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'Gilded Lions And Jeweled Horses'

By **Frances McQueeney-Jones Mascolo** Oct 2nd, 2007

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NEW



A carousel horse with a raised head was carved by Charles Carmel with fish scales, feathers and, improbably, a pistol on his flank. He is jeweled and has glass eyes and an open mouth with imposing teeth.

YORK CITY:From the solemnity of the tabernacle to the tinny tunes of the carousel comes a seemingly unlikely association, yet there is a common thread, one that bespeaks the unsurpassed artistic Jewish carving traditions in America during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries.

Immigrant Jewish artisans who arrived in America in the late Nineteenth Century were imbued in the Eastern and Central European skills and traditions of woodcarving. Schooled in the art of carving horses, eagles, foliage and fruit for Torah Arks and gravestones, these artists expanded their mediums, creating fanciful figures for the newly burgeoning carousel industry. "Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel," on view at the American Museum of Folk Art (AFAM) through March 23, explores the traditions of this select group of carvers through their religious and fanciful works.

"More than two decades have passed since this artistic terrain was first explored," states Gerald Wertkin, AFAM's director emeritus, in the foreword of the *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses* book. "If anything, that terrain seems even more hallowed today. It is an appropriate moment to return, to explore further and, once again, to marvel."

AFAM first explored Jewish folk traditions with the widely acclaimed 1984 exhibition "The Jewish Heritage in American Folk Art," jointly organized with The

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Jewish Museum. Artist and scholar Murray Zimiles was inspired to continue researching Jewish folk art in both Europe and America; the new exhibition, catalog and corresponding book, *Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel*, are the result of more than 20 years of efforts for AFAM's guest curator.



An imposing 36-by-48-inch Decalogue with lions and a large crown was carved around 1882 by an unknown artist, probably in Ohio. The ferocity of the lions, their rolling tongues and Medusa-like manes appears again and again in religious imagery and carousel figures.

Many of the new arrivals settled in New York's Lower East Side and Brooklyn and initially found work carving for neighborhood synagogues. At the same time, the carousel industry had gained a significant place in America, and with the emergence of street cars that placed amusement parks at the end of the line, further opportunities for talented carvers were created. In New York City, Coney Island and its carousel workshops became just a streetcar ride away for talented carvers.

In New York and Philadelphia, where immigrants arrived from locations with strong carving traditions, such as Germany, Italy and Eastern Europe, carousels became highly popular and the shops that produced them prospered.

The earliest carousels in the United States appeared around 1825, although it was not until 1867 that Gustav Dentzel built his first carousel. Charles I.D. Loeff, a Danish-born immigrant, was commissioned to produce his first carousel for Coney Island, going into operation in 1876 with a well received group of highly realistic animals. Over the course of his life, Loeff created about 40 carousels, several roller coasters and Ferris wheels, and the Santa Monica Pier.

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The Coney Island style of woodcarving took root in Looff's workshop where such artists as Marcus Charles Illions, Solomon Stein, Harry Goldstein and Charles Carmel all worked at one time or another. Those artists incorporated the symbolism of Torah Arks, papercutting and other liturgical elements from Eastern Europe into their animal carvings in the New World. It is that connection between religious and secular arts that is thoroughly explored in the exhibition.



A late Nineteenth Century Torah Ark ornament of the Decalogue topped by priestly hands was made in the vicinity of Hartford, Conn.

Stacy C. Hollander, senior curator at the American Folk Art Museum, said the exhibit also illustrates how these highly talented Jewish artists used the exact same codified liturgical and rabbinical iconography across all media. "It was exciting for us because this is the first time ever that this tradition of woodcarving in America is being brought to light." She added that until now these "highly significant carvings were completely unrecognized and remained in Judaica circles."

Jewish woodcarving in Central and Eastern Europe emanated from the synagogue where Torah Arks, designed to contain sacred Torah scrolls, were regarded as important religious symbols. Frequently towering wood constructions, carved

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fantastically, they sometimes measured up to 30 feet tall. Densely carved and decorated with animals, fruit and foliage and columns, they were often painted in vibrant colors and gilded. Synagogue architecture and Torah Arks are said to have proliferated from the late Seventeenth to the late Eighteenth Centuries in Galicia, a heavily forested region with a large Jewish population.

When Torah Arks were lit from behind, the illumination created a filigree effect that may have translated into the art of papercutting, a technique similar to the grammar school technique of folding paper and making cuts to form designs. They were then painted with animals, plants or human figures, elements seen in Torah Arks. They were often used as preliminary plans by Ark carvers. Jewish papercutting was done mostly by men, primarily in Poland and mainly in the second half of the Nineteenth Century.



The fierce lion by Marcus Charles Illions, circa 1910, is ferocious in posture and countenance. He roars and shows his impressive teeth, his tail is switched back indicating a readiness to pounce and his musculature, right down to his substantial feet, suggests a force with which to be reckoned.

Papercutting in the United States was prevalent in the late Nineteenth and early part of the Twentieth Centuries. Papercuts were used in the home for prayer and celebration or given to friends; some were sold by peddlers. One papercut on view, made by Abraham Shulkin, who immigrated to Sioux City, Iowa, may have been a template for the design of a Torah Ark that he carved there.

Torah Arks in America were carved with the animals cited in the precepts of the Ethics of the Fathers: lions, deer, eagles and leopards; and with Decalogues and the hands of the priests. Ferocious lions are generally gilded, open mouthed with sharp teeth and protruding eyes that were sometimes made of red glass and lit from behind for added effect. They stand alongside the Decalogue with robustly carved manes flaring and cascading in the breeze.

Jewish carvers at work on carousel animals and other figures incorporated the traditions and design elements used in synagogue architecture, Torah Arks and papercutting into their new trade. Carousel figures, cigar store and other trade figures, ladies' combs, furniture and circus chariots routinely received the treatments. Many of the carvers had their

workshops in the vicinity of Coney Island, yet as they moved from workshop to workshop, regional carving styles evolved.

Carousel animals were typically carved in three postures: standers with at least three hooves on the ground, prancers with the rear hooves on the ground and the front in the air, and jumpers with all their hooves in the air.

Marcus Charles Illions, a Lithuanian-born Jewish carver who either worked for Loeff or supplied him with horses from his own shop, produced animals notable for their flamboyant animation and fanciful decoration. Photographs of the Brooklyn workshop of Illions reveal his synagogue carvings alongside his carousel animals. His especially vigorous and realistic horses can be attributed to his equestrian heritage.



A photograph of the interior of the M.C. Illions and Sons shop, circa 1910-1912, reveals a Torah Ark pediment carving of lions and the Decalogue above the doorway and drawings for a tiger carousel figure and a lion. Illions himself faces the camera and he is surrounded by an array of horses in creation.

Illions carved his carousel horses with blazing manes, rolling eyes and tongues and flying hooves; he adorned them with fancy flowers and jewels, fully pierced scrollwork and foliage, all borne out with hand chisels, knives and hammers. Similar forms are found throughout his known and attributed religious carvings.

Illions, who had arrived in the United States in 1888 at the age of 17, opened his own company in 1909. He fashioned all his own tools and carved all the animal heads himself. M.C. Illions and Sons produced entire carousels, including the Supreme, a 54-foot platform that carried 74 horses, four abreast, and two chariots. The company advertised "Circus Wagons," "Hand Sculptured Horses," "Highest Class Carousels" and "Show Fronts," and produced the chariot ticket booth at Coney Island's Luna Park. He is also known to have created four sets of Ark lions for Brooklyn synagogues.

Shortly after Illions opened his company, immigrants Solomon Stein and Harry Goldstein opened their Artistic Carousel Manufacturing Company nearby, producing exceptionally large and beautiful muscular horses on carousels. The carousels

were large enough to support five and six rows across and were capable of seating more than 100 people at one time. Artistic Carousel made 17 complete carousels, including the one in New York City's Central Park, which continues to operate today. Stein and Goldstein, who also included ladies' hair combs in their creative repertoire, are believed to have only produced horse figures for their carousels, decorating them with fanciful garlands of flowers.



Charles Carmel's patriotic jumper, circa 1910, is bejeweled and decorated with red, white and blue bunting and an eagle. The eagle has a double significance as an icon of the United States and an important figure in Jewish tradition.

The Russian-born and -trained Charles Carmel arrived in the United States in 1883 at age 18 and he was first an apprentice under Illions at Loeff's shop. The two later worked together with Stein and Goldstein for William F. Mangels. Carmel created powerful figures of horses with strong legs, but modified their aggressive aspect with jewels, buckles, flowers, feathers and fringe and cheery bright colors. Their sweet expressions belied any fierceness. One horse on view has a gun on his right flank. So realistic are Carmel's horses, that some even have bad teeth.

The exhibit itself is a document of the influence of immigrant Eastern European Jews on American folk art. It delineates the ways in which a traditional culture took root in the New World and reinterpreted itself in a straightforward merging of the sacred and secular. Zimiles writes in his preface to the catalog, "This is the story of a tradition that, when released from surrounding oppression and prejudice, and even its own orthodoxy, could respond to the new environment and engage the world with playfulness and joy. It is the story of how a people's crafts became a mirror that reflected ways in which both the sacred and the worldly found room for each other in New World society."

The exhibition catalog, *Gilded Lions And Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel*, is available from the American Folk Art Museum. The museum is at 45 West 53rd Street. For

information, 212-265-1040 or www.folkartmuseum.org.

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