

## INTRODUCTION

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This book is about the cultural exchange between Jews and Christians in the High and Late Middle Ages (c. 1230–1450 CE). Members of each group contributed to the other’s culture, even to their religious practices. The Christian protagonists appear more frequently in most chapters, but Jews, too, are handsomely represented. My interest in these people and their endeavors was raised while I was working on the history of the West European marketplace and its financial services. Moneylenders, Jews and non-Jews, could not always count on notarized contracts to secure the loans they were extending, and required tangible objects as collateral. They became, in fact, pawnbrokers. This fact led me to undertake the present project.

Jews would often have in their possession artistic objects from the surrounding society. Even if held for a limited time, these objects were most likely influential in shaping the possessors’ own art. The idea of looking at the Christian environment when studying Jewish ritual objects was raised in 1960 by Mordechai Narkiss, then the director of the Bezalel Art Museum in Jerusalem. He was studying the shape of a Jewish ritual object—the spice box—known in Hebrew as a *besamim* box or *hadass* (myrtle). This small elegant object (see fig. 24) frequently shaped like a tower, is used in the concluding moments of the Sabbath and of holidays when the fragrance spread from the box announces the beginning of a new week. Narkiss noticed that originally these *besamim* (perfume) boxes were similar in shape to Christian reliquaries labeled in German as *Monstranz*. Jewish moneylenders, Narkiss suggested, must have kept such reliquaries as pawns to guarantee the loans they provided. To support this hypothesis he provided a dozen references showing how medieval Jews accepted Christian liturgical articles as securities. As if in support of this suggestion, Parisian art historian Victor Klagsbald noticed that in the sixteenth century, goldsmiths in Frankfurt called the *besamim-hadass* box a *Judenmonstranz*. Meyer Shapiro, the nestor of the discipline, would agree with Narkiss. He had no hesitation writing about “the intimate

bond between Christian and Jewish culture in the middle ages in spite of the separateness of the communities.”<sup>1</sup>

Materials for this enterprise came from all corners of the Latin West. Fourteen years of searching did not provide me with enough data to concentrate the study in one region, or to limit its chronology to a span of time shorter than three centuries. The field of observation had to be extended in order to cover all aspect of the story I wished to tell. Even so, it is more than probable that I have not discovered all the information that could be of relevance. Thus, precious evidence has come to my attention since I first submitted the manuscript to the publisher and other relevant materials are sure to surface following the publication.

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The first part of this book, chapters 1 to 3, is devoted to a study of the exchange of cultural values in the medieval money market and to the venues of their transmission. Here we can observe the cross cultural exchange of material objects. We enter now the world of pawnbroking. In chapter 1, we meet mostly peasants and humble citizens. As can be surmised, not much in terms of beauty can be expected to be discerned from the objects that these simple people brought to the market. Their relationships with the pawnbrokers are studied through the exploration of the tribunal registers of Manosque (in Upper Provence), which indicate the rules that governed the practice of exchange and exhibit the complications and disagreements that may have arisen between the business partners. Chapter 2 exposes members of the clergy in need of credit for their monasteries and churches. They were prepared to give as securities objects that were considered sacred. By relinquishing such objects they ignored papal and ecclesiastical councils' prohibitions. Chapter 3 deals with moderate to high financial assistance that was required at times by well-to-do urban inhabitants and by members of the princely class. There were situations in which even members of royalty borrowed from Jewish moneylenders. Much more aesthetic value (at least to the modern eye) was present in the objects brought to the pawnbrokers' premises by this

<sup>1</sup> Mordechai Narkiss, “The Origin of the Spice Box,” *Journal of Jewish Art* 8 (1981): 28–41. A previous version of this study was published in Hebrew in *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* 6 (1960): 189–98. See also Victor Klagsbald, “Myrte, parfum du jardin d’Eden,” in *A l’ombre de Dieu: dix essais sur la symbolique dans l’art juif* (Leuven, Belgium, 1997), 109–18 and the illustrations there. For the quote from Meyer Shapiro, see his “Introduction,” in Moshe Spitzer and Max Jaffé (eds.), *The Bird’s Head Haggada of the Bezalel National Art Museum in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 1967), 16; see also his statement on 15: “We cannot imagine the Haggadah with this ornate and lively illustration before the Middle Ages, when Christian art had created the Psalters and liturgical books with pictures.”

class of borrowers. It is not hard to imagine how Jews could have been enchanted by pledges offered by the very upper class of society. Indeed, on rare occasions they expressed their admiration for the refined taste of such securities.

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Part Two, anchored in Germanic lands, begins with chapter 4, which offers a most astounding testimonial to the influence that success had on the development of the aesthetic taste of Jewish financiers. It describes the decorations in an apartment discovered in the mid-1990s in the city of Zurich. In this apartment, between the years 1320 and 1330, lived the family of the exceedingly rich Rabbi Moses ben Menahem, the spiritual leader of the city's small community who is well known today to rabbinic scholars. Visiting the premises in the summer of 2003, I was surprised by the remains of the wall paintings that once surrounded the living room. Although in all likelihood they were painted by non-Jews, I expected nevertheless to see scenes of great moments of the biblical narrative, or, alternatively, images of impossible hybrids, of waterfowl, of unicorns or of dragons swallowing serpents, the way they appear in the decorated medieval manuscripts. Instead, the message these frescoes send is bereft of any of the fantastic and is instead one of strict realism. Moreover, neither of the two frescoes has anything do with Jews or Judaism. One of the two shows a group of men and women dancing; the other shows a man and a woman riding in what seems to be a romantic promenade. In order to better understand the cultural profile of the rabbi and (mostly) to evaluate the contribution of these wall paintings as indications of the artistic horizons of German Jews of the fourteen century, I decided (for chapter 5) to briefly review their art history in the centuries that preceded and followed these frescoes (1230–1450 CE).

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Part Three (chapters 6 and 7) will underline again the fact that the marketplace brought Jews in touch with Christian artists and craftsmen, where they learned to value their skill and expertise. That this helped to shape their sensitivity to what was considered then as beautiful is shown plainly by their preparedness to hire Christian artists and craftsmen to decorate Hebrew prayer books and to create for them objects with which Jews performed their liturgical obligations (chapter 6). These Christian professionals were not necessarily familiar with the intricacies of the Jewish religion, and when not consulting a Jew, at times committed mistakes. The late Ruth Mellinkoff went a step further and claimed that the deformed way Jews are presented in these Hebrew manuscripts was due to the hostility of these Christian painters toward the rival religion. In this

chapter I cannot subscribe to this suggestion. These deformations, I shall try to prove, followed a Jewish initiative and not a Christian one. More than that, in most manuscripts and objects that I observed I did not sense any hostility. As far as I can tell, in most cases these non-Jews wished to present an honest product to the satisfaction of the patron. This lack of rivalry or animosity brings our book to chapter 7, the last—and for me the most intriguing—chapter. It shows Jewish artists and craftsmen working together for the church and its institutions. This is unexpected, because even current historiography is still centered on instances of tension and dispute and has the story of hostility as its central preoccupation. To be sure, historians are not pointing readers in the wrong direction since much of the relations in the past were unfortunately marked by persecutions and massive bloodshed. But a study like the present volume should prepare all of us to encounter instances of tolerance, of humanity, and of collaboration that existed then, as surely as they exist now.

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The term *cultural exchange* when discussed from the point of view of the Jews means external input into their civilization. In the preceding pages we limited the discussion to art and craftsmanship and to the medieval marketplace. But other aspects of life, be it ceremonials, customs, or even communal institutions, can be subjects of examination as well. And indeed they were in the past and still are at present. In the appendix to this book I present such studies as conducted by distinguished scholars, and the reaction—some of it negative—their scholarship attracted. The towering figure of Historian Fritz (Yitzhak) Baer gets, of course, special attention. In a short addition to these pages I raise the issue of whether we can go beyond identifying influences and pointing to similarities and try to follow the channels through which these “external inputs” flowed.

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Finally, a note about the monetary terminology used in the following pages. Although several coins were in use in the medieval marketplace, the most prevalent was the *denarius*. A pound (*libra*) of silver—or most often a mixture of silver and other metals—was divided into 240 *denarii*. Twelve *denarii* made for a *solidus* (shilling), and twenty shillings made a pound. These last two denominations did not exist as coins and were just units of monetary calculation.

The present study does not use the Roman terminology but will quote salaries in pounds and shillings in order to simplify matters. A day’s salary for an unskilled laborer would rarely exceed eight *denarii*. He might rightly claim that this sum was equal to two-thirds of a shilling.