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ART REVIEW | 'GOLDEN LIONS AND JEWELLED HORSES'

Sacred Skills Thrive on a Merry-Go-RoundBy **MARTHA SCHWENDENER**

“Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel” takes the idea of artists borrowing from popular culture to create art and reverses it. Here, skills and motifs used in sacred art resurface in a surprisingly secular place: the carousel.

The artists in question were Jewish woodcarvers who arrived in the United States during the great wave of immigration between 1880 and 1920. Often they applied their skills to making furniture, cigar store figures or ladies’ combs. But leisure was becoming big business, and amusement park carousels with hand-carved wooden horses were in demand. Enter the Ashkenazi wood carver.

Every section of the show at the American Folk Art Museum, organized by Murray Zimiles, an artist and professor at Purchase College, and coordinated by Stacy C. Hollander, a senior curator at the museum, offers some sort of revelation.

In the Old World section on the third floor, you quickly understand why Eastern Europe was a breeding ground for carvers: it was the land of wood. Photographs from Ukraine and Belarus and elaborate wooden models of Polish synagogues built in the 17th and 18th centuries show how this heavily forested region provided raw material for buildings with tiered roofs and domes, heavy wood shingles and elaborately carved interiors.

Alongside photographs of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries with minutely carved gravestones are paper cuts, which look like giant, precision-cut snowflakes mounted on brightly colored paper. The tradition flourished in Poland, particularly in the second half of the 19th century, as paper grew cheaper.

Animals appear frequently, particularly those from a popular Hebrew aphorism: “Be bold as a leopard, swift as an eagle, fleet as a deer, and strong as a lion, to do the will of thy Father who is in Heaven,” as the museum renders it.

The works often include biographical elements as well. An 1877 Polish mizrah (a plaque hung in the home to indicate which direction to face when praying) by Israel Dov Rosenbaum, a clockmaker, mimics the shape of a mantel clock. Baruch Zvi Ring’s “Memorial Tablet and Omer Calendar,” made in Rochester in 1904 for a society devoted to the study of the Mishnah, the basic code of Jewish oral law, is the largest in the show and flaunts Mr. Ring’s specialized trade, Hebrew calligraphy.

On the second floor the lineage from synagogue to carousel is made explicit with religious carvings lining one wall and a display of eight carousel horses on the other. Virtually all the synagogue art here is American, since little survived World War II in Europe.

As traditions blended in the United States, Torah arks were simplified to a few basic elements. Most of the works feature two lions guarding the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, and they are almost always gilded, either with gold leaf or paint. But there is still an impressive range of interpretations. Some are carved in low relief, others in high. Haughtily regal lions share wall space with homely or comic ones.

A pediment with lions from a Jewish center in Brooklyn, carved around 1920 by Marcus Charles Illions, the Michelangelo of carousel carvers, includes elaborate, almost Rococo scroll work, while another from around 1918, attributed to Isaac Sternberg of Philadelphia, has lion heads in high relief that virtually leap off the wall.

In the carousel horses everything seen in the paper cuts and synagogue carvings is amplified. The animals are three-dimensional rather than two, and there is a greater amount of dynamism: bared teeth, tossing heads, flying manes, lavish armor decorated with glass jewels. The artists here all passed through the carousel manufacturer William F. Mangels’s shop in Brooklyn, and while they developed their own characteristics, collectively their work became known as the Coney Island Style.

Mr. Illions’s horses are proportional and lifelike. His father was a horse trader in Russia, and Mr. Illions was an avid rider, which put him close to the source. He is also one of the few craftsmen to sign his horses, usually below the saddle. The two horses here — one on the second floor and one in the lobby — show off his Baroque detailing, with roses carved on the bridle and a little human head peeking out from under

the pommel on the saddle. Mr. Illions also pioneered the use of metal leaf on the manes and tails.

Charles Carmel's horses, too, have elaborate ornamentation, like saddles with fish-scale patterns, tassels and feathers. The standers and jumper here (carousel horses were either earthbound standers or airborne jumpers) are also wildly expressive, with tongues rolling out of their mouths and rearing, twisting heads. (A sad chapter in Mr. Carmel's career came when his carousel built for Dreamland Park in Coney Island burned to the ground with the rest of the park the day before it was to open in 1911.)

Solomon Stein and Harry Goldstein made the largest hand-carved horses, and their shop produced the biggest carousels: one measured 60 feet across and carried more than 100 people. An armored horse that has lost most of its paint is here, but you can still see Stein and Goldstein's work in Central Park; their company made the carousel in use today.

One area in which the Folk Art Museum usually excels is showing the work of women who learned and practiced their crafts outside the academy or workshop. "Gilded Lions" fails on that point, but it is hardly Mr. Zimiles's or the museum's fault. Carving and paper cutting were male traditions, the latter often practiced by former rabbinical students versed in Scripture.

Another of the museum's strengths is in gathering American art from across the country. It is no different here, with Torah ark carvings from Harlan, Ky., and Fremont, Ohio, and paper cuts from Sioux City, Iowa, and Shreveport, La.

The artisans in "Gilded Lions" are an exclusive group — white, male and Jewish — but their story is fairly brief. The carousel industry faltered after World War I, and horses were later cast in fiberglass. Stein and Goldstein carved on, though after the 1920s they produced animal-shaped chairs for barbershops.

But the show reveals a vibrant Jewish visual culture when Judaism is often seen as a text-oriented one. It is also a great immigrant story, in which skills learned in the shtetls of Europe made their way to America and, for a short time, flourished.

"Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel" continues through March 23 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040, folkartmuseum.org.

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