## Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses

# The Synagogue to

"Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel" is on view at the American Folk Art Museum through March 23, 2008. The exhibition travels to the Fenimore Art Museum, New York State Historical Association, and the Farmers' Museum, Inc., Cooperstown, New York, from May 24 to September 1, 2008.

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PAUL FOSTER

# the Carousel

By Murray Zimiles

LION
Marcus Charles Illions
(1865/1874–1949)
Coney Island, Brooklyn,
New York
1910
Paint on wood with glass
eyes
51 × 84 × 20"
Mary Lawrence and Walter
Youree Collection, Oregon

The magnificent wooden and masonry synagogues of Eastern Europe that were filled with elaborately carved arks housing the sacred Torah scrolls are largely lost to the world. Surviving gravestones in nearby cemeteries display the carvers' pictorial and typographical artistry and lead the curious to guess at the wonders of the vanished houses of worship. Great artistic skill was also displayed in many Eastern European Jewish homes, which were decorated with some of the finest papercuts. These traditions of the Eastern European shtetl, handed down through families of craftsmen, evolved and flourished over hundreds of years.

When Jewish artisans emigrated from Eastern Europe to the New World near the end of the nineteenth century, they brought with them carving iconography and techniques in their hearts, minds, and hands. Immigrant carvers decorated many American synagogues, created intricate and colorful papercuts, and found new uses for their skills in the secular urban environment. Carvers of ark lions supporting wooden replicas of the Decalogue—the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets—became carvers of carousel animals, now much sought-after examples of American folk art.

## Eastern European Synagogue Carvings

The Bible devotes many often highly detailed verses to descriptions of the Ark of the Covenant, the chest holding the Decalogue. An object of magical power that was carried by the Levites during their wanderings and housed within the Tabernacle, it offered protection against snakes and enemies and worked wonders against obstructions such as mountains and even the walls of Jericho, until it came to rest behind a veil in the innermost part of the great Temple built by Solomon.

The Eastern European ark was dense with visual references to the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle, and Solomon's Temple. The eighteenth-century ark of the synagogue in Olkienniki, Lithuania (opposite), is an awe-inspiring example. The ark was usually crafted as a large, elaborately carved structure consisting of three or four distinct levels and reaching heights of thirty or more feet. If the ceiling was not high enough, the top level of the carved ark was arranged so that it followed the pitch of the roof, looming over the congregation.

The arks featured an astonishing array of symbolic animals carrying the meaning of the Messianic age as described in the Old Testament, as well as mythical creatures, plants and foliage, fruits, crowns, hands with fingers splayed in the act of priestly blessing or healing, endless knots, columns and pediments, Decalogues, and Hebrew inscriptions, all densely worked and sometimes brightly painted and gilded. Specific animal groupings refer to descriptions in Isaiah 11:6, including "[T]he leopard shall lie down with the kid . . . ," and to a much-loved quote from the Talmud, Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:20: "Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion, to do the will of thy Father who is in heaven." The mythical creatures—Leviathan (often represented as an *ouroburos*, a coiled serpent swallowing its own tail), the bird monster Ziz, the land monster Behemoth, the phoenix, and the unicorn—gave range to the creativity of the artist, delighting the viewer's eye and reminding even the humblest person that his or her actions, here and now, could hasten the coming of the Messiah, and to prepare a place at the celestial banquet in the "world to come."

## Eastern European Jewish Gravestones

Jewish gravestones that date from the same period as carved synagogue arks and Jewish papercuts are part of the very same artistic tradition. Unlike many arks and unlike papercuts, however, gravestones were not pierced through but cut in bas-relief; their imagery and lettering are therefore denser and heavier. Some gravestones were even painted with symbolic colors to further enhance the sculpted images. The same vocabulary of Messianic symbols, especially appropriate to all the waiting dead, is also found on these gravestones. In addition, the stones feature signs and symbols, words and verses that relate to the deceased person and his or her manner of life, and prayers, psalms, and sayings selected by the bereaved. An 1872 gravestone (below), for example, features a rampant lion of Judah guarding a Torah crown and the five books of the Bible, or Pentateuch, indicating that the deceased was a scholar of the Torah.

Ark of the synagogue in Olkienniki, Lithuania, eighteenth century

MURRAY ZIMILES

1872 gravestone, Siret, Romania

The Hebrew lettering on the gravestones is often beautifully formed and frequently achieves typographical strength and elegance. Originality, playfulness, and craft all combine to enhance the lettering, whose source and inspiration could have been the calligraphy on marriage contracts, books, and illuminated manuscripts. The epitaphs, sometimes in Yiddish and often flowery and laudatory, are joined with quotations from the Bible and the Talmud that speak of the deceased as pious, learned, charitable, or righteous.

## Eastern European Jewish Papercuts

To this day, papercutting is thought of as a Polish tradition, so pervasively were papercuts used in Polish homes. Central and eastern Poland, where the greatest number of Polish Jews lived, was the center of papercutting, which was practiced by Jews and Gentiles alike. Most of the known Polish papercuts date from the second half of the nineteenth century, when paper had become relatively inexpensive. In 1856, aniline dyes were discovered and quickly became the chief agent for coloring paper. The peasants' love of color and pattern could now be satisfied more easily and cheaply than with textiles. Papercuts were used to decorate walls, ceiling beams, and windows, and for weddings and both Jewish and Christian holidays. Mizrahs (such as the example on page 47), were made mainly for domestic use and hung in the home to indicate the direction of Jerusalem and of prayer. It always contains the word *mizrah* (East) itself or a phrase for which *mizrah* is an acronym.

Jewish papercuts are steeped in Jewish symbolism and imagery and were made primarily by schoolboys, their teachers, and grown men from all walks of life. They have much in common with the skillfully carved synagogue arks. Just as the pictorial elements of the papercuts are held


כתר מלכים
זאת נדב
הנגיד ונדבן
מפורסם מה
יוסף במ
יהודא לי
מוליי


VLADIMIR NAIKHIN

◀ **MENORAH AND HORNS OF PLENTY**
Artist unidentified
United States
Late nineteenth or early twentieth century
Paint on cut paper
22¼ × 19½"
Free Library of Philadelphia, Rare Book Department

**MIZRAH** ▶
Artist unidentified
Ostrów-Masowiecka, Poland
1890–1891
Ink on cut paper
21 × 20½"
The Gross Family Collection, Tel Aviv, 036.011.010

together by a tracery of connecting plant forms or webs of delicate lines, carved arks were often pierced, allowing light to shine through and turn the elements into silhouettes when backlit. Papercuts also feature many of the same ritual and symbolic motifs found on arks, but certain elements, such as menorahs (see above and left), endless knots, and idealized depictions of Jerusalem, appear more often in papercuts. Lettering is also far more abundant, since the function of a papercut often is to supply verses and prayers for the holidays. Some papercuts are adorned with magical Kabbalistic formulas, acronyms, and diagrams. Often, uncut areas of the paper were painted with watercolors to depict animals, plant motifs, and even the human form. The final image was then attached to a colored sheet that acted as a contrasting background.

### New World Synagogue Carvings

In a short period of just thirty-five years, from about 1890 to 1925, the greatest era of American Jewish carving was born, flowered, and died. It is difficult to know how many of the synagogues that were newly erected or established in existing church buildings by immigrant Jews contained carved arks or even papercuts. Thousands may have; hundreds certainly did. Examples exist in small towns and in larger cities across North America. Unfortunately, so much was destroyed, and so much was abandoned, that little remains to be seen.

In the Old World, the ark was guarded not only by lions but by other creatures, both mythical and real. In North America, Australia, and England, where Jews immigrated to escape persecution, paired lions became the primary guardians. A spirit less fantastical and more realistic seems to have come into play immediately in the New World. The pressure to expect and to bring about Messianic deliverance was not the same; the "world to come" was perhaps less urgently awaited. Attention turned to the hope and promise of the here and now.

New World lions are depicted in myriad ways but are, almost without exception, gilded. Many are fierce guardians with straining muscles and threatening expressions—mouths open, painted red and revealing sharp teeth, and protruding eyes fixed in a hypnotic stare, painted red


LIONS, DECALOGUE, AND EAGLE
Artist unidentified
Scranton, Pennsylvania
c. 1920
Paint and gold paint on wood with lightbulbs
74 × 85 × 11½"
Collection of Rabbi David A. Whiman

AUGUST BANDAL

or embellished with red glass or even electric lightbulbs (see above), which serve to draw the viewer's gaze toward the ark and the Decalogue. Some lions, however, such as the pair attributed to Isaac Sternberg (opposite), are docile, almost sweet creatures, beasts that seem more inclined to charm than to fight.

These sentinels on either side of the Decalogue are typically supported by elaborate floral scrollwork, adding rhythm, color, and ornament to the ensemble. The plant forms usually derive from classical and baroque traditions, in the form of stylized acanthus vines and leaves, as in the ark expressions in Eastern European synagogues. The Decalogue itself displays the Ten Commandments in Hebrew, typically in the order listed in Exodus. The script is calligraphic and usually painted gold, and the background is most often painted blue, for heaven, or white, for purity. More elaborate assemblages feature the hands of a *kohen* in the act of priestly blessing (see above). Crowns are depicted as bejeweled, splendid objects above the Torah, carved in high relief or as flat, truncated heart shapes resting on an ornate base. A few crowns are topped with a large Star of David, a motif rarely seen on Old World crowns.


AUGUST BANDAL

LIONS, DECALOGUE, AND HANDS OF A KOHEN FROM ANSHE EMETH SYNAGOGUE
Marcus Charles Illions (1865/1874–1949)
Coney Island, Brooklyn, New York
c. 1920
Paint, gold paint, and gold leaf on wood with glass eyes
32¾ × 71⅜ × 9"
The Sea Breeze Jewish Center, Brooklyn, New York

The eagle also assumed a place of prominence on American arks, but the double-headed imperial eagle of Russia, Prussia, and Austria and Poland's single royal eagle gave way to the American bald eagle as a crowning symbol. Centrally located, wings evenly spread, fearsome and majestic, the eagle watches over the congregation.

### The Sacred to the Secular

The names of a few Jewish woodcarvers who immigrated to America have been rescued from obscurity, and some facts of their lives and works are known. Abraham Shulkin (1852–1918) came from what today is Belarus and settled as a cattle dealer in Sioux City, Iowa. More than most carvers in the New World, Shulkin retained the look and feel of the Old World carving and cutting styles. In 1899, he carved one of North America's greatest known arks, for the Adas Yeshurun Synagogue in Sioux City (now in the collection of the Jewish Museum, New York). In this ark, a delicate tracery of vines and shoots entraps the animals and vases. Leaves, grapes, and flowers bend to fill the empty spaces in the tight composition. Some elements, such as the interlaced menorah and the Star of David, show Shulkin's familiarity with papercutting. It is likely that he made papercuts as preliminary plans for his arks.

Samuel Katz (1885–?) was born near L'vov in present-day Ukraine and was trained, just as his father and grandfather were, as a cabinetmaker. Seeking economic opportunity and fearful of being drafted into the czarist

LIONS OF JUDAH FROM SHAAREI ELI TORAH ARK
Attributed to Isaac Sternberg (Itzok the Schnitzer) (dates unknown)
Philadelphia
c. 1918
Paint, metallic paint, and gold leaf on wood
47 × 25 × 11" each
National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia, gift of Congregation Shaarei Eli, 1984.32.1a, b

GAVIN ASHWORTH

army, Katz left his family and sailed to America in 1907, settling in Troy, New York, where his cousin and sponsor lived. By 1910, he had saved enough money to bring over his wife and children. That same year, he carved his first two American arks, for synagogues in Albany and Saratoga Springs, New York. Throughout the 1920s and '30s, Katz built the arks for approximately two dozen congregations in the greater Boston area. The average cost of an ark, negotiated according to its size and the number of animals commissioned, was about $700, a sum that was often paid in installments. Katz usually started carving without having created models or preliminary drawings. The average ark took two to three months to complete. When finished, the sections were transported to the synagogue for installation. Katz, like most of the artists in Eastern Europe, did not sign his arks, considering them, no doubt, to be sacred work. As far as can be determined, he was the most prolific ark builder in America; thus far, twenty-three arks have been attributed to him.

It is not known who carved the main part of the great ark of the Shaarei Eli Synagogue in Philadelphia (now in the collection of the National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia). It is known, however, that Isaac Sternberg (dates unknown), also known as "Itzok the Schnitzer," carved the ark lions and that he was influenced by the work of the Philadelphia Toboggan Company and by G.A. Dentzel, Steam and Horsepower Carrousel Builder—enterprises that specialized in making carousel animals. Expressive, realistically depicted animals and highly ornate, imaginative, and skillful woodcarvings were hallmarks of the Philadelphia Style of carousel carving—characteristics that can also be found in the pair of lions Sternberg carved for the ark of Congregation Shaarei Eli (above).

Shulkin, Katz, and Sternberg exemplify the many anonymous immigrant carvers in the New World who continued working in an Old World religious tradition. There were others, however, who bridged the gap between the insular world of pious Jewish life and the raucous commercial and secular world all around them. In the process of acclimating to a new life, and in spreading out from the points of first landing, the artisans encountered the commercial world of advertising and entertainment. Many immigrant artists and craftsmen took up the business of producing shop signs, cigar-store Indians, circus wagons, carnival booths, and figureheads of all kinds. And they experienced secular approaches to leisure time, which for many began to replace the ordained rest of the Sabbath.

With newly created trolley and subway lines in New York, it was now possible to transport the urban populace to nearby beaches and to amusement parks such as those emerging in Coney Island at the time. Entrepreneurs had begun building these contained parks because of the incredible potential of the entertainment market for a growing working and middle class. Conceived and constructed as architectural fantasies, they featured domed buildings, lagoons, and minarets whose silhouettes were illuminated at night with hundreds of thousands of small electric lights, becoming apparitions against the dark sky. The amusement parks catered to families by creating exciting and relatively wholesome entertainment.

Competition to attract the masses of visitors spurred owners to hire carvers and painters to make elaborate

entrances. Rides inside the park and carousels all required the skills of such craftsmen to create near-life-size horses and chariots and to decorate walls with fantastic beasts and complex scrollwork. Many of the artisans were skilled Jewish craftsmen from Eastern Europe—and some of these were the same men who carved the sacred arks in American synagogues.

Glorious carvings came to life in the workshops of the carousel makers, a number of which were, in fact, established by Eastern European Jews. The best known and most innovative of those artists may have been Lithuanian-born Marcus Charles Illions (1865/1874–1949), whose horses are spirited creatures with realistic expressions (some even baring bad teeth). They seem exhausted from their eternal gallop—tongues hanging out, wild eyes protruding, disheveled manes cascading or flying in the air—and one can almost feel the lather on their skin. This sense of realism was based on Illions's intimate knowledge of equine behavior and movement. A lover and owner of horses, he was often seen at the racetracks, where he studied the young thoroughbreds. Before starting to carve a new animal, Illions made life-size preliminary drawings that he sometimes transferred to cardboard and used to determine the size of the laminated blocks to be carved. A stickler for perfection, Illions carved all the heads himself and often finished the bodies as well. His carousel horses (see opposite, bottom) are characterized by their energy, classical proportions, exquisitely carved ornate trappings, and precise anatomical detail. He took great pride in his achievements and was one of the few carvers to sign his name; he even carved his own portrait on the horses he admired the most. Illions never ceased to innovate. In order to bring out the dramatic chiaroscuro effect of his carvings and to make them glisten under the carousel lights, he pioneered the use of gold and aluminum leaf on manes and trimmings. Illions's trappings show his creative ingenuity at work, and styles from different periods are often combined on one horse.

Illions, along with other distinguished Jewish immigrant artisans of the Coney Island Style of carousel carving, such as Charles Carmel (1865–1931) and partners Solomon Stein (1882–1937) and Harry Goldstein (1867–1945), revolutionized the level of artistry associated with the American carousel. Their memories of the magnificent, towering Torah arks, gravestones, papercuts, and other liturgical forms that imbued life in the Old World were part of the shared experiences they brought to bear in a fresh arena. The pervasive visual iconography of lions, deer, eagles, Leviathans, and other symbolic creatures was newly manifested in the animals and decorative elements of amusement-park rides and carousels. The deeply gouged and fully dimensional carving techniques, pierced-through scrollwork, and foliate forms that adorn sacred carvings and papercuts are echoed in pierced manes, garlanded flowers, and feathered ornamentation. The traditional ark lion, with its fiercely expressive face, open mouth, and bared teeth, its wild mane curling in snakelike tendrils or layered like fish scales or leaves, was a familiar motif that was reinterpreted in the flying manes of the horses, which might be similarly layered or tangled as gnarled roots, and then gilded like those of the ark lions.

Stylistic continuity is seen most dramatically in Illions's carousel lions (see pages 42–43). As in his ark lions, tails project and sharply return to rest on backside flanks. Lifelike manes cascade down the necks and are finely modeled, and the paws are clearly delineated. The ark lions (see page 48) strain as they lean against the Decalogue, and their musculature, like that of the carousel lion, is more detailed and less stylized than the work of other carvers. The animals' claws are extended, and their expressions are animated, presenting a forbidding aspect. These are not animals to be trifled with. Illions brought to both his ark lions and his carousel animals a skill of carving that has rarely been equaled. It is somewhat ironic that he was the only Coney Island carver who is actually documented as having also carved for synagogues, given the fact that he—in contrast to Carmel, Stein, and Goldstein—spent much of his life removed from the primary center of traditional Jewish life.


From left: Solomon Stein, Harry Goldstein, Charles Carmel, unidentified, Marcus Charles Illions, and unidentified, 1906, collection of the Frederick Fried Archives, photo courtesy Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York

With laws ending the era of mass immigration in the mid-1920s, the onset of the Great Depression, and the upward mobility and Americanization of the immigrant Jews and their children, the great era of American Jewish religious and secular woodcarving came to an end. We shall never know all that we long to know of the Jewish artisans, but we do have a sense of what they brought in their hearts and memories from the vanished Eastern European towns. We can see the exuberant life that burst forth from their chisels and brushes when they found it was possible to live and, yes, flourish as Jews in America. ★

*Murray Zimiles, the guest curator of "Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel," is an artist and Kempner Distinguished Professor at Purchase College, State University of New York, where he teaches in the School of Art and Design.*

TOP: AUGUST BANDAL; BOTTOM: KEN HICKS