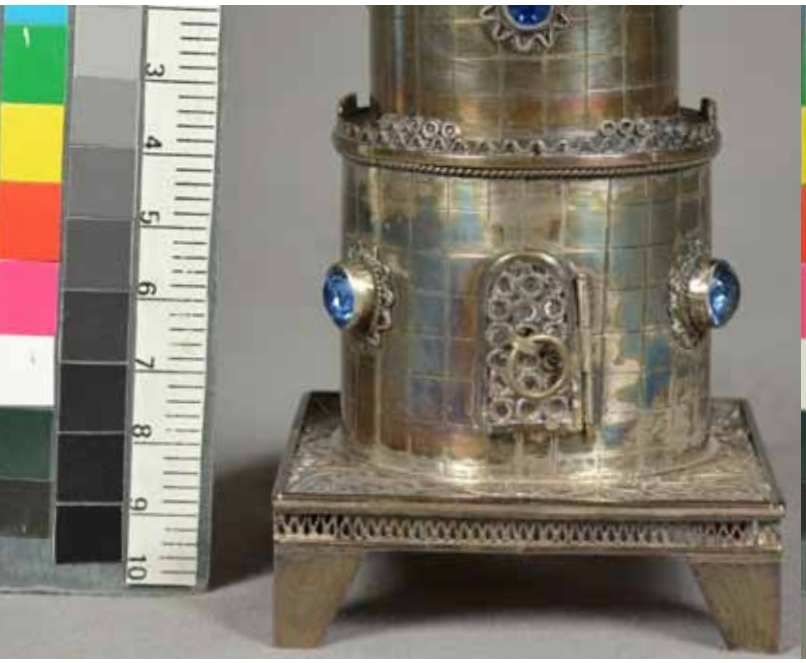
From Sacred to Secular

Collecting and Caring for Judaica



Spice Tower, before treatment

Spice Tower, after treatment

Hopkins Hillel / Smokler Center for Jewish Life
Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Building
3109 N. Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218

November 11, 2011 – September 30, 2012

Thank you for leaving this exhibition guide in the gallery

COVER PHOTOGRAPHS: *Spice Tower, before and after treatment.*

COURTESY LORI TRUSHEIM

From Sacred to Secular: Collecting and Caring for Judaica is the third in an annual series of student-curated exhibitions focusing on the Henry Sonneborn Collection of The Johns Hopkins University. Significant funding is provided by the Sonneborn Foundation. This ongoing exhibition series is created and supported with the following partners: the Program in Museums and Society, Jewish Studies, and the Cultural Properties Program of the Sheridan Libraries, The Johns Hopkins University; and Johns Hopkins University Hillel. Students interested in working on the collection should contact one of the partnering programs.

From Sacred to Secular
Collecting and Caring for Judaica

When a conservator approaches an object she must bear in mind its physical properties, namely its medium and state of preservation. Sacred objects, however, require special consideration. They have particular needs with regard to their maintenance, conservation, and display that must be taken into account when they enter a museum or other collecting institution. It is the responsibility of curators and conservators to balance the objects' traditional requirements with the needs and goals of that institution.

In the case of the Sonneborn collection, a third factor mediates the collection's treatment and use: the wishes of its creator. From 1901 to 1905, Henry Sonneborn (1826–1917) donated a collection of Judaica to The Johns Hopkins University with the specific aim that the objects be used for research, exhibition, and teaching. Years later his son, Henry Sonneborn, Jr. (1890–1980), added to the collection with the same goals in mind. By accepting the gift, Johns Hopkins agreed to fulfill the Sonneborns' vision and follow their wishes.

Caring for this collection is not a straightforward matter since the objects were never intended simply to be works of art. Rather they reflect the Talmudic idea of *hiddur mitzvah:* the tradition of making beautiful objects to enhance Jewish ceremonies. Thus, while the objects are indeed beautiful, their beauty, like the objects themselves, is functional. Similarly, when these objects enter a collection, a further transformation occurs: they become cultural artifacts, with the power to bear witness to history and celebrate heritage.

How should museums and collecting institutions interpret Jewish ritual and sacred objects?

Exactly how Judaica is displayed and interpreted depends upon the goals of the individual institution. It is always preferable that decisions be made with sensitivity towards the objects' spiritual importance. At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C., for example, curators consulted with rabbis before displaying a Torah[1] that was damaged by fire on Kristallnacht[2].

Curators at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum carefully set the Kristallnacht Torah scrolls atop velvet in preparation for their exhibition.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM AND ALAN GILBERT PHOTOGRAPHY

Torah scrolls desecrated during the Kristallnacht pogrom in Germany rest in a protective case, or "glass casket," in a kind of above-ground burial at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

1 The Torah is the most sacred object in Jewish worship. It is a scroll containing the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.
2 The "Night of Broken Glass" was a series of attacks by Nazis against Jews in Germany and parts of Austria on the eve of November 9, 1938. On this night, Jewish homes, shops, and synagogues were destroyed and thousands of Jewish men were arrested.
3 The Hebrew word *geniza* comes from the grammatical root meaning to conceal, hide, or preserve.

According to Jewish Law, a desecrated Torah must be protected from further harm and disrespect by being buried or placed in a *geniza,*[3] a special room at a synagogue dedicated to housing worn-out scrolls and ritual objects.

Although it went against religious tradition, the rabbis determined that the USHMM could display the Kristallnacht Torah, since its presentation was as much a memorial as a religious text. The staff was thoughtful in designing the exhibition and careful when handling the scroll to ensure the Torah was treated with respect. It was laid atop velvet pads and placed in a case that acted as a "glass casket," simulating the protective space of a burial or a *geniza.*[4] While the USHMM is an "American institution and cannot be bound by religious law,"[5] it was still able to balance "Halakhic requirements and museological sensibilities."[6]

---

4 Oren Baruch Stier, "Torah and Taboo: Containing Jewish Relics and Jewish Identity at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," *Numen* 57, no. 3 (2010): 521.
5 Raye Farr, Director of the Permanent Exhibition at the USHMM, as cited in Stier, "Torah and Taboo," 519.
6 Stier, "Torah and Taboo," 519.

What is the lifecycle of a Jewish ritual object?

Religious instruction regarding the use and treatment of Judaica comes from the *Halacha,* Jewish law.[7] These guidelines are important because restrictions are not universal and can change during an object's lifecycle. Careful planning on the part of museums and collecting institutions is required to ensure that the rules set forth in the *Halacha* are observed as closely as possible.

When *tashmishey kedusha,* such as Torah scrolls, are no longer suitable for use, they must be properly disposed of through burial, as seen here, or placed in a *geniza* at a synagogue.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY MIKE BROWN/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

7 The *Halacha* is a continuation of the Law of Moses and has been developed throughout the centuries with rabbinical interpretations; Michael Maggen, "The Conservation of Sacred Materials in the Israel Museum," in *Conservation of Living Religious Heritage: Papers from the ICCROM 2003 Forum on Living Religious Heritage: Conserving the Sacred,* ed. Herb Stovel, Nicholas Stanley-Price, and Robert Killick (Rome: ICCROM, 2005), 103.

Judaica can be divided into two categories. The *tashmishey kedusha*[8] bear an intrinsic quality of holiness or "are essential to the performance of a particular ritual or commandment."[9] These objects, such as the Torah, contain the name of God and/or words "divinely written or inspired, from which the quality of holiness is derived."[10] Recently other handwritten texts such as *Megillot Esther* have begun to be included in this group. Objects that touch the texts, such as the *rimmonim* [11] (the Torah finials), *yad,*[12] and Torah shield are also considered sacred because of their contact with the holy works. When these objects are no longer suitable for ceremonial use they cannot be repaired; instead they must be "put away." In the Ashkenazi tradition this is achieved by burying the objects in a cemetery, while in the Sephadic/Oriental tradition the objects are placed in a *geniza.*[13]

8 Hebrew for "accessories of holiness" or "objects that carry holiness."
9 Virginia Greene, "Accessories of Holiness: Defining Jewish Sacred Objects," *Journal of the American Institution for Conservation* 31, no. 1 (1992): 31.
10 Greene, "Accessories of Holiness," 34.
11 Hebrew for "pomegranate" in reference to the shape of the finials' tops.
12 A *yad* (Hebrew for "hand") is a pointer used when reading from the Torah to ensure the parchment is not touched by hands and remains clean.
13 Greene, "Accessories of Holiness," 34.

If *tashmishey kedusha* are acquired by a museum or collecting institution, their treatment varies, although for the most part they can be displayed and treated by any qualified conservator. Exceptions include the Torah, *tefillin,*[14] and *klaf,* a handwritten text held in a *mezuzah.*[15] These objects should not be treated by a conservator or put on display.

There are also ritual objects related to *mitzvot,*[16] that are not sacred, but make it possible for a commandment to be performed. Some examples include *shofars* (ram horns blown on certain holidays), and *Kiddush* cups, ritual drinking glasses. These objects should be perfect in order to reflect *hiddur mitzvah;* therefore if they break, they are considered unsuitable for use. At this point they can be discarded or, if part of a collection, they can be conserved and displayed.

14 Hebrew for "phylacteries," these are leather cases that hold handwritten texts from the Torah and are worn by men on their arms and heads during morning prayers; see the portrait of A. Bissinsky to see the *tefillin* in use and read its label for more information.
15 The *mezuzah* are special cases for texts that are traditionally hung on the doorpost of a home.
16 Hebrew for "accessories of religious observance."

How should we care for Jewish ritual objects?

Objects in the Sonneborn Collection are conserved in order to slow the process of deterioration and preserve them for future studies. Although conservation involves “aesthetic compensation,” with reversible materials that allow the viewer to experience the object as it was originally intended to be seen, it is important to note that these treatments do not “restore” the objects. “Restoration” involves more extensive changes to an object’s appearance and removes signs of wear that come from their life as ritual objects.

The majority of objects in the Sonneborn Collection are made of silver and thus susceptible to corrosion. Chemically termed silver sulfide,

It is important to remove fingerprints from silver objects so they do not become permanently etched into the metal’s surface.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY
SANDRA SANTESSO-HOLLENDER

This image shows the Torah crown during its conservation treatment; the lower half had been polished while the top portion remained tarnished.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY
LORI TRUSHEIM

corrosion is the result of silver reacting with hydrogen sulfide gas naturally found in the air. Such corrosion is commonly known as tarnish and appears as dark brown areas on the surface of an object. Silver is affected by a second type of corrosion that forms as a result of polish residue or the salts and oils from our hands reacting with the copper content of the silver. If not removed, this corrosion can permanently etch the silver, marring the object's appearance; thus it is important that the object be conserved, and in a timely manner.

Unfortunately each time the corrosion is removed by polishing, a microscopic amount of silver is also lost. With repeated polishings these losses are compounded, resulting in the fading of details like engraving and gilding. To minimize the loss of silver, conservators use specially formulated polishes. In the case of the Sonneborn Judaica, this consists of a slurry of mineral calcium carbonate ($CaCO_3$) dissolved in distilled water with a drop of triton non-ionic detergent. In contrast with commercial polishes, the fine particle size of this formula does not harshly abrade the silver. After polishing, the objects are wiped with ethanol (ethyl alcohol), which dries rapidly, ensuring that no water remains that could tarnish the surfaces.

Once polished, the silver Judaica can be protected from new corrosion by the application of a microcrystalline wax polish. The wax coating, applied with a brush or dry cloth and buffed out, acts as a physical barrier to protect the objects. The coating can last up to a year depending upon the environment and amount of handling the objects receive.

Conclusion

Caring for Judaica is a complex task that can only be successful when both religious and museological matters are considered. Ritual objects should not be viewed as dead artifacts; rather, they must be treated as anthropological material with an important religious history that ties the past to the present. Through modern conservation techniques, we can ensure that the gifts of the Sonneborns will be preserved for future studies, and that the meanings they convey will play an active role in the Johns Hopkins community for years to come.

Unless otherwise noted, all objects are courtesy of the Henry Sonneborn Collection, Cultural Properties, The Johns Hopkins University.

Upper shelf, from left to right:

Book Binding
Continental, most likely Italian
18th –19th century
Silver

JH1901.2.20

Etrog Box
Continental, possibly German
19th century
Silver

JH1901.2.8

Spice Box
Israeli
20th century
Silver, blue pastes

JH2010.7.2
Gift of Henry Sonneborn Jr. to the Henry Sonneborn Collection, Cultural Properties, The Johns Hopkins University

Upper shelf, from left to right (continued):

Scroll of Esther
Israeli
20th century
Silver, paper or parchment

JH2010.7.6
Gift of Henry Sonneborn Jr. to Henry Sonneborn Collection, Cultural Properties, The Johns Hopkins University

Kiddush Cup
Continental
1870-1895
Silver with gold washed interior

JH1901.2.26

Center shelf, from left to right:

Spice Box
Russian
Late 19th century
Silver

JH1901.2.54

Scroll of Esther
Possibly Polish
Undated
Silver, semiprecious stone, paper or parchment

JH1901.2.28

Center shelf, from left to right (continued):

Torah Breastplate
English or American
Late 19th century
Silver

JH1901.2.15

Shofars (3)
Continental or Israeli
Late 19th century
Horn

JH1901.2.9.1-3

Mezuzah
Israeli
20th century
Silver, stone

JH2010.7.1
Gift of Henry Sonneborn Jr. to the Henry Sonneborn Collection, Cultural Properties, The Johns Hopkins University

Lower shelf, from left to right:

Pair of Torah Crowns
Continental
Late 19th-early 20th century
Silver

JH1901.2.32; JH1901.2.33

Yad (Torah Pointer)
Late 19th early 20th century
Silver

JH1901.2.13

Yad (Torah Pointer)
Israeli
20th century
Silver, stone

JH2010.7.7
Gift of Henry Sonneborn Jr. to the Henry Sonneborn Collection, Cultural Properties, The Johns Hopkins University

Yad (Torah Pointer)
Austro-Hungarian
Mid-to late 19th century
Bone and silver

JH1901.2.22

Works Cited

Geene, Virginia. “Accessories of Holiness: Defining Jewish Sacred Objects.” *Journal of the American Institution for Conservation* 31, no. 1 (1992): 31-39.

Maggen, Michael. “The Conservation of Sacred Materials in the Israel Museum.” In *Conservation of Living Religious Heritage: Papers from the ICCROM 2003 Forum on Living Religious Heritage: Conserving the Sacred.* Edited by Herb Stovel, Nicholas Stanley-Price, and Robert Killick, 102-6. Rome: ICCROM, 2005.

Stier, Oren Baruch. “Torah and Taboo: Containing Jewish Relics and Jewish Identity at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.” *Numen* 57, no. 3 (2010): 505-36.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everybody who helped with this project. In particular I would like to recognize Jackie O'Regan, Rabbi Debbie Pine, Professor Jonah Erlebacher, and Professor Lisa DeLeonardis for their ideas and feedback, as well as the Sonneborn Foundation for the generous funding that enables the ongoing conservation of the collection as well as the presentation of special exhibitions. Thanks to Professor Elizabeth Rodini, the project supervisor, for her patience, guidance, and encouragement. Lastly, I owe a very special thank you to Lori Trusheim for her conservation knowledge and willingness to let me work with her—the experience was amazing!

Emily Carambelas '11
Archaeology
History of Science, Medicine and Technology
Museums and Society
Krieger School of Arts and Sciences