts. One motif from Berlin must be considered to be crudely tasteless despite its satisfactory details; displayed above two round columns is a cabinet for the burners with a protruding narrow pin whose top third forms the mast of a small ship—shamash. Rigging and flag are not missing either. Following from here are those menorahs that form a small-scale synagogue lampstand due to a failure to recognize the original purpose of a household menorah. The pointlessness of this enterprise is most clearly epitomized by the approximately one-span-high pieces, which likely belong straight in the Museum of Offenses against Good Taste (Stuttgart). From a Jewish point of view, the menorahs attempting to copy the candelabrum from the Arch of Titus attest against themselves; any connection to Judaism must have been lost if one fails to sense the repulsiveness and absurdity of this notion. Before we conclude with the wall menorahs, we must still examine the design of the small lights themselves, the shamash, and the feet on which menorahs usually stand. Frequently, the lights have the shape of lions whose jaws hold the wicks, oil cans, too, have often been used for this purpose, pomegranates, blossoms, and vases are occurring as well; of course, the simple open oil lamp remains in existence all along. The shamash is carried either by a warrior or a bird, in Italy sometimes by mythical creatures or caryatids. At times, very pretty and original structures were created such as, for instance, the little candelabrum-man in the garb of a Jew from the mid-17th century holding a candlestick in his hand. Besides simple balls or lions’ claws, the feet are sometimes also formed from a heraldic shield of oil cans, eagles, and other creatures [?]. It should be mentioned that the tools for cleaning the lights as well as the can for replenishing are often added to the menorahs in small versions [miniatures?].

So far we have dealt with the wall menorahs used for the celebration that originally took place solely at home. From the Middle Ages, rabbinical sources attest to the custom to light the menorah also at the synagogue because of the foreigners and the poor. For this purpose,



Munich / National Museum

larger candelabrums had to be manufactured, which seem to have evolved from the large lampstand. From a pedestal that frequently stands on lions or claws, a shaft ascends abundantly adorned with tendrils and blossoms, from which four branches are extending on each side carrying the lights. The shamash is either mounted on the shaft or on a branch set in front of the lights; in the latter case, the shaft ends in a flame, eagle, lion, warrior, or in suchlike. Most of the objects that have emerged so far are works from the 17th century, which on the whole do not considerably differ from each other (see Mitt. III/IV, p. 39). As evidenced by the item we know from the synagogue on Heidereuthergasse, now at the Jewish museum, also lampstands used to be equipped for oil lighting, which eventually was changed in most cases. The oldest lampstands seem to originate in the Renaissance; known is the Italian one from Padua¹³ (Mitt. III/ IV. p. 40) with a fine scene of the Temple inauguration on its pedestal. This lampstand has two unequally high arms, the like of which has so far come to my attention only in two other objects of unknown origin. As is well known, the Shulchan Aruch has later on forbidden the creation of menorahs with unequally high arms. Around 1600, richly adorned works are produced, the likes of which have become known through items in private ownership in Frankfurt, now at the Jewish museum Frankfurt am Main (Mitt. III/IV, p. 42), and under AJHE no. 1905. If we start from the slightly simpler item AJHE 1752, which displays little trees above the lights and small bells below and whose shaft is decorated with a crown and a cone, then the two other menorahs, between themselves quite similar, are an expansion of this type. Each oil flame carries in front of the little tree symbolic animals: squirrel, stag, eagle, and pelican, warriors are mounted in different places, and the shaft is crowned by Judah Maccabee who carries the head of his opponent Nicanor in one hand and the brandished sword in the other. These animal forms can also be seen on other Jewish art objects; however, the attempts at interpretation seem to be unsatisfactory, hence, they shall not be considered here. The lampstand menorah from Pogrebyszcze (Mitt. III/IV, p. 41) has already been shown and described so often that we shall not further deal with this bizarre work that seems to be completely out of the ordinary.

13 In determinations of date and place, the possibility of later copies in the correct style, which could have been made also in a different place, is left out of consideration.



Synagogue in Cleve

The Hannukah feast has endowed the domestic celebration with greater significance; hence, the lampstand menorah is less in the foreground regarding both design and quantity than the wall menorah, to which we, therefore, have payed greater attention. Since we are still at the beginning of the research into Jewish art, many links remain unclear; material that has emerged so far demonstrates how much new and interesting information can be unearthed through thorough examination of Jewish monuments of art. After all, the examination of representational Jewish art is able to provide a more vivid picture of the Jewish past than the written word just by itself.

(Translation: Lilian Dombrowski)