WHAT IS “FOLK” ABOUT SYNAGOGUE ART?

Abstract
This publication is a tribute to the memory of the outstanding folklorist and ethnographer Dov Noy, who passed away in 2013. In the scholarly discourse that classifies folklore by modes and media of transmission, synagogue art—as distinct from folk narrative and behavioral lore—is commonly categorized as “visual folklore.” This paper examines the approach of classifying murals and sculptural decoration in east and central European synagogues from the late seventeenth century until the Holocaust as “folk creations.” It suggests a revision of pre-established definitions in the field, in general, and in the analysis of representative folk narratives relating to synagogues, in particular.

The position of academic research into traditional Jewish visual culture, at the seam of art history and folkloristics, challenges predefined divisions of this integral cultural phenomenon into the conventional categories of separate disciplines. In the discourse classifying folklore according to the ways and media of its transmission, synagogue art—in distinction to folk narratives and behavioral lore—commonly falls into the category of “visual folklore,” defined as the visual domain of folk art and material culture. Jewish “folk art” is often attributed generally to “folk artists” and “craftsmen,” without a clear distinction between the two groups. This paper holistically examines the approaches to the murals and sculptural decoration in east and central European synagogues from the late seventeenth century until the Holocaust as visual folklore, craftsmanship, and artistic work, and outlines the part of oral lore in the programming and interpretation of synagogue art. Finally, it proposes to re-approach folk synagogue art as a medium that creates a visual environment for liturgical activity and predicates its viewers’ responses to the challenges, trials, and tribulations of daily life.

Between Folkloristics and Art History in Jerusalem

Professor Dov Noy’s (1920–2013) thought and personality first cast their spell over me at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the early 1990s. I met Dov Noy shortly after my first visit to a well-stocked, academic Jewish studies library, at which time I embarked on my research into synagogue art. In the library, I came across a xerographic copy of his dissertation, “Motif-Index of Talmudic-Midrashic Literature,” comprising an extension and glosses to Stith Thompson’s Motif-Index of Folk Literature.1 Dov Noy’s investigation of Judaism’s oral heritage and his mapping of its historical and geographical path in his further work embrace and encourage functionalist and semiotic approaches to folklore as communication imparting human existence with symbolic significance.2 Noy has formulated the idiosyncratic message of the Jewish folktale as “future-oriented, urging the listener to adopt an ideal or goal as yet unrealized, to improve his ways and change his attitudes.”3

The strict classification of the plots recorded in the motif-indices seemingly challenges the elusive nature of the oral narrative, which—unless recorded—is by its very nature transformed as it loses its performative context and fades with human memory.

Notes


Occasional records of similar stories told in different times and places testify to the dissemination of ideas over continents and throughout the ages. These suggest—though loosely—the routes by which certain traditions were transmitted and reveal various cultures’ peculiarities.4

The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where Dov Noy held a chair, nurtured another project reflecting the positivist tendency in folklore studies to collect and classify ideas and objects, the Index of Jewish Art.5 This index was founded by Professor Bezalel Narkiss (1926–2008) in 1974 as a complement to the Index of Christian Art established in Princeton University in 1917 and to help fulfill the dream of a catalogue raisonné of Jewish artistic heritage worldwide.6 Labeling each narrative depiction for its one or more “subjects,” the Index in Jerusalem developed some sort of universal “motif-index” of Jewish art spanning the breadth from ancient synagogue mosaics to contemporary paintings and sculptures.7 The midrashic motif-index and the iconographic register of traditional Jewish art have a few topics in common; yet, a systematic comparison of these lists has never been performed, nor has the role of the oral lore in the artist’s planning of the decorative program and the beholder’s interpretation of the images been specifically investigated.

Beginning with the primary area of Narkiss’s expertise, Hebrew illuminated manuscripts, the Index grew to include the fields that usually attracted the attention of Jewish ethnographers in the early twentieth century: ritual and ceremonial objects, sepulchral art, and synagogue architecture and decoration.8 The academic responsibility for these fields in The Hebrew University was claimed by both the Department of Art History, where these fields were treated as “Jewish art,” and the Department of Jewish and Comparative Folklore, where they were designated “Jewish visual folklore.”9

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7 See the introductory brochure to the first printed volume of the Index of Jewish Art, Bezalel Narkiss and Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, *Iconographical Index of Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976), 7–8. On the Center for Jewish Art (established in 1979), which hosts the Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art, see Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 95–96. The ideological aspects of the establishment of collections of records and documents relating to Jewish cultural heritage in the Diaspora in Israel are beyond the current discussion.


Several kinds of Jewish traditional art omitted in the Center of Jewish Art’s Index were investigated by Jerusalem-based folklorists. To name but a few of those fields subjected to rigorous study: illuminated ketubbot, ephemera, and souvenirs (Shalom Sabar), postcards (Shalom Sabar and Galit Hasan-Rokem), papercuts (Gizela Frenkel and Olga Goldberg-Mulkiewicz), and shiviti plates (Ester Juhasz). See *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*, Raphael Patai and Haya Bar-Yitshak, eds., (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2013), 197–198, 208–209, 231–232, 459, 491–492.

The position of traditional Jewish visual culture at the seam line between art history and folkloristics inevitably challenges the preformed division of the integral cultural phenomenon into conventional categories.\textsuperscript{10} The various perspectives brought to bear on the same object prompt a more comprehensive observation of the object and consequently a closer comparison of the creative process types: anonymous “folk” creation, craftsmanship, and artistic work.\textsuperscript{11} In this paper, I shall discuss these issues in the context of the rich synagogue decoration that flourished in eastern and central Europe from the late seventeenth century until the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{12} This tradition, as well as synagogue paintings and carvings from other regions and periods, is often neglected in the surveys of visual folklore and folk art in the Jewish and folklore encyclopedias that instead choose to address the ritual appurtenances, Torah scroll ornaments, fixtures and movable objects, and architecture.\textsuperscript{13}

**Oral Lore versus Folk Art**

Educators, archivists, connoisseurs, curators, and art dealers are well-served by the classification of visual arts according to their media and artistic techniques, which are more or less in keeping with the pre-contemporary artists’ traditional specializations. However, this classification fails to take into account the integrity of the beholders’ perception of their visual surroundings.

Indeed, the attendees in a typical east European synagogue shifted their field of vision between similar images and ornaments on, for instance: the stone or wooden carved Torah ark; iron-wrought, wooden, or brickwork bimah; metal or wooden ritual objects; woven or embroidered textiles; paintings and stucco reliefs on the walls; title pages of printed books sitting in their places or an old illuminated manuscript in front of the cantor; a hand-drawn, paper-cut, a lithograph shivviti plate mounted on the cantor’s pulpit; and chandeliers, candlesticks, and lamps all around. Furthermore, the very same folk received traditional lore visually and aurally: the eyes that looked at the images and patterns were located on the same heads as the ears that listened to liturgy, sermons, and folk stories.

In the discourse classifying folklore by the mode and media of its transmission, synagogue art—as distinct from the folk narrative transmitted orally—commonly falls into the category “visual folklore” or “material lore,” which is also described as the “visual domain of folk art and material culture” and as “things people make with their hands.”\textsuperscript{14} The term “folk art”—as opposed to “fine arts”—emerged at the same time as the genre was defined in the late nineteenth century under the influence of the materialist theories of artistic activity, nationalist sentiment, and the romantic belief that the folk traditions had continued without interruption from prehistoric times to the triumph of industrialization.\textsuperscript{15} Jewish folk art is usually attributed

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to folk artists and craftsmen, without a clear distinction being made between these two groups. In order to get a better notion of what is folk in synagogue art, I would like to briefly compare its nature and techniques to those of oral folklore:

1. Folk raconteurs may tell tales of their own volition, irrespective of whether certain occasions customarily demand it or whether someone else wishes them to do so. Synagogue artists, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, were dependent on their patrons, be they a group or an individual, who were in charge of the synagogue building. The inscriptions bearing names of donors and of honorees are ubiquitous in synagogues from antiquity to the present.

2. The creators of oral folklore remain anonymous; the executants of synagogue art do not, for they sign and date their work. Curiously, this is even true of non-Jewish synagogue artists, who occasionally signed their art. Over and above the likelihood that the Jewish artists were aiming to promote their reputations, their signatures imply a belief that professionally embellishing the sacred space brings with it mystical rewards; indeed, some colophons add brief personal information and praise the artist’s work as a pious act promising the commemoration of his soul. For instance, in the ceiling painting in the Pińczów synagogue’s vestibule in Poland, the signature where the artist refers to himself in the third person—as if in prayer or reciting a spell—pleads with God: “In the heights, remember for good that man, whose name is Joseph, dealing with paintings, the exalted rabbi Joseph, a sexton of the community, our community here, son of our rabbi and teacher Eliezer of blessed memory, the year [5]502 [1741/42 CE].”

3. Folk storytellers, who normally learnt the oral lore by hearing it, transmitted and, thereafter, committed it to memory. The folk tradition of making objects or depicting images is similarly deemed to be “transmitted by [the] imitation” of exemplars created within the same tradition. The practice of synagogue decoration seems to be more complex: its makers not only imitated earlier models but also invoked memory and commonly available portable samples, and sometimes even appropriated alien visual traditions. While planning their new paintings in a synagogue, the artists obviously recollected the compositions they had seen in other synagogues. When depicting figures, vista, and ornaments, they usually copied relevant drawings and printed samples from any available origin. Painted wall decorations in the early modern Polish synagogues duplicate ornamental pages in Jewish books and manuscripts and patterns from Christian sample books. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, enlarged copies of postcards and broadsheets from Europe and the Holy Land, and patterns from...
model-books were commonly painted on the walls in the synagogues of Orthodox Jewish communities in eastern Europe and of Ashkenazi synagogues in the Land of Israel.24 The same art was also introduced to the United State and Canada by east European Jewish immigrants.25 The synagogue artists probably collected models just as the church painters had since the Middle Ages.26 Synagogue painters who studied and/or started their professional careers in early twentieth-century Europe left carton files or bound piles of sample books, postcards, ephemera, and pictures torn off from illustrated books and magazines to their Israeli heirs.27

4. Storytelling was seldom a paid occupation.28 In contrast, wall painting and sculpture in the synagogues was neither truly domestic labor (Hausfleiss in Rieg's parlance) nor a mere hobby engaged in for the aesthetic pleasure. It was rarely amateur; as a rule, the artists were professionals.29 However, the profession was hardly lucrative: the tradespeople who devoted themselves to synagogue decoration could barely make a living by their work, as the Jewish communities rarely built new synagogues or refurbished their old edifices. Joseph ben Eliezer of Piiczów exemplifies those for whom synagogue painting was a complementary or occasional job. Those who specialized in synagogue painting had to journey between the new or recently repaired synagogues in the Ashkenazi diaspora. In the eighteenth century, Eliezer-Zusman of Brody in Ukraine worked in five or more synagogues in Bavaria.30 Other artisans broadened their area of artistic specialization.


26 On the albums of samples in medieval west-European art, see Robert W. Scheller, Exemplum: Model-Book Drawings and the Practice of Artistic Transmission in the Middle Ages (Ca. 900–Ca. 1470) (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995). A collection of kishbashki (Ukrainian, after the German Kunstbücher: art books) used by Christian Orthodox painters is held in the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine in Kyiv. The albums compiled by the masters and apprentices of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra Monastery icon-painting workshop contain linear and tonal samples, exercises, and copies, as well as original western engravings dated from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. See Pavel Zholtovsky, Maloiski Kievo-Lavraski ikonopisniy mayesterniy [Drawings of the Kyiv Lavra Icon-Painting Workshop] (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1982) [Ukrainian]. See also Dmitry Rovinskiy, Russkie narodnye kartinki [Russian Folk Pictures], vol. 1 (Saint Petersburg: R. Golike, 1900), cols. 35–64 [Russian]; Pavel Simson, “Chto inogda mogli imet’ u sebia pod rukoiu nashi ikonopisty” [What Our Icon Painters Could Sometimes Have at Hand], Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnogo obrazovania (New Series) 15, no. 5 (1910): 134–147 [Russian].

27 I thank Shay Farkash (Holon, Israel), a conservator of decorative wall paintings, who amiably showed me several such sets in his collection; see Rodov, Ziure kir be-vatei keneset. I am also grateful to Yarda Cooper and Shuli Levinboim (Tel Aviv), who kindly allowed me to study the collection of sample books belonging to their grandfather, Joseph Eliezer Dinaburg (1877–1969), the Vilna-born sculptor of plaster cast Torah arks in Lithuania and the Holy Land.

28 In Jewish communities, paid entertainers (either itinerant or resident) were the exception; see Ariela Krasney, Ha-badḥan [The Badchen] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1998) [Hebrew]. The term, Hausfleiss, was coined by Alois Riegl in his Volkskunst, Hausfleiß und Hausindustrie (Berlin: Siemens, 1894).

For example, even the prolific synagogue painters of the Fleck family in early twentieth-century L’viv managed the Company for Decorative Painting and Varnishing, which decorated public and private buildings in their city and beyond. Abraham Mendel Grinberg of Iaşi (d. 1928), who painted in nearly fifty Romanian synagogues, decorated middle-class houses and churches as well. His contemporaries, the Jewish woodcarvers and carpenters from eastern Europe who produced Torah arks in America, also applied their skills to carving carousel animals.

5. Of course, gifted performers always have an advantage, yet almost anybody able to remember some information by rote and adept at public speaking could retell tales without any prior professional training. Wall painting, wood and stone carving, or stucco modeling demand at least elementary technical skills that can only be gained by assisting more experienced craftsmen or, at the very least, by observing their work. Even the work of the amateurish synagogue painter mentioned above, the sexton of the Pińczów synagogue Joseph ben Eliezer, suggests that he learned from others how to cope with the secco technique and how to maintain a steady hand in painting animals, vegetal ornaments, and Hebrew script. Most synagogue artists probably gained their training by apprenticing with experienced craftsmen. However, since the mid-nineteenth century some synagogue painters have had the opportunity to study in trade schools devoted to art (Kunstgewerbeschulen) or at European departments for artistic crafts that formed in art academies. By the late nineteenth century, the east European synagogue painters were integrated into the marketplace as “decorative painters”: they defined themselves as Zimmermaler, malarze pokojowi, or zugravi (German and Polish, respectively, for parlor painters, and Romanian for painters), as distinct from Kunstmaler, malarze artysci, and pictori (German, Polish, and Romanian, respectively, for artistic painters).

6. Each one of the folk taletellers’ performances is transient, and can only take place in the presence of recipients. Adherents of folkloristic performance studies stress that whilst telling tales, the performer adopts a certain stance towards the listeners and invokes listeners to take complementary stances. The synagogue artists’ work is ultimately a material object rather than a temporary creative act. We have no documentary evidence of how past synagogue decorators negotiated with their patrons, nor do we know whether these artists confabulated with passers-by during the execution of their work. On the contrary, indirect sources imply that while working in the synagogue, artists disliked any nosy observers of the process. However, we can discern some sort of virtual stance taken by the artists towards the target beholder of their completed works. The artists’ signatures—a genre mentioned above—perform this role. They have been prominently displayed in Ashkenazi synagogues since the mid-eighteenth century. The Hebrew epithet melekhet kodesh (“holy craft,” Exod. 36:1, 4; 38:24), recurrent in the signatures, positions the synagogue designers as craftsmen following in the path of the artisans who constructed the Tabernacle of the Covenant. Praising their own artistry, the synagogue decorators credited God as the source of human talent, deeming their artistry a Divine gift. In his signature on the Torah ark from 1815/16 in the Kępno synagogue in Poland, the woodcarver Jonah ben Samuel Yanwel wrote the following: “With God’s help, God granted

32 My interview with Abraham Mendel Grinberg’s granddaughter, Selina Steinfeld (September 10, 2009; Haifa).
33 See Murray Zimiles, Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2007).
34 On the folkloristic explorations of the role of the taleteller’s performing skills in the rendering of oral lore, see Bauman, Verbal Art, 11, 38.
35 See above, note 20.
36 For a survey of the artistic craft studies in nineteenth-century European art academies, see Petra Hölscher, Die Akademie für Kunst und Kunstgewerbe zu Breslau: Wege einer Kunstschule 1791–1932/33 (Kiele: Ludwig, 2005), 23–93.
37 The terms derived from the Greek ἀρτέρας (painter) were used for the Christian-Orthodox church painters in the Romanian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Russian languages.
39 For example, this was the stance adopted by Avner Talpalaru (1888–1962), the synagogue painter active in the town of Dorohoi (Romania) and the surrounding region in the 1920s and 1930s, as reported by his granddaughter Mariana Groper. (I interviewed her in Rishon le-Zion, August 11, 2009.) See, too, note 85 below pertaining to the story of someone who beheld the prophet Elijah at work on a wooden Torah ark in a Belarusian synagogue and lost his sight.
40 See examples in Shadmi, “Ha-ketovot she-‘al kirot,” 286 nos. 1, 3, 6, and 288 no. 14; Yaniv, “Galafei eẓ yehudim,” 63 no. 2.
me with knowledge of this craft and with the skills to make this holy ark and to set it. ⁴¹ A legend about the woodcarver Oyzer ben Yecheil of Kremenets in the Ukraine teaches that the artist may not place his heavenly talent in the service of improper endeavors, for if he does so his name will be miraculously erased from his synagogue work:

The heads of the community [of Radyvyliv, Ukraine] traveled to Kremenets and hired a renowned master carver, famous throughout Ukraine for his peerless artistry. For an entire year the master carver worked on the holy ark. The result was a splendid cabinet, a rare and astonishingly beautiful work of art, with carved lions and leopards, gazelles and antelopes, eagles, doves, animals large and small, as well as many species of flowers. The cognoscenti came from far away just to see the holy ark and to wonder at its form and delicate work. When he completed his task, the carver incised his name into the holy ark, at the very bottom: “Oyzer ben Yecheil, ‘the work of my hands, wherein I glory.’” Five months after the completion of the holy ark… there was a sudden cloudburst, accompanied by thunder and lightning… A tongue of lightning penetrated into the synagogue and seared the bottom of the ark, burning off the name of the carver, along with the words “the work of my hands, wherein I glory”… The people, amazed, asked themselves… Why was the carver denied the privilege of having his name inscribed on this work of art, which he carved with his own hands and with such immense toil and effort?… Not long time afterwards it became known that the carver had previously executed similar carving in a church. The people saw this as a profanation of the sacred and understood why his name was erased by fire, along with the words “the work of my hands, wherein I glory.” ⁴²

In addition to expressing the artist’s pride in his work, the praise of artwork as ma’aseh yadai le-hitpa’er (“the work of my hands, wherein I glory,” Is. 60:21), a standard conclusion to many synagogue decorators’ signatures, prompts the community to a sense of admiration for, and aesthetic delight, in synagogue art. ⁴³ The token of artistic virtuosity in synagogue decoration was probably the abundance of ornaments, figures, symbols, and inscriptions, as well as their delicate and precise rendering. The horror vacui aesthetics weakened during the nineteenth century with the deeper penetration of naturalistically rendered images in prints—especially color lithographs—into the visual culture of traditional Jewish communities. Although they lacked academic training in drawing and painting from nature, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century synagogue artists who instead copied the naturalistic images from samples, successfully mastered the academic-style illusionistic depictions and the trompe l’oeil effects. Since some Jewish decorative artists tried their hand at easel painting, which they undoubtedly celebrated as fine arts, it is likely that they considered their ability to manage naturalistic rendering as proof that their professional attainment was not inferior to those with academic training. ⁴⁴

The latter activity suggests that synagogue decoration should not be considered a folk art, if folk art is understood to be a form of entertainment for self-taught amateurs. Likewise, synagogue decoration can not be considered a pure craft either, since the paintings and sculptures were incorporated in synagogue design to imply meanings and evoke emotions rather than to solely serve utilitarian needs, liturgical or otherwise. Nevertheless, synagogue art may be conventionally described as folk art if “folk” is stripped of the parameters based on the media employed, the channels of transmission used, nationalist or ethnic concepts, and economic theories. Such a redefinition was proposed by Joan M. Benedetti, who defined folk art as, “the genre of art produced in culturally cohesive

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⁴³ See the examples in Shadmi, “Ha-ketovot she-‘al kirot,” 286 no. 2, and 287 no. 11; Yaniv, “Galafei ‘eẓ yehudim,” 63 no. 1; Rodov, “With Eyes towards Zion” 144.

⁴⁴ The stories about oil-on-canvas paintings (mainly still-life, landscapes, and portraits) produced by the decorative painters who worked in synagogues are rife in the memories that Samuel Zeev Silverstein shared with Dr. Sergey Kravtsov and myself about Maksymilian Kugel (1899–shortly after 1941), who painted on the walls and ceiling in the Zori Gilead Synagogue in L’viv in 1936. (This interview took place in Tel-Aviv, July 16, 2009.) Such stories are also related about Abraham Mendel Grinberg (see note 32 above), and Avner Talpalaru (see note 39 above). See also the easel paintings made by decorative painters of the Kroll family in Israel, Malca Kroll-Aleksandrowicz, Ṭaḥebi ha-UR [Painters of the City] (Tel Aviv: Eked, 1989), 239–240, 243, 252 [Hebrew].
Both the creators and recipients of art—members of a single cohesive community—share a cultural consensus spanning both oral narrative and traditional synagogue art. The researchers of oral folklore have pointed out that this consensus is maintained by a cumulative mechanism of selective appropriations by the taletellers and audience. We may expand this notion to include the synagogue art under discussion. The bulk of the zoomorphic paintings and carvings, often naturalistically rendered, including several cases of anthropomorphic images, existed in thousands of traditionalist, Orthodox Jewish communities for many years without being significantly addressed in the rabbinical responsa literature (though, the exception does prove the rule, as a relatively minor part of this art was discussed). The rabbinical authorities usually reacted to synagogue design only after congregants protested; thus, it was the appeal for arbitration that triggered the discussion of synagogue art by the rabbis. For example, in the oft-discussed case of a leonine sculpture set atop the Torah ark in the synagogue of Candia (Heraklion) in the early sixteenth century, the community perceived the sculpture to be an expression of the donor’s (Reuben’s) haughty individualism, which risked undermining the social fabric of the Jewish community and seemed to be contesting the authority of the community’s spiritual leaders. The community reacted by appealing to four of the most authoritative rabbis of that time who all harshly condemned such decorations. However, no one has ever criticized the numerous sculpted lions—including a pair of two gold, rampant lions, a reproduction of a papal emblem—on the Torah ark in the synagogue of the Catalonian Jewish community in Rome during the almost five hundred years since its production in 1522/23, around the same time as Reuben’s lion. Moreover, since the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, lion sculptures in relief and in the round have become a token of the Torah ark in east European synagogues. However, when transplanted into another cultural context—Sephardic communities in contemporary Israel—the synagogal lion images were criticized as a diasporic, Ashkenazi custom unacceptable in the Holy Land.

The laity’s requests for rabbinical responsum about synagogue art are not motivated only by concerns about Jewish law, but rather are either a response to someone’s contravention of the collective consensus, or an indication of the process of disintegration that cohesive communities are undergoing. Subsequent rabbinical rulings involve several principal criteria: forbidding images, which can resemble objects of worship and therefore may be associated with idolatry; forbidding images and artifacts that may be associated with the symbols or objects of gentile cults; fear that the images may distract the congregants from worship; and concern that the personal donation of a work of art to the community synagogue undermines social harmony. As a rule the rabbis did not demand the immediate destruction of the objects in question if they were an integral part of the sacred synagogue building; rather, they ruled that the objects should be concealed and banned such decorations in the future.

This notwithstanding, the halakhic corpus neither provides the synagogue artist with explicit instructions for designing or planning synagogue decoration, nor offers more than a few recommendations for particular images or symbols to be displayed in the synagogue. It seems that the rabbinical scholars were not expected to be involved in the process of construction, ornamentation, and maintenance of synagogues. Even those rabbinical scholars who tolerated the use of certain images in the synagogue neither discussed the purpose of those images nor promoted their

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46 See a review of this research in Francisco Vaz da Silva, “Tradition Without End,” in A Companion to Folklore, 44–45.
48 Rodov, The Torah Ark in Renaissance Poland, 68–72.
50 Notice the argumentation of the influential ultra-Orthodox halakhic legislator and former Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (1920–2013), in his She’elot u-teshuvot “Yehaveh da’at” [Responsa “Revealing Knowledge”], vol. 3 (Jerusalem: AB Press, 1976/77), responsum 62 [Hebrew].
reproduction in other synagogues. Although the Jews’ aesthetic preferences, as Rachel Neis and Kalman Bland have deduced from pre-modern Jewish literature, were expressed through biblical exegesis, philosophy, legal writings, mysticism, poetry, and travelogues, the theory of visual art did not constitute its own genre. Unlike Christian theologians of the Byzantine East and Catholic West, Jewish scholars avoided declarations of or apologies for religious art. Given the absence of manuals, instructions, or *emblemata* books composed for synagogue artists, our attention is attracted by the role of oral media and the part of unwritten narrative in the transmission of knowledge and in the programs and interpretations of synagogue art.

**From Oral Lore to Synagogue Art**

To reach another recipient, the folk story must be retold anew; to last for generations, it must be transmitted by a chain of raconteurs, each of whom might recount a different version of the story. In contrast, the artifact, once created, endures until it is altered, damaged, or destroyed either by nature or human beings. Any remaking produces not an altered original but another artifact. The beholder can see—directly or in photographic reproduction—the very patterns that were created generations ago. Thus we still may observe Eliezer-Zusman’s paintings dated from 1735 on the ceiling of the synagogue of Horb in Bavaria in their nearly original condition (save for some minor losses and faded areas). What barely survive the passage of time, though, are the contexts—including the ideological, liturgical, social, and performance contexts—which granted either oral narratives or visual imagery certain meanings and messages. One of contemporary art and culture historians’ main challenges now seems to be the hypothetical reconstruction of these contexts and meanings.

References in synagogue decoration to specific Jewish texts are usually relatively easy to identify, though sometimes their particular implementations are open to dispute; these texts include the Bible and its exegesis, *midrash*, liturgical texts and religious poems, and quite possibly Jewish mystical treatises. Those synagogue decorators who lacked proficiency in this literature could nevertheless have had some access to this knowledge through the liturgy, sermons, and advice of the learned, not to mention their own basic Jewish educations.

The cynosure of our discussion, however, returns us to those hardly recognizable subjects that cannot be underpinned by biblical or midrashic stories. A unique folk story—that has fortunately survived—circulated among the Jews of Worms prior to the mid-seventeenth century. In the 1660s, Juspa (Yephtah Joseph ben Naphtali, ca. 1604–1678), a beadle in the town’s synagogue, recorded it in his book *Ma‘aseh nisim* (Story of Wonders). Juspa recounted the toponymic legend relating the name “Worms” to a *lint wurm*, a dragon that threatened the town until it was slain by a giant locksmith. Juspa speculated that the name Worms replaced the town’s previous name Germisa, which

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was familiar to him from the phrase describing local Jewish scholars as sages of Germisa. 57 According to the first legend in his book, these sages arrived at this locale following the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem. 58 In this instance, we can observe how a universal folktales motif underwent the process of Jewish ecotypification so profoundly investigated by Dov Noy; either Juspa or earlier Jewish transmitters transformed the heroic legend into a myth of origin implying Jewish anteriority in the local settlement. 59

Printed copies of Ma’aseh nisim eventually reached the eastern outskirts of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, where the painter Hayim ben Isaac Segal of Slutsk (now in Belarus) depicted a worm-like dragon threatening the town of Worms (Worms) in at least two synagogues: one in Mogilev on the Dnieper in 1740 (fig. 1) and another in the town of Kopyš about the same time. 60 In Mogilev, Hayim Segal juxtaposed the view of Worms in the southeastern section of the cupola and an imaginary depiction of Jerusalem in the northeastern section; in the eastern and western sides of the cupola, he painted allegorical representations of wandering people. 61 Rachel Wischnitzer proposed that Segal—or, we may suppose, his anonymous adviser—creatively retold the story of the dragon by weaving into it Juspa’s tale about the Judean exiles’ establishment of the Worms Jewish community after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, as they fled to Worms instead of to Babylon. 62 When the exiles in Babylon were redeemed and resettled in the Holy Land, the Jews of Worms did not leave their hospitable haven, for in their minds it had become a “lesser Jerusalem.” The story concludes: “For these reasons they were visited by harsh persecution, and other communities were punished because of Worms.” 63 The innovative combination of two primarily disconnected motifs serves to create a visual ecotype that—as Jewish oral folk narrative usually does—introduces a didactic or moral lesson: here it reconfirms the Diaspora Jews’ indisputable recognition of Jerusalem’s unassailable holiness. 64

Before the “age of mechanical reproduction,” Hayim Segal’s murals would probably only have been seen in their original location. 65 Even if some of those who beheld his works in those provincial synagogues heard Segal’s explanations and transmitted them to the upcoming generations, his version of the Worms dragon tale faded into oblivion: to the best of our knowledge, it has neither been duplicated in other synagogue paintings nor recorded elsewhere. 66 This

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57 Eidelberg, R. Juspa, 84.
58 Ibid., 53, no. 1.


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61 See note 58 above.
64 Rodov, “With Eyes towards Zion,” 142.
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example suggests that such a visual tale has a limited ability to impact on the further evolution of both visual and oral folklore.

From Synagogue Art to Oral Lore

The aforementioned story about the wooden Torah ark in Radyvyliv epitomizes the legends relating to the synagogues that could actually be seen by the tale-teller or, if they had been lost or destroyed, remembered and recounted by the transmitters of narrative. Since fantasy nevertheless tends to predominate over fact in these legends, the references to local history and real, physical objects impart a crucial sense of reliability to the mythology, which these tales invariably serve. The imaginative component of synagogue legends sheds light on the semantic perceptions of synagogue art. Whereas most of the folk stories recount the synagogue architecture and decoration in general terms and describe the artwork’s aesthetic effect, a few tales interpret certain, specific images.

Fig. 1. El (Eliezer) Lissitzky, Dragon under the Walls of Worms, ca. 1916. Copy of a detail of Hayim ben Isaac Segal's ceiling painting (1740) in the synagogue in Mogilev on the Dnieper, reproduced in Milgroim, vol. 3(1923): 8.

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68 For example, see Haya Bar-Itzhak’s interpretation of legends on east European synagogue buildings, their establishment and sanctity as myths of Jewish origin in Poland and as a reflection of Jewish-Christian relations; Bar-Itzhak, Jewish Poland, Legends of Origin, 133–154.

69 The account of subjects painted in the synagogue of Kazimierz Dolny in Poland (referred to in ibid., 139 and 174 n.16) is not an exception to this rule, as Bar-Itzhak’s source is not a folk tale but memoirs written by the Kazimierz-born American journalist and
One such oral communication offers an interpretation of a fish depicted in 1895 in the center of the ceiling in Pakruojis, Lithuania’s synagogue (fig. 2). By 1938, the Pakruojis Jews told the tale to a Lithuanian ethnographer and lexicographer of Jewish origin, Chackelis Lemchenas (1904–2001). He remarked that some of his informants still remembered the time when the synagogue murals were executed. Monti Kremer, the son of a Pakruojis synagogue gabbai (officer) before World War II, recollected the same story in 2004. It is unlikely that Monti Kremer ever read Lemchenas’ paper. Both witnesses testified that the congregants believed that the fish biting its tail represented the sea monster Leviathan, which encompasses the world, preventing it from ruin. Should the Leviathan ever release his tail the world would be destroyed.

Fig. 2. Leviathan, 1895, synagogue in Pakruojis, ceiling painting. Photograph by Chackelis Lemchenas, May 1, 1938. © Šiauliai, The Aušros Museum, no. 2783.

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70 A reconstruction of the layout of the ceiling painting in this synagogue is proposed in Aistė Niunkaitė Račiūnienė, Lietuvos žydų tradicinio meno ir simbolių pasaulis: atvaizdai, vaizdiniai ir tekstai (Vilnius: Valstybinio Vilniaus Gaono žydų muziejus, 2011), 508–509, fig. 436.


72 Interview with Monti (Menachem) Kremer of Rehovot, Israel, in August 10, 2004 (tape-record, the Center of Jewish Art Archives, Jerusalem). I thank Dr. Sergey Kravtsov who kindly directed my attention to this example.
The reported folk interpretation echoes the legends of a coiled sea-monster, dragon, or serpent that bears the earth. The Jews might have anchored their association of a cosmic piscine ouroboros with Leviathan in both the biblical definition of the Leviathan as *nahash 'akalaton* ("tortuous serpent," Is. 27:1) and in the descriptions of Leviathan supporting the earth in midrashim and mystic literature.

Zmitrok Biadula’s (1886–1941) autobiographic novel describes how midrashic and kabbalistic discourse was popularized and adapted for oral transmission in his native village, Pasadzets in Belarus, in the 1890s—the period when Leviathan was painted in the Pakruojis synagogue. Biadula recounts his childhood memories of his private Jewish tutor Boruch, a Talmudic scholar and devoted Kabbalist, who taught his pupils about the earth floating in the waters of the ocean on the fins of the tail-biting fish Leviathan, which encompasses the earth to prevent another global flood.

The persistence of Leviathan as *circuitus mundi* is reconfirmed by the appearance of a globe encircled by a fish, labeled in Yiddish *der Leviathan* (fig. 3), on a Jewish New Year postcard published in New York, ca. 1910. Both the postcard and the synagogue ceiling painting portray the cosmic fish as a carp or pike, the traditional festive meal enjoyed by eastern European and North American Jews. This notwithstanding, the choice of a carp or pike is not intended to recall the

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73 Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, A844.12 (Serpent Supports the Earth); A876 (Serpent Surrounds the Earth); A876.1 (The Leviathan that Surrounds the Globe); note too B11.2.8.1 (Dragon Encircles City with its Tail) and B91.6 (Serpent Causes Flood). See also Alexander Kulik, "The Mysteries of Behemoth and Leviathan’ and the Celestial Bestiary of 3 Baruch," *Le Muséon* 122, no. 3–4 (2010): 298–300. Sara Kuehn, *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 145–155.


76 Here referred to Zmitrok Biadula, "V dremuchikh lesakh" [In the Thicket of Woods], in idem, *Solovey V dremuchikh lesakh* [Minsk: Belarus Press, 1971], 190–191 [Russian].
Leviathan (along with its opponents in apocalyptic combat, the Behemoth and Ziz) that will be eaten by the righteous and used as material for their tents when the Messiah comes. Rather the folk narrative suggests that these later depictions of encircling fish were understood as images suggesting the world’s stability. The early twentieth century upheavals in eastern European Jewish life and in America, for their Yiddish-speaking brethren, required such symbolic representations. This emphasis on the stability of their world may have compensated for the sense of vertigo caused by the social disturbances and the gradual dissolution of the habitual Jewish communal mode of life and its concomitant inter-religious barriers. Likewise, the massive immigration of eastern European Jewry and the remaining Jews’ increased mobility, as a result of the advances in transport and communications, opened the small oecumene of the Jewish shtetl to the outside world—a scary, though promising, development. Evidence of this reality and accompanying sentiment may be found in a locomotive and wagons portrayed in another ceiling painting in the Pakruojis synagogue.79 The Jews of this small town could longingly imagine their mundane bliss as a provincial homestead with welcoming, unlocked doors and smoking chimneys—a vision protected from external dangers by the encircling Leviathan in the synagogue mural (fig. 2).

Etiological legends constitute a distinct genre of eastern European synagogue art folk tales. Isaac Kotler, a Jewish immigrant from Poland, contributed a stellar example of this genre to Dov Noy’s archives of Jewish oral narrative. The tale that Kotler heard in the land of his birth begins with Adam regarding the lion as a just ruler and crowning it king of the animals. Kotler relates that in Noah’s ark, the lion first stumbled in the sin of pride, but he later sincerely atoned; King Solomon, who favored the repentant royal lion, introduced it to the Temple in Jerusalem where it was placed alongside the cherubs in the Holy of Holies, flanking the Ark of the Covenant. Furthermore, Solomon appointed twelve lions to guard his royal throne. Based on this legend, the story then proposes a novel mythological explanation for the zoomorphic design of the Torah ark, whose real etiology was unknown to both the narrator and audience: after the destruction of the Temple, the Jews rescued the Torah, took it to the Diaspora, and set the lions flanking the Tablets of the Covenant atop the Torah ark in their synagogues. The narrative implies a symbolic association of the Torah ark, the biblical Sanctuary, and Solomon’s throne.80 The tale’s moral is nevertheless didactic: the lion is privileged to stand on the Torah ark as a reward for its repentance, for “In the place where penitents stand even the wholly righteous cannot stand.”81

In addition to dealing with the origin of particular images or objects, etiological folk narratives provide us with insight into the more abstract, metaphoric aspects of synagogue art and architecture. A “local synagogue legend” of this type was recorded by Zmięk Biadula.82 As a yeshiva student in the village of Il’ia in Belarus, while spending a night in the village’s synagogue, he was told a tale about a wondrous carver, who carved the synagogue’s Torah ark, adorning it with naturalistically carved lions, eagles, flowers, and plants. According to the story, once upon a time Elijah the prophet arrived at the synagogue disguised as a wandering woodcarver. He offered to produce a splendid new Torah ark for the synagogue. At night, he transformed the prayer hall into a miraculous orchard.

77 See Joseph Gutmann, “When the Kingdom Comes: Messianic Themes in Medieval Jewish Art,” Art Journal 27, no. 2 (1967–1968): 168–70. Biadula testified (see note 75 above) that the commonfolk in late nineteenth-century, Jewish, eastern Europe were familiar with folk versions of the story about the three animal monsters and feast of the righteous in Paradise; see Biadula, “V dremuchikh lesakh,” 191–192.


79 Piechotka, Bramy Nieba: Bóżnice drewniane, 153, fig. 230b.


82 See Joseph Gutmann, “When the Kingdom Comes: Messianic Themes in Medieval Jewish Art,” Art Journal 27, no. 2 (1967–1968): 168–70. Biadula testified (see note 75 above) that the commonfolk in late nineteenth-century, Jewish, eastern Europe were familiar with folk versions of the story about the three animal monsters and feast of the righteous in Paradise; see Biadula, “V dremuchikh lesakh,” 191–192.


84 Indeed, there was a yeshiva led by adherents of the Vilna Gaon in Il’ia, see A. Kopolivetz, ed., Kehilat Ilia: Pirkei hayin ve-hashmada [The Community of Il’ia: Chapters of Life and Destruction], (Tel Aviv: Association of Former Residents of Il’ia in Israel, 1962), 69–86 (Hebrew).
The sky above was starry and eagles and stately lions wandered through it and the orchard. By the break of day, Elijah had transmuted the living animals and flowers into immobile sculptures on the Torah ark. Though this tale is insufficient to provide either the synagogue artists with practical instruction concerning how to perform their work or the beholders with a manual for interpreting each ornament in the synagogue, the tale sets the mood for apprehending the synagogue as—to use Michel Foucault’s terms—a semantically charged heterotopic and heterochronic space, that is a real space evoking other places and other times.

Concluding this discussion of a folk component in east European synagogue art, I would like to propose folk synagogue art be perceived as a visual communication that provides the stage and backdrop for the liturgical spectacle and, in a broader sense, predicates its viewers’ responses to the challenges, trials, and tribulations of daily life. The picturesque zoomorphic and vegetal decoration and the sky-like painted ceiling brought to synagogue worshippers’ minds a vision of Judaism’s flourishing orchard and the paradisiacal garden promised for the faithful. While living in their own time and place, the practitioners of Jewish liturgical decorum could intellectually experience both remote biblical history and the prospective Messianic period; visit the biblical Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple or the court of the Supreme King; be present at Mount Sinai; enter the heavenly gates and envision many other times and places, restrained only by their own imaginations.

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85 This story also prominently adopts a moralizing thread as it tells of the gabbai who was mysteriously blinded as a punishment for spying on Elijah at work. See an extended discussion of this tale in Rodov, “Ha-gan ha-pil‘i: ha-poetikah shel ha-ʻitur ha-ẓimḥi be-vatei–keneset be-Eiropah u-mekoroteyah” [The Marvelous Garden: On the Poetics of Vegetal Ornamentation in European Synagogues and Its Origins], in Timorah: Articles on Jewish Art (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), III–I13 [Hebrew].


87 See Rodov, “Ha-gan ha-pil‘i.”
