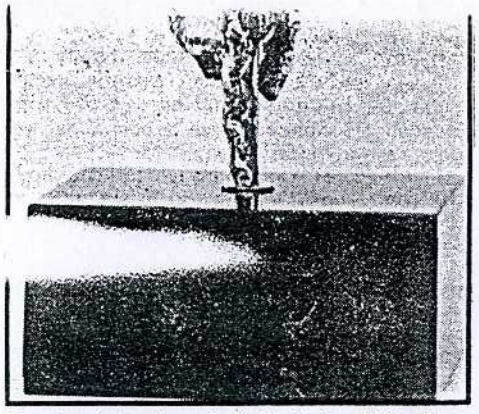
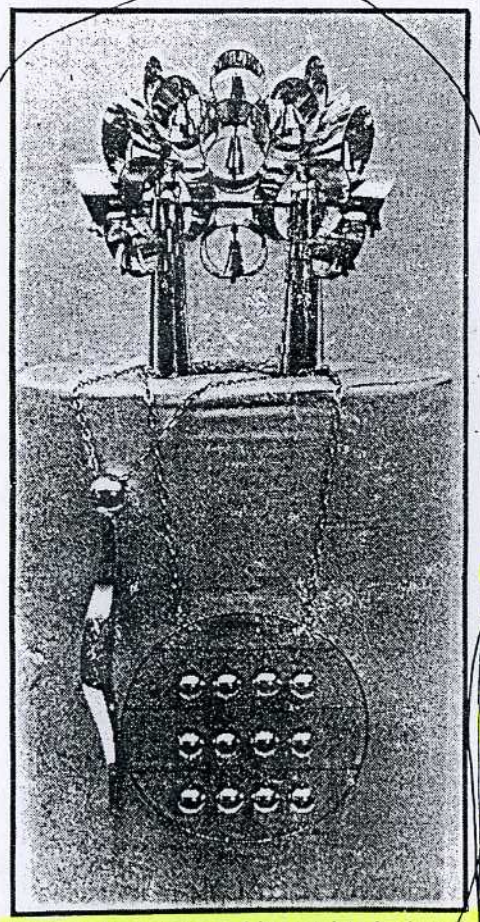


Torah pointer, inscribed (in Hebrew) "Justice, justice shalt thou follow," by London artist George Weil



Torah bells, pointer and breastplate by Israeli silversmith Arie Ofir

biblical times. Exodus tells of the ar... craftsman Bezalel ben Uri, who was endowed with "the spirit of God, in wisdom and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise skilful works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones for setting, and in carving of wood."

The invitation in Psalm 29 to "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness," and the rabbis' call for *hidur mitzva* — the obligation to beautify ceremonial — generated a positive response from artists and craftsmen throughout the centuries.

Yet very little Jewish ritual art created before the sixteenth century has survived to the present day, due mainly to the persecutions and subsequent wanderings of the Jews from country to country. Objects made of gold and silver were particularly vulnerable; they were often confiscated, or else sold by their owners to save life.

No authentic Jewish style in ritual art is at all discernible. Most of the older objects extant date back to no further than the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and lean heavily on the baroque, with its attributes of floridity and exuberance. Some are very beautiful, as, for example, the rimmonim made by the eighteenth century London silversmith, Abraham de Oliveyra.

But most of the objects in the synagogue and the home today are merely copies — often debased — of earlier designs. The current exhibition presents a challenge to an outworn convention; it demonstrates that contemporary artists are fully capable of creating original works of Jewish ritual art, fit for their purpose and relevant both to the spirit of Judaism and to our own times.

Among the ornaments for the Torah on display is a set comprising breastplate, crown and yad, designed and made by Professor Arie Ofir, head of the silversmithing and jewellery department of the Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem. Bezalel, founded in 1906 by the artist Boris Schatz, is performing an invaluable service in furthering the expression of the Jewish spirit in the applied arts in a modern idiom.

Ofir, a graduate of Bezalel, was born in Israel in 1939 and has had a distinguished career as a designer. His three ornaments beautifully complement each other. The elegant yad and the circular breastplate, with the twelve balls symbolising the Twelve Tribes, create a restrainedly balanced effect, and the crown has

The contrast ... dynamic is explained by Agam as representing the Jewish people in constant motion, yet ever-rooted to their heritage. "Just as the mezuza appears to move, yet actually remains permanently affixed to the doorpost, so are all Jews throughout the world firmly linked with the Land, God and the People of Israel." It is a lovely concept.

Among silver artefacts by other Israeli artists joyful nature of the Festival of Lights. The branches are moveable, and each is fitted with a dreidl which can be spun.

Among silver artefacts by other Israel artists are a pair of intricately worked traveller's candlesticks and a mezuza case by Eli Gera, and a seder dish by Yitzhak Bier, made in a fortress design with Hebrew letter ramparts.

Three of the most beautiful items in the exhibition were commissioned by a private collector from Gerald Benney, professor of silversmithing at the Royal College of Art. Benney is a brilliant craftsman and designer whose innovative technique of texturing has now been adopted by many British silver-

Pottery spice-box (for the havdala ceremony) by Carol Howard

the traditional tower ... surmounted by a flag, four subsidiary ... es, each with its own flag, and an arched door opening to the spice compartment.

The chanukia, intended for use with oil, is adapted from the shape common in Central Europe in the eighteenth century. Of handsome appearance, it combines plain and textured silver surfaces with applied arches in feathered silver gilt, capped by a crown. A unique feature is the concave central section of the backplate which is designed to reflect all eight lights on the last day of Chanucah. It is a triumph of craftsmanship.

The rimmonim and breastplate in silver gilt by Stuart Devlin are notable for elegance, good proportions and superb finishing. Born in Australia, Devlin is one of today's outstanding designers. A liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, he has had many important commissions, including the design of Australia's decimal coinage. Other examples of Devlin's art on display include a pair of silver and gilt candlesticks, ingeniously crafted to glitter in candlelight.

An extremely original havdala set with a spherically shaped spice-box on a sculptured stem is the work of silversmith Veronica Shaw, who shows regularly at Goldsmiths Hall and the Design Centre. Other interesting exhibits include three mezuza cases in petrified wood, mother of pearl and montana agate by Rabbi Efraim Rosenzweig.

George Weil's creations are sculptural in essence, expressing in a rich flamboyant style the emotional intensity of his commitment to the Jewish way of life. The bronze mitzva box is a remarkably ambitious and complex work, measuring 15in x 20in x 4in and bearing figures and Hebrew script symbolising the holy days of the Jewish year. The yad, made in sterling silver weighing 62 ounces, depicting Moses wrapped in a talit inscribed in Hebrew with the words "Justice, justice shalt thou follow," cannot be regarded as other than a piece of sculpture. Weil's work is notable for its warmth and vitality.

The custom of using embroidered textiles to adorn the synagogue and its appurtenances is highlighted in the splendid display of ark curtains, Torah mantles and wall-hangings. Embroidery done with linen, wool or metal threads is an important category of Jewish ritual art, harking back to an ancient tradition.