

Jewish material culture and artists' responses to it

How would modern artists respond to artefacts from Jewish history, now held at libraries and museums? This is the question that colleagues at Manchester's Centre for Jewish Studies and Northern UK and Dublin partner institutions¹ asked themselves in 2018 – and now we have some answers. Over the last 15 months, established creative artists and academics have collaborated in using 50 selected Jewish Objects as pointers to historical and contemporary Jewish life.

The resulting artistic engagement has borne thoughtful, beautiful and moving fruit.² One artwork, created by Jacqueline Nicholls, offers the viewer pristine white pages and folds sewn together as a book. That book conceals as much as it displays. In a stunning inversion of fragments from the Genizah, one glimpses handwriting through irregular openings in the blank paper – the *lacunae* are where the writing is. The placing of the sewing and the gaps evoke Manchester's famous, butterfly-shaped Genizah fragment of the *Mishneh Torah*, on which Maimonides himself can be seen formulating halakhic rules, then changing his mind.³

Another work of halakhah, Isaac ben Joseph of Corbeil's *Sefer Mitsvot Qatan*, inspired illustrator Kremena Dimitrova to create seven large, complex and vibrant comic strip panels that tell the (hi)story of Isaac and his work. The number of panels corresponds to the *SeMaQ*'s structure of seven "pillars", and its motifs echo some of the hundreds of unusual marginal illustrations which adorn this Ashkenazi manuscript dated to c.1346.⁴ Kremena's panels fuse modern styles and techniques with medieval images of hounds and hares, dragons, fishes and human figures.

The 50 Jewish Objects researcher, Dr Stefania Silvestri, reports that her encounter with circumcision wimples advanced her thinking on Jewish material culture generally. In a report completed just before going on maternity leave – and subsequently giving birth to a beautiful baby girl – Stefania argues that the emotional dimensions of such objects have a place in Jewish historiography. For Stefania, these pieces of cloth that were embroidered by female relatives of a newborn boy in certain regions of Ashkenaz from the 16th century and into which the boy at circumcision was wrapped,⁵ link ritual, cultural, emotional and gendered dimensions in the study of the Jewish historical experience.

Exploring another "textile" dimension of Jewish life, artist Helena Tomlin has created an installation of three pieces of white cloth with the hand-stitched names "Tycia", "Helena" and "Rusha". The cloths are draped on three low stands, making up a "Lodz Banquet". Originally arising from Helena's engagement with an illustrated Italian Esther scroll,⁶ the installation reflects inter-generational connections between women

¹ <http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/n-uk-js-partnership/>

² All pieces mentioned here can be seen at <http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/50-jewish-objects-artwork/?SSLoginOk=true>; other pages on the site link to artists' blogs and interviews, Dr Silvestri's blogs and the annotated list of 50 Jewish objects and other materials relating to the project.

³ For Jacqueline's impressions upon encountering this fragment, see her artist's blog on the Centre for Jewish Studies website: <http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/50-jewish-objects-blog/2019/8/29/artists-corner-handle-with-care-by-jacqueline-nicholls.html>

⁴ Digital images and a detailed description may be found at: <https://www.digitalcollections.manchester.ac.uk/view/MS-HEBREW-00031/1>

⁵ <https://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/5818c5>

⁶ <https://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/q628t4>

in “everybody’s history”. The three women named are two great-aunts and a great-grandmother of the artist, who lived in Lodz in the 1920s, after which all trace of them is lost.

Artists also brought the sound of Hebrew singing to the solemn reading room of Manchester’s John Rylands Library, where such sounds had never been heard before. In November of last year, this grand neo-Gothic building, whose stained glass windows depict the intellectual giants of Western history and Christian theology, witnessed a performance of synagogue music from 19th century Odessa. Using a book of liturgical compositions that had been hand copied in Pontypridd in 1917, members of the Menorah Synagogue Choir performed songs by the Odessa cantor Jacob Bachmann,⁷ songs that had perhaps not been sung anywhere in the world for a long time.

It was again the illustrated Esther scroll that inspired artist Nicola Dale. Alongside that scroll, a liturgical manuscript from Honan, whose Hebrew characters invoked for her the aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy,⁸ set Nicola on the path of creating the 49 printed cards and other items that together make up her artwork “Arranged in Time and Space”. A key theme of that piece is the “translation” of words into three-dimensional objects. She thus addresses, among other things, the very materiality of written culture. Or, as she says in a video that draws upon a quasi-Midrashic sensitivity to multiple meanings: “the *justification* of text and the *direction* of reading”.⁹

Researchers came together on several occasions to discuss the conceptual implications of studying Jewish material culture, presenting to each other items held at Trinity College Dublin and at the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Chester and Bangor. Memorable was also a 12 February 2020 event, at which, following short papers by Aaron Hughes (Rochester), Sami Everett (Cambridge) and Alex Samely, a meeting explored links between curating and researching Jewish objects on the one hand, and “Jewish” belonging, identity and alienation on the other, which might be experienced by the persons involved in such academic pursuits.

Alex Samely, July 2020

⁷ Images and description: <https://www.digitalcollections.manchester.ac.uk/view/MS-HEBREW-00059/1>

⁸ Images and description: <https://www.digitalcollections.manchester.ac.uk/view/MS-HEBREW-00024/1>

⁹ Interview with Nicola: <http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/50-jewish-objects-blog/2020/4/6/interview-with-the-artist-nicola-dale.html>