



Post-Ethnic: Judaica Today

BY DANIEL BELASCO

NIMROD VARDI
Mine Is My Copy, 2009
aluminum, silver and
gold plating
height: 2 3/4 to 4 3/4"

BUFFETED BY THE ONGOING standardization of good design (e.g., IKEA) and the current craze for DIY authenticity (e.g., Etsy), in recent years the larger craft community has recognized Judaica as an independent and vibrant area of creativity, attracting skilled artists and designers around the world, both Jewish and not. In this post-ethnic Judaica, ritual objects are opportunities for connection and discovery, not vehicles for particularism and exclusivity. Several talented artists are pushing the contemporary design interest in process to the extreme, testing the very notion of religious ritual as a renewable resource.

First, a definition: In brief, Judaica comprises the objects that play a significant role in the practice of Judaism and the establishment of Jewish forms of the sacred. Some types are specific to Judaism, such as the *yad* (Torah pointer), while other types are common to other cultures and religions, such as candlesticks and candelabra, goblets, plates, and amulets. Judaica are usually intended for either the synagogue, where rituals revolve around the Torah, the scroll with the five books of Moses, the core of the Old Testament; or for the home, the site of most other rituals relating to daily prayer, eating, holidays, meals, and lifecycle events. As the practice of Judaism continues to evolve, its ritual objects strive for wider relevance.

While Judaica are today created in nearly every medium, from glass to concrete to iPhone apps, metalworks occupy a significant place in the field, because of their traditional use, durability, malleability, and ability to be mass produced. The quality of metal Judaica today ranges from inexpensive bronze pieces cast in India to unique artworks crafted by leading international designers for public and private

In this post-ethnic Judaica, ritual objects are opportunities for connection and discovery, not vehicles for particularism and exclusivity.

collections. Silver remains the essential material for handcrafted pieces, while steel prevails for high quality mass-produced objects. My research for the recent survey exhibition, “Reinventing Ritual: Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life,” revealed that the field is divided significantly between artists who dedicate themselves to Judaica (and even make a living from it), but create less adventurous, more traditional works, and artists who create more experimental, innovative Judaica on occasion (for a commission, exhibition, or course) but do not make Judaica the center of their practice. The majority of works are created in the Jewish population centers of North America and Israel, but there is also small but significant production in Europe (especially England and the Netherlands) and Australia. This article surveys some of the most notable recent examples of international contemporary Judaica in metal, more specifically acquisitions by the few encyclopedic museums with dedicated Judaica collections and galleries; innovative work that has also achieved a degree of commercial success; and experimental works by emerging artists.

The Minneapolis Institute of Art and The North Carolina Museum of Art both house galleries dedicated to the display of Judaica in their permanent collections. Both tend to prefer significant and unique works by established artists in the field. California-based Harriete Estel Berman is

known for her mixed-media jewelry and functional objects composed of found metal (tins, dollhouses, charity boxes), elaborately constructed with gold and silver pins and rivets. She makes vibrant feminist and socially conscious Judaica that is collected internationally. *Eons of Exodus*, created in 2008 and exhibited in the San Francisco Contemporary Jewish Museum’s Seder plate invitation “New Works/Old Story: 80 Artists at the Passover Table” in 2009 (and purchased by Minneapolis Institute of Art out of that show), exemplifies the multiple intersections of individual creativity and institutional support that go into the best of contemporary Judaica. The monumental piece is more of a plinth than a plate, composed of tin, steel, gold, silver, stainless steel, brass, and Plexiglas. It commemorates the story of the Exodus, a central part of the narrative of the Jews’ movement from slavery to freedom, celebrated by the Seder during Passover holiday. With silhouette imagery derived from an old family Haggadah, Berman’s plate depicts historical moments of Jewish and other communal upheaval. Her piece joins contemporary metalworks by Australian Marion Marshall and American Tony Berlant in the MIA’s Judaica collection.

The North Carolina Museum of Art’s collection was recently reinstalled in an expanded building. Established in 1974, it includes modern masterworks by Ludwig Wolpert and Moshe Zabari. In 2009, Wisconsin artist Fred Fenster was commissioned to make a new piece for the collection for the reopening because of his influence as an artist and educator, and his local ties, having taught at Penland School of Crafts Summer Workshop for many years. Stylistically, his pair of *Sabbath and Festival Candlesticks* is paradigmatic in its clean lines, balanced proportions, and technical finesse in blending contrasting geometries. The use of the six-pointed star as a Jewish symbol is also typical of his work. The star, despite its contentious history, retains its power as one of the most overt markers of Jewish purpose and identity in functional objects, second only to Hebrew words and letters.

In the U.K., there is a smaller yet vital contingent of contemporary Judaica metalsmiths. The Victoria & Albert Museum in London recently created a gallery dedicated to sacred silver and stained glass. In 2004, artist Tamar de Vries Winter was commissioned to create a Kiddush cup for the permanent collection. Digitally engraved and enameled with gold foil, the cup is part of her shift to technology to achieve greater precision and complexity in enamelwork. The Hebrew letters repeat the blessing over the wine, a moment of sanctification that begins Shabbat and holidays. The Israeli-born Winter is one of a number of Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design alumni who have settled in London and contributed to the creation of contemporary Judaica and design, including the emerging silversmith Adi Toch. The V&A gallery also displays a contemporary silver mezuzah on loan from Londoner Mila Tanya Griebel, though most of the Jewish work in this case is by traditionalist Gerald Benney.



HARRIETE ESTEL BERMAN
Eons of Exodus (Seder plate), 2008
tin, steel, 10k gold, sterling silver,
stainless steel, brass, pigments
4 1/2 x 26 x 11"
COLLECTION OF MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART
PHOTO: PHILIP COHEN



FRED FENSTER
Sabbath and Festival Candlesticks, 2009
silver
height 10 5/8"
COLLECTION OF NORTH CAROLINA
MUSEUM OF ART

SARI SRULOVITCH
Havdala spice and candle holders, 2000
sterling silver
4 x 1 1/8 x 3 3/8"



TAMAR DE VRIES WINTER
Kiddush Cup, 2005
 sterling silver, enamel, gold foil
 3 1/2 x 2 3/4"
 COLLECTION OF VICTORIA & ALBERT
 MUSEUM, LONDON, M.19-2005
 PHOTO: MARY BERNARD

Many women artists have been attracted to the field since the 1980s, and thus more aspects of women's lives are being expressed in ritual objects.

Bezalel, established in Jerusalem in 1906 by European immigrants, is the one art school in the world where Judaica creation is consistently promoted through coursework, criticism, exhibitions, and prizes. Bezalel-trained Sari Srulovitch works in

her studio on Jerusalem's Hutzot Hayotzer (Arts and Crafts Lane), across the way from her mentor, the witty modernist Zelig Segal. Srulovitch prefers subtlety over statement, injecting humanism and warmth into the rigid minimal forms that predominate much of contemporary high-end Israeli Judaica. She is also one of the few Sephardic Jews to embed Mediterranean heritage in Judaica; witness her spice containers, used during the Havdalah ceremony at the end of the Sabbath, a bittersweet return to the secular week marked with the smelling of spices. While the Ashkenazic (Central and Eastern European) tradition uses dried spices, a number of Srulovitch's spice containers are designed to hold fresh herbs, in the Sephardic tradition.

In his final project for Bezalel, London-based artist and curator Nimrod Vardi took a conventional mass-produced *kiddush* (ceremonial) cup and subjected it to a series of manipulations in the re-casting process to create a group of new aluminum cups. Exploiting various manufacturing defects resulting from molds, wax, casts, and silver and gold plating, the results are a distorted yet oddly attractive collection, resembling both an unearthed hoard and Picassoesque sculptures. Vardi asserts the primacy of creativity in contemporary religion by reversing the notion that a ritual object is subordinated to ritual performance.

Israeli Talila Abraham is the rare artist who combines innovative design, commercial impulses, and commitment to Judaica. A graduate of the Holon Institute of Technology, where she currently teaches, she developed a technique of etching intricate patterns into thin sheets of stainless steel so that they resemble lace. The "metal lace" material she creates can become baskets used to hold ritual foods like challah or matzoh, or can be paired with other materials like glass or cast steel to become vessels for honey or mezuzah cases. The translation of lace, a common decorative element in nondescript Israeli concrete apartments and houses, into sturdy and lustrous functional objects comes off brilliantly. Her products, under the brand Metalace Art, are widely available internationally.

Numerous forms of Judaica play an important role in daily life, and are handed down from generation to generation. Many women artists have been attracted to the field since the 1980s, and thus more aspects of women's lives are being expressed in ritual objects. The Women's Torah Project in Seattle, the first Torah entirely written and adorned by women, first read publicly in 2010, is among the most ambitious recent American synagogue



TALILA ABRAHAM
Royal Touch Basket I, 2009
 stainless steel
 9 x 8 x 4"
 COURTESY OF METALACE ART

AIMEE GOLANT
Rimonim, 2009
 copper, silver, 22k gold, brown diamond
 3 x 10 x 11" each
 COURTESY WOMEN'S TORAH PROJECT





RORY HOOPER
*Sliced (Sliced Rail Track
Candle Holder)*, 2010
steel, gold plated silver
6 1/4 x 5 3/8 x 2 3/8"



ANIKA SMULOVITZ
*Rosh Hashanah
(Torah pointer)*, 2010
sterling silver, 18k gold,
citrine, honeycomb,
bee, glass
6 1/2 x 5/8 x 5/8"
PHOTO: DOUG YAPLE



BRIAN WEISSMAN
Word (Torah pointer), 2009
 silver
 13 x 2 x 2"
 COLLECTION OF THE
 JEWISH MUSEUM, NEW YORK



DROR BENSHETRIT
Connection Mezuzah, 2010
 stainless steel
 4 1/4 x 1 1/2"
 COURTESY ALESSI



JOSH OWEN
Menorah, 2010
 cast iron
 11 x 11 x 3 1/2"
 COURTESY AREAWARE

commissions. California-based metalsmith Aimee Golant contributed *rimonim*, or finials, for the pair of wood staves. Golant, who has created mezuzahs for two Space Shuttle missions, and for the new National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, turned an object typically associated with fruit (*rimonim* means pomegranate in Hebrew) or royalty (a crown is another common type) into two-dimensional decorative flourishes. She likens the pair to open doors, and they are reminiscent of the baroque ornament flanking the facades of Jesuit churches in Rome. The use of copper, an unusual choice for contemporary Judaica, lends the pieces a warm humility.

While the older generation of modernists and postmodernists, such as Fenster and Berman, gravitate to the most familiar and central symbols and forms in Jewish ritual (yes, even Jewish feminism has its canon), younger artists prefer lesser known types of Judaica, narratives, and symbols. They share a need to reinvent the traditions, but from a position of personal discovery and formal irony. In a notable evolution, their approaches to Jewish ritual objects are more closely related to jewelry than hollowware, drawing on new ideas about the social construction of the

The urge today is to blend and morph specifically Jewish symbols and rituals with pop culture, science, food, fashion, architecture, and commercial imagery and materials.

and the Holocaust. Hooper's *Sliced Rail Track Candle Holder* consists of an actual iron train track bought in a scrap yard. The 30mm cross-section closely resembles the profile of a traditional candlestick. A jeweler trained at the Royal College of Arts in London, he refined the found material by finishing it with an asymmetrical silver cap to hold a candle. Hooper's work suggests the connections between memory and the nomadic and migratory patterns of Jewish and other communities, reminding us that railways can be sacred, such as the Ottoman Hijaz Railroad that once linked Palestine to Medina.

body and the relationship between objects and identity.

Israeli Rory Hooper's ideas about multifunctionality and displacement are emblematic of the current desire to look askance at Judaism and its big twentieth-century themes: Zionism, Modernism,

Idaho-based Anika Smulovitz created a Rosh Hashana *yad* in 2010, equipped with an actual bee at the base, as part of new body of work displayed at Boise State University, where she teaches. This piece notably adapts the artist's well-known herbarium jewelry of bits of nature—flowers, insects—encased in glass on rings, connecting the body to nature. On Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, celebrants traditionally eat apples and honey as a wish for the New Year to be sweet. Smulovitz's *yad* provides a sacred connection between a folk tradition and the reading of the Torah. The doubling of rituals here indicates the interest in hybridity, emblematic of new Judaica, seamlessly achieved with artful, nearly clinical, craftsmanship. Smulovitz is one of a number of American metalsmiths who have discovered Judaica in their studies in prestigious metals programs at American universities. Smulovitz gained inspiration from Fenster and Lisa Gralnick at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

New York-based Brian Weissman trained at SUNY New Paltz with Myra Mimlitsch-Gray, and worked with Judaica modernist Kurt Matzdorf to complete one of the elder artist's final synagogue commissions, including a *ner tamid* (eternal light). Weissman has combined these

influences into what he calls "alternative Judaica," which honors traditional forms of the object with contemporary interpretations. His *yad*, *Word* (2009), features the basic form of an Eastern European Torah pointer. But in place of one hand making a pointing gesture, there are four hands spelling "word" in sign language, which for the artist also connects to hip-hop culture (the slang "word" is a term of agreement, akin to "amen"), as well as riffing on the function of the pointer itself, in serving the chanting of the word of the Torah. *Word* uses wit to marry traditional forms and contemporary popular culture, imagining what blinged-out Judaica looks like for a generation of observant Jews who grew up immersed in hip hop in the 1980s and '90s.

Overall, the field of contemporary Judaica is dynamic and growing. Some of the leading manufacturers of design have recently launched their first Judaica products. Areaware's cast wrought iron menorah, designed by New York-based industrial designer Josh Owen, speaks of permanence and solidity, while its gentle curves and thoughtful incorporated base make it exceedingly user-friendly. Alessi, in collaboration with The Jewish Museum in New York, produced its first-ever religious object, a mezuzah, designed by Israeli-born, Dutch-trained, and New York-based Dror Benshetrit. The cast stainless steel *Connection Mezuzah* melds the ancient look of Jerusalem stone with a sleek contemporary aesthetic. Its solid rectangular base fits firmly within twentieth-century minimalism, while its raised stonelike surface, inspired by an ancient stamp seal, offers a metaphorical gesture to the continuity of Jewish identity from its birth to the present. *Connection Mezuzah* also marks the first collaboration between Alessi and an American museum, a signal moment in contemporary Judaica.

The cutting-edge work by artists born in the 1970s combines the best of postmodernism (diversity and history) and modernism (clarity and significant form). They are sophisticated works that simultaneously enhance and question ritual. Judaica has almost always expressed its hybrid style as sourced in local culture and Jewish traditions. The urge today is to blend and morph specifically Jewish symbols and rituals with pop culture, science, food, fashion, architecture, and commercial imagery and materials. Contemporary artists have seized upon the inherent diversity and pluralism of Jewish culture, using formal wit to negotiate differences. Perhaps the best means of expressing a post-ethnic Jewish identity in ritual objects is to pinpoint intercultural and open-ended qualities with new forms and materials.

Daniel Belasco, Henry J. Leir Associate Curator of The Jewish Museum, New York, curated the exhibition "Reinventing Ritual: Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life" (2009) and served as the juror for 500 Judaica: Innovative Contemporary Ritual Art (Lark Books, 2010).

Furthermore:
www.thejewishmuseum.org