

RELIGIOUS ART CONTINUED

Synagogue, which celebrates its centenary next year, possesses a Parochet (ark curtain) of outstanding beauty. It was the gift of the Morrison family. The motive, as Michael Morrison says, was 'to put an outstanding work of art into the *shul* that would enhance the atmosphere of what is already a fine old building.'

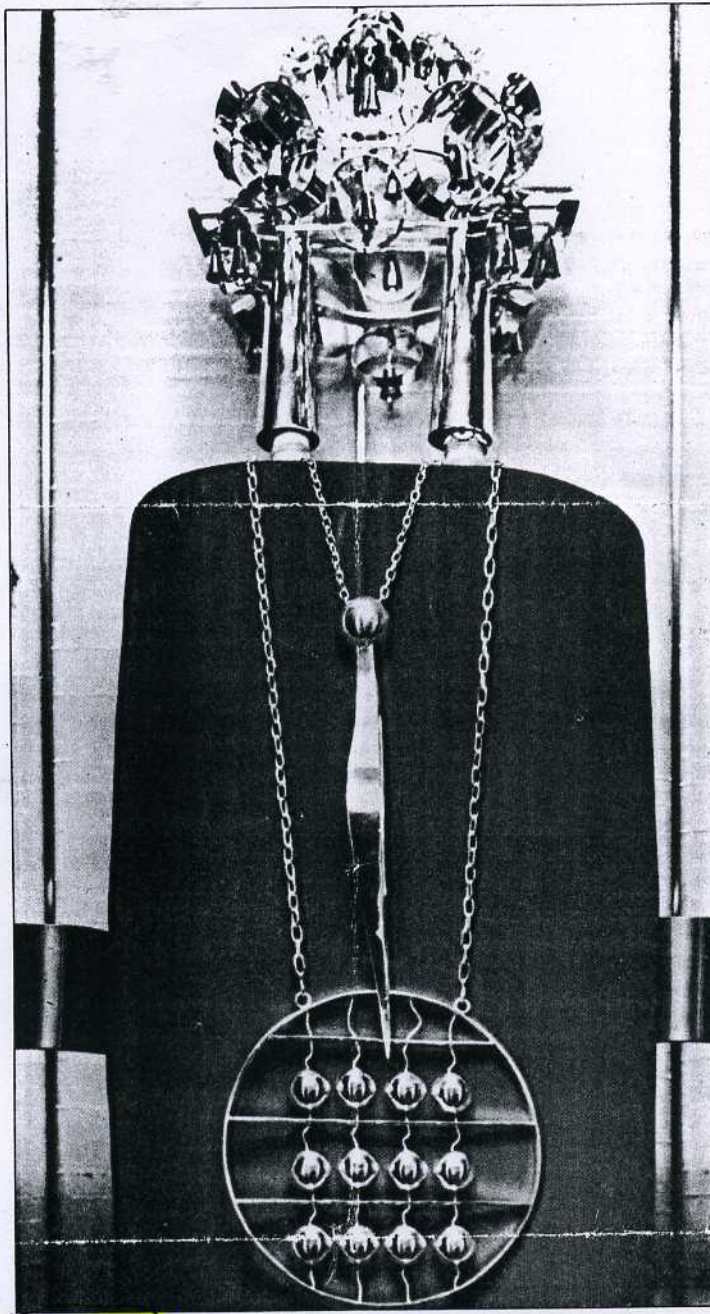
Some two years of thought and planning were invested in the project. The design commission was given to Alfred Cohen and the curtain was made by the Royal College of Needlework.

The curtain has a deep blue background on which is an appliqué design of the Temple menorah. Brilliant orange and red flames come from each lamp and above it is a fanciful and exotic representation of the Temple, an appliqué of many fabrics and textures with semi-precious stones worked into the motif.

To appreciate the curtain, it is necessary to understand the nature of its environment. The New West End Synagogue is a Victorian fantasy in the Moorish style, built at a time when the image of the English Jew was still that of the oriental, exotic Disraeli-type figure. A high vaulted building with an elaborate mosaic floor, the walls and the Bima are lined with dark, mellow marble and alabaster, intricately cut and carved. Around the ladies' gallery is a delicate tracery on which are affixed Hebrew quotations copied from the famous Spanish synagogue in Toledo.

Its most magnificent and opulent feature is the Ark. An enormous marble structure, it is topped by a series of eastern domes. The doors of the Ark are solid teak adorned with carved panels. Against this, the curtain provides a dazzling splash of colour — its glass and stones standing out boldly in the half-light.

The Morrison Parochet is a rare example of old and new complementing and enhancing each other. It is also testimony to what care and thought can achieve in synagogue furnishings and ritual art. Too many British synagogues have embroidery that is virtually identical and silverware to decorate the Torah which is



The Aryeh Ofir designed silver at the New London Synagogue. The crown, breastplate and Yad have an artistic unity and recall Temple times silverware

totally forgettable. It applies not only to our synagogues; our prayer books and other ritual objects rarely have visual appeal.

Perhaps it takes an event like the formation of the New London Synagogue (many of whose members incidentally, formerly belonged to New West End) to stimulate creativity. The opportunity was not lost at New London, which has a particularly fine set of modern silver decorations for their Sifrei Torah.

Two of the four sets are by the prominent English

silversmith Gerald Benney, and reflect contemporary styling. They take as their theme the Crown of the Torah. The Rimonim are tall and heavy and each set is surmounted with a different stylistic representation of a regal crown. So as not to detract from their beauty the Torah mantles are plain.

The third set is perhaps not so distinguished; Rimonim and breast-plate are architectonic clusters of fluted, square silver sections. The fourth set, only recently presented to the synagogue by Mr and Mrs M.

Durst, is clearly the most significant. It consists of three pieces — crown, breast-plate and Yad (pointer). They were commissioned in Jerusalem and made there by the Israeli silversmith Aryeh Ofir.

Of New London's four sets this is the only one which has a distinctive styling in all its components — the Yad has been designed as a Yad, the crown as a crown and the breast-plate with its rows of silver knobs recalls the *urim* and *thummim* of the High Priest's breast-plate. The Yad is curved and almost animate. The crown is graceful and looks at first glance like a spray of flowers. It is made from a cluster of cylindrical sections, inside each of which is suspended a tiny bell. The crown is truly a *hiddur mitzva* — enhancement of the mitzva.

Since 1945, the scope of synagogue art has moved beyond the interpretation of biblical themes. As a subject, the Holocaust has figured prominently and one outstanding example is the Abram Games window in the Muswell Hill Synagogue in north-west London. The window is set in a wall otherwise bare of adornment. Indeed the architect, Joseph Mendelson, ensured that the window could be seen from any position within the synagogue.

The window is mainly a fibreglass collage depicting a hand rising out of the floor and reaching towards heaven. Its dimensions are fifteen feet tall by three feet wide and the other materials include barbed wire (to recall the concentration camps) and fragments of an old talit. The wire has been shaped into a Magen David, while the strips of the talit serve as the fingers of the hand and are also arranged to represent tefilin. On an adjacent wall is an inscription from the Psalms in Hebrew: 'From out of the depths I called on you, O Lord.'

These are but three examples of contemporary synagogue and ritual art and perhaps point the way to what should be commonplace rather than the exception. After all, does not the Talmud justify the existence and pursuit of ritual art, based on the Biblical verse: 'This is my God, and I will glorify him.' ●