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ART

Faith and Fantasy at the Carousel

By CELIA McGEE

FOR many years, beginning with the birth of his son in 1984, the artist Murray Zimiles devoted himself to depicting the Holocaust in works that now reside in museum collections. He felt it might help him exorcise personal dybbuks from a Brooklyn childhood darkened by his relationship with a stepmother who had survived the horrors.

Learning of the destruction of Eastern Europe's wooden synagogues from an old book stacked on a remainder pile, he depicted their violent eradication in his art to mourn and commemorate the annihilation of a culture.

He combed Russia, Poland, Romania and other countries for his research, and on a 1994 trip through Poland was stunned by the objects in Warsaw's [Jewish Museum](#), neglected but priceless.

"I was brushing off a silver menorah when I saw a dusty wooden carving of two lions and a Decalogue in the corner," he said, "and I heard a guy behind me say, 'You can find stuff like that in America too.'" It was Samuel Gruber, the former director of the Jewish Heritage Council of the World Monuments Fund.

Mr. Zimiles became determined to connect the dots between Jewish visual culture in Europe and America, a topic that had been largely ignored. In more than a decade of exploration, he found that in Jewish communities from Sioux City, Iowa, to the influential Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati, to towns in central and northern New York State, the traditional materials, styles and motifs of European Jewish art makers continually resurfaced in religious and domestic artifacts.

But the most surprising part of his bread-crumbs trail was carousel art.

Perfecting by Jewish carvers steeped in communal memories and skills handed down through generations, the carousels that Mr. Zimiles found capped an age-old tradition of sacred and secular Jewish art that used biblical, folkloric and Messianic symbols: lions, eagles, unicorns, roses, crowns, Decalogues and the blessing hands of the priestly kohen.

Now, together with the senior curator Stacy Hollander, Mr. Zimiles has organized an exhibition exploring this imagery, "Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel," which opens on Tuesday at the American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan.

In addition to carved synagogue ornamentation, unimaginably intricate paper cuttings and wooden models of synagogues, the curators have gathered a dozen carousel horses, a lion and a dragon by Jewish artisans who called on memories and their training in their homelands for their craft.

For Jews, the "vocabulary in Eastern Europe was Messianic," Mr. Zimiles said. "Jews were persecuted to the point

that their only hope was that the Messiah would come.”

He speculates that once they came to America “and found freedom — found that their efforts would get them places” — much of that imagery vanished.

“They seemed not to need it anymore,” he said. Yet it was transformed in exuberant ways in the resplendent carousel carvings in the amusement parks of the New World.

The exhibition comes at a time when appreciation is growing in some quarters for this art, but when vintage amusement parks are increasingly imperiled.

This month, Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) announced a \$2 million plan to restore the B&B Carousell, the last of the Coney Island merry-go-rounds, fabricated in Brooklyn in 1919, and make it a starring feature of a park proposed as part of the playland area’s restoration and renewal. Two of the carousel’s master carvers — Marcus Charles Illions, born in Russia, and Charles Carmel, who immigrated here in 1883 — are prominently represented in the show at the folk art museum.

“Amusement parks weren’t just places for kids in those days,” said John F. Kasson, a professor of history and American studies at the [University of North Carolina](#) and the author of “Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century.” “You went to get away from your family and neighbors, and to meet people.” Such leisure activities transformed the Sabbath.

Mr. Zimiles, an artist and a professor in the School of Art and Design at SUNY Purchase, lives in the foothills of the Catskills, in Millerton, N.Y. There he designed and built a house “based on a little Cubist painting of a French village, a [Picasso](#),” and a studio inspired by the architecture of the wooden synagogues of prewar Poland, with their skillfully simple exteriors and richly decorated interiors, systematically destroyed in the course of the Holocaust.

“The vented roof is like a cupola; it lets in light and air,” Mr. Zimiles said. He is surrounded by some of his new paintings, color-filled works that blend animal shapes, computer-generated spatial distortions and the legacy of the nearby Hudson River School in pictures that, he said, “both acknowledge and violate the landscape tradition.

“A light-bulb moment,” he said, sparked his decision to travel back and forth between Eastern Europe and America to link the folk art creations. In a 1984 exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan, “The Jewish Heritage in American Folk Art,” organized jointly with the folk art museum, he saw cigar-store Indians, store signs, personal items — and carousel creatures.

For decades, conventional wisdom and scholarship had virtually discounted the existence of a vibrant Jewish visual culture. “One of the areas not approached much in the past was Jewish folk art,” said Gerard Wertkin, a former director of the museum. “People thought it was largely a question of oral traditions, song and narrative — that Judaism abhorred visual art.”

Studying a photograph of Mr. Illions and other carvers in his workshop in that show, Mr. Zimiles noticed a carved Decalogue hanging above the door. Four made and signed by Mr. Illions have since been traced.

Mr. Illions, Mr. Carmel and others helped evolve the so-called Coney Island School of carousel carving, anchored

in the here and now and characterized by a greater realism and expressiveness than its European counterparts. Mr. Zimiles noted that the heads of Mr. Carmel's feisty horses, for example, were unnaturally large, to accentuate their expressions.

Mr. Illions, whose father had been a horse trader in Russia, "grew up with horses," Mr. Zimiles said, and in Brooklyn lived near a racetrack.

The elaborate trappings on the animals mixed historical adornment — knightly armor, feathered saddle blankets, fairy-tale jewels — with American symbols like the Stars and Stripes and bunched roses that resemble the Old Testament flowers in synagogue art. The tossing manes and rearing stances recall synagogue carvings as well. Mr. Zimiles said the flick of the tail on a Coney Island lion by Illions replicates the tail position of lions guarding Torah arks.

Among the other prominent carvers were Solomon Stein and Harry Goldstein, who made the animals for the 1908 Central Park Carousel, still in use today. "It's amazing to think that millions of children have ridden them," Mr. Zimiles said, "and don't know who made them." The horses bob up and down beneath canopies whose shapes echo the roofs of the European shetls' temples.

Mr. Zimiles said that research on American Jewish folk art was still in its early stages, with much left to be done.

"Hopefully this will stimulate the whole field to open up," he said. "There are so many topics that students and scholars could pursue," starting with old advertisements in *The Jewish Daily Forward* and synagogue record books.

Mr. Zimiles has no photographs from his family past in his home. But for him, the monumental golden Hebrew letters on a wall at the exhibition's entrance, which translate as "Art and Spirit," contain his multitudes.

"I used to weep because the greatest folk art heritage in the world had been destroyed," he said. "But now there's this."

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