

HUC-JIR's Museums: Laboratories for Learning

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From its very inception as a modern rabbinical seminary in the late 19th century, the College-Institute recognized that Jewish material culture was an essential resource for the liberal study of Judaism and the professional training of clergy and scholars. Learning at this Reform seminary was predicated on the principle of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the 19th century German approach to scholarship that stressed a scientific orientation to the study of Judaism. This approach applied objective scholarly methods to Jewish history and thought, and provided the intellectual approach for collection efforts. Indeed, the impetus to collect, preserve, and study Jewish religious or ethnographic heritage was the result of the emancipation and enlightenment of 19th century European Jewry that was transplanted to these American shores.

Thus, the development of library, art, and artifact collections were part and parcel of the earliest decades of the College-Institute's existence – intended as research resources for faculty and students. The Library was established in 1875, with the acquisition of artifacts as well as books. The Union Museum on the Cincinnati campus, established by the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods in 1913, was one of the first formally established Jewish museums in the United States, with the goals of preserving and providing a survey of Jewish cultural history.

By the 1920's, through the acquisition of several major private collections (see page 26) and donations by individuals, the College-Institute's museum and library collections comprised objects dating from the



Reva Kirschberg, z"l, founder of the HUC-JIR Museum, guiding a synagogue high school group through "Rebirth After the Holocaust: The Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp, 1945-1950," which HUC-JIR is traveling to museums throughout North America.

Renaissance to the current day: Jewish ceremonial objects, Jewish graphic art, tapestries, ceramics, carvings, illuminated manuscripts and Esther scrolls, and, in the words of Adolph S. Oko, the librarian who shaped the College-Institute's collections, "specimens of virtually all artistic, decorative or folkloristic objects for the synagogue and home that Jews



Artist Tobi Kahn discussing his ceremonial art on exhibit at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles.

have created in various countries. Through this effort, the American scholar may gain a picture of the cultural life of the Jew and attempt its study." Oko asserted that these collections provided the "external proof" for an evaluation of Jewish culture as the development of the Jewish people in dynamic interaction with the host cultures in which they resided, contributed, and simultaneously created their own culture. "The whole panorama of Jewish cultural history is spread out before the student – the objects used by the Jew in his religious worship, his achievements as artist and craftsman, as musician and architect, writer and philosopher..."

The fruit of all of these efforts can be seen today in the vitality of HUC-JIR's network of museums. As informal environments for teaching and learning they provide stimulating contexts for our students' and faculty's exploration of Jewish history and values. Exhibitions demonstrate the significant role of the arts in promoting Jewish continuity in contemporary life. Visual artists lecture on art as *midrash* interpreting text and discuss *hiddur mitzvah* through the creation of works of contemporary ritual art. Students are offered tangible model arts programs to provide their future congregations and communities with spiritual and cultural enrichment. The museums extend HUC-JIR's outreach to the community and offer visitors of all faiths a deeper understanding of Jewish heritage, including public, parochial, and Jewish schools that participate in group tours and teacher workshops fostering diversity education.

In the cautionary words of eminent historian Dr. Arthur Hertzberg, the artifacts of Judaism are not “mummified in cases, bereft of their original, authentic purpose.” HUC-JIR’s museums promote Jewish practice and continuity, advance understanding of Jewish history and culture, and illuminate Judaism’s relationship to the host cultures in which we dwell. They instill Jewish values of remembrance, tolerance and social justice and provide a forum for contemporary artists seeking to express Jewish spirituality, experience, and identity. By creating partnerships with other Jewish museums, synagogue museums, and secular university museums, HUC-JIR’s museums raise HUC-JIR’s visibility far and wide.

The Skirball Museum in Cincinnati presents the cultural heritage of the Jewish people as conveyed through thematic galleries: Immigration, Cincinnati Jewry, Archaeology, Torah, Jewish Festivals and Life Cycles, the Holocaust, and Israel. The Center for Holocaust and Humanity Education has amplified the Museum’s educational outreach through an interactive, multi-media environmental exhibition, “Mapping Our Tears,” which highlights eyewitness testimonies of World War II and Holocaust survivors, liberators, and refugees, and temporary exhibitions promoting tolerance education. In addition, the Museum’s Archaeology Center offers a hands-on learning and research facility for the study of Archaeology and Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern history and culture, featuring artifacts of the 2nd to 1st millennia BCE discovered at HUC-JIR’s excavations in Israel.



Students and visitors enjoy the treasures of HUC-JIR’s Judaica collections at the Skirball Museum in Cincinnati.

The Skirball Museum of Biblical Archaeology/Jerusalem presents the research and the archaeological expeditions of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology and tells the story of ancient Laish/Dan, Gezer, and Aroer, based on the history of these cities and the reconstruction of the daily



Laura Kruger, HUC-JIR Museum Curator (second from right), explaining the meaning of biddur mitzvah as fulfilled by contemporary Jewish ritual art in an exhibition organized by HUC-JIR and presented at the Rosen Museum in Boca Raton, Florida

life of their inhabitants. Artifacts, photographs, models, and plans illustrate the fortifications, burial customs, and cult practices of antiquity.

The Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles preserves and exhibits HUC-JIR’s collection of over 25,000 art objects in its permanent exhibition, “Vision and Values,” which traces the history, accomplishments, and values of the Jewish people over four thousand years, culminating with their experiences in the United States and contributions to American culture.

The HUC-JIR/Los Angeles campus periodically presents exhibitions in the *Merkaz Limud*, including this past summer’s “Avoda: Objects of the Spirit, Ceremonial Art of Tobi Kahn.”

The HUC-JIR Museum in New York is nationally recognized for the presentation of contemporary art exploring Jewish identity and themes: seminal shows for emerging artists, landmark exhibitions establishing new directions for contemporary ritual, group shows reflecting new interpretations of Biblical text, cutting-edge exhibitions illuminating Jewish history, career surveys of celebrated artists, exhibitions promoting Israeli-North American cultural exchange, and presentations of significant private collections advancing the definition of Jewish art in the 21st century. The HUC-JIR Museum also serves as a vital source of traveling exhibitions for the Reform Movement’s synagogue museums and cultural institutions throughout North America. ■