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The Great Heights of Lowly Merriment Museums

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'Even lowly merriment has its ultimate origin in holiness," wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel. They may not have known it at the time, but many New Yorkers had their first hint of Torah joy on the Coney Island carousel. Until now, historical and aesthetic links between the synagogue and the carousel have not been documented. But "Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel" at the American Folk Museum establishes the record.

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Jewish folk traditions and the skills formed within Eastern and Central European village environments are not staples of the folk repertory. Unlike Pennsylvania Dutch frakturs, for example, polychromed Hispanic santos or Shaker designs, Jewish contributions are not in wide currency. Much of that visual folk heritage was lost with the destruction of European Jewry during World War II. Even the eminent postwar study "Life Is With People: the Culture of the Shtetl" states: "Jewish folk art is chiefly verbal. . . . There is no equivalent to the peasant embroideries, or the elaborate paper cutouts made by the Poles."

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"GildedLionsandJeweledHorses: The Synagogue to the Carousel" counters the view that Jewish folk culture is inhospitable to imagery. It seeks to affirm, as Gerard Wertkin states in the catalog, the sense of awe and

delight in the visual that El Lissitzky (1890–1941) experienced visiting wooden synagogues in the Ukraine nearly a century ago. In America, the iconography of the carousel reached exuberant heights, and this exhibition showcases Jewish participation in that flourishing.

The story of the American carousel begins with Gustav Dentzel, a Rhineland cabinetmaker who emigrated in the 1860s. He brought with him a portable horse-driven carousel carved by his father, Michael. Dentzel set up shop in the Philadelphia area where he introduced what is now considered the first carousel in the Western hemisphere. He also added a menagerie (ostriches, giraffes, lions, kangaroos, goats and more) to the traditional horses and chariots.

The fledgling Dentzel Carousel Company hired many immigrant German and Italian carvers who were classically trained in the old country as sculptors' apprentices and carvers of statuary. Later, Yiddish-speaking craftsmen came in large numbers, joining the — by then — dozens of carousel factories. Eastern European carving skills, often acquired for synagogue purposes, found a use in this secular setting.

Charles Loeff, a Dane from Schleswig-Holstein, carved his first carousel out of scraps from the Brooklyn furniture factory where he worked. In 1876, he installed it in a popular beach pavilion at a newly developed district called Coney Island. It was the Nickel Empire's first carousel. His workshop employed some of the most talented immigrant artisans before they set off on their own. Among them were Russian-born Charles Carmel and the Lithuanian Marcus Illions. The two men worked together once again when, along with fellow Russians Solomon Stein and Harry Goldstein, they carved for amusement park entrepreneur William Mangels. All four carvers enriched American carousel art by dramatizing and embellishing the conventions of the initial Philadelphia style. As the carousel movement expanded, they spread the spirited, fanciful Coney Island style around the country and gave the American carousel a distinctive élan. The exhibition revolves around the work of these four.

Carmel established his own shop near the stables in Prospect Park to stay close to good models. Illions, an avid rider, infused his works with a sense of motion and speed. Stein and Goldstein, creators of the Central Park Carousel, produced the largest carousels ever made: life-size horses with animated heads and chain mail trappings. All four invested the carousel horse with a new flash and lively naturalism. Horses assumed more aggressive poses with manes flying and nostrils flared. Their trappings were splendid.

On display are armored jumpers by Stein and Goldstein to delight King Arthur's Court. Saddle blankets, bards, and caparisons glitter with glass jewels and gold leaf. The bridle of an Illions horse is lovingly festooned with wooden flowers. Another sports a horsehair tail. The headress on Carmel's standing horse illustrates the "fishscale" motif introduced to mimic metal plating. Illions's muscled, snarling lion holds its tail in a position identical to that of the ark of lions found at Brooklyn's Anshe Emeth Synagogue.

Curator Murray Zimiles finds the vitality of the great carousel carvers prefigured in Torah arks, the expressive symbolic motifs of European gravestones, the intricate tracery paper cuts — for sukkah decorations, mizrahs, and two-dimensional Judaica — and the luxuriant carvings of wooden synagogue interiors. He summarizes the vigor of visual traditions that enlivened the heyday of amusement parks: "Few would divine in the leaping charges, the tail-swishing lions of the great carousels, the hand of the religious Jew from the Eastern European shtetl. But here, indeed, are found the roots of some of North America's greatest folk art expressions."

Shtetl carving traditions existed side by side with strong inhibitions against the plastic arts. These were so severe that Karl Schwarz, writing in 1961 about Jewish sculptors, said: "Of all the creative arts, sculpture has been almost alien to the Jew." Yet Illions insisted on carving every horse head himself and made streaming gilded manes a signature of the Coney Island style. The entire school was built on the unrestrained embrace of three-dimensional form as well as decoration.

The exhibition does not resolve the tension between these two realities, but resolution is not needed here, and that might be asking too much of a museum show anyway. What matters is the correspondence between the art and its purposes. It aims at a pure, sweet pleasure that lasts as long as it takes the Wurlitzer to play "Beer Barrel Polka" or "The Carousel Waltz."

"Judaism is a reminder that joy is a way to God," Rabbi Heschel wrote. Do a mitzvah for the downhearted and for anxious

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