Masterpieces and Curiosities

The Jewish Museum's collection is vast and diverse. Some of its holdings are artworks of recognized significance, beauty, and craftsmanship. Others are oddities—unexpected and eccentric creations that merit closer attention. This scene places a single group of objects in the larger context of cultural and social history to reveal rich layers of meaning.

The Benguiat Collection

In 1925, when the Jewish Museum was barely twenty years old (and two decades before it moved into this building), it made its first major acquisition: nearly three hundred objects purchased from the collection of Hadji Ephraim Benguiat.

Benguiat (born around 1852, died in 1918) was an astute and flamboyant businessman from a Sephardic Jewish family in Smyrna, an important port in the Ottoman Empire (now Izmir, Turkey). The five Benguiat brothers were antique dealers who traced their lineage to eleventh-century Spain. They traveled extensively, buying and selling paintings, carpets, silver, silks, and other rarities in Gibraltar, Greece, Italy, North Africa, Syria, Turkey, and eventually the United States. The family had a special love for Ottoman and Italian decorative arts and Jewish ceremonial objects and kept many pieces for their own collection and use.

In the late 1800s Hadji began to expand into the American market, setting up shop in Boston, San Francisco, and New York. His Judaica treasures were his special pride, and many were not for sale. He began to lend this collection for display in museums and world's fairs, where it eventually came to the attention of the Jewish Museum.

This exhibition is made possible in part by The Coby Foundation, Ltd.

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Scenes_Benguiat_SectionText_4p.indd 1

IN THE CENTER OF THE ROOM

Torah ark curtain, c. 1735

Istanbul, Ottoman Empire

Silk embroidered with silk and metallic thread and metallic lace border

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 4

In a synagogue, a Torah ark curtain screens and protects the scrolls of the Torah, the sacred text of the five biblical books of Moses. This striking curtain has a most unusual mix of Jewish and Muslim motifs: two columns representing King Solomon's Temple frame a mosque, whose six minarets identify it as the Blue Mosque in Istanbul.

The Hebrew inscription makes its purpose clear: "With the help of God, Benjamin . . . Modico dedicates to the holy congregation Talmud Torah of our teacher Navarro and his . . . son Solomon Navarro." Perhaps the curtain began its life in a Muslim setting and was later altered for Jewish ceremonial use. Alternatively, the image of the famous mosque may simply have symbolized the great multicultural city where the cloth was made—a syncretic merging of two religious traditions that would not have been alien in the international culture of the Ottoman Empire.

Either way, the textile is an apt metaphor for its former owner, Hadji Ephraim Benguiat, whose wide travels and eclectic tastes well reflected the empire's cosmopolitan nature.



Sultan Ahmed Mosque (Blue Mosque), Istanbul, Turkey, completed in 1617

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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT

Lucerne Studio

American, founding date unknown

Hadji Ephraim Benguiat, late nineteenth or early twentieth century

San Francisco, California

Not long after Benguiat moved to California, a reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner* wrote: "The picturesque figure, the red fez and black beard of Hadji Ephraim Benguiat, Turkish Jew, dealer in Oriental rugs, is familiar in the streets of San Francisco." Hadji had a flair for business and for the dramatic. He sometimes donned traditional garb to appeal to the public's fascination with "exotic" Eastern cultures, as in this striking and deliberately stylized studio portrait.

The Benguiat family, late nineteenth century

Smyrna (now Izmir), Ottoman Empire Gelatin silver print

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, U 7628

Hadji Ephraim Benguiat and members of his family—probably his wife, Rebecca, and daughter Luna—pose for a photograph during the celebration of Sukkot, the Jewish harvest festival. They stand by the *sukkah* at their home in Smyrna, modern-day Izmir. Hadji holds a *lulav* (a palm branch bound with sprigs of myrtle and willow) and an *etrog* (citron fruit) in his hands, both ceremonial objects associated with the holiday. The Benguiats were observant Jews in a port city with a robust multiethnic population.

The Benguiat family at the grave of Rachele Benguiat, the mother of Hadji Ephraim, c. 1881

Possibly Smyrna (now Izmir), Ottoman Empire Gelatin silver print

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, X1994-566

Benguiat_Labels_7p.indd 5 9/3/19 5:20 PM

TOP

Mandolina Bassan

Nationality unknown, birth and death dates unknown

Torah binder, between 1735 and 1736
Italy or Ottoman Empire
Silk embroidered with metallic and silk thread
The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 17

In addition to its fine embroidery, this Torah binder notably includes the name of the woman who created it. Its inscription reads: "And [the staff of Aaron] put forth buds, bloomed blossoms and bore ripe almonds [Numbers 17:23]. A work of embroidery done as a holy craft. Mandolina Bassan, she shall be blessed above the women of the tent [a play on Judges 5:24] in the year [5]496 (1735–36)."

Benguiat_Labels_7p.indd 6 9/3/19 5:20 PM

RIGHT

Simcha, wife of Levi of Buttrio
Nationality unknown, birth and death dates
unknown

Torah binder, 1697

Buttrio, Italy

Silk embroidered with silk thread

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 16

Benguiat_Labels_7p.indd 7 9/3/19 5:20 PM

RIGHT

Object label, date unknown

Archives of the Jewish Museum, New York

This handwritten card was displayed alongside the Torah binder from Buttrio at far right. It translates the inscription and bears Benguiat's stamp, also found on some of the objects from his collection on view here. "Patronized by H. R. H. The Duke of Connaught, Hadji Ephraim Benguiat, Closed on Saturday" appears above the duke's coat of arms. Benguiat proudly names Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught (a son of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert), as his customer. By stating that he would not do business on the Sabbath, he made it clear that he was a lew

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ON THE WALL AT LEFT

Louisiana Purchase Exposition (also known as the World's Fair), Saint Louis, Missouri, 1904

Benguiat in the United States

In 1888 Hadji Ephraim Benguiat moved to Boston. A few years later, Cyrus Adler, a curator from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, saw Benguiat's Judaica collection in Boston. Adler recognized the quality of the objects and persuaded Benguiat to exhibit them at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in the pavilion of the United States government.

The Chicago World's Fair was the first of its kind in the United States. It commemorated the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in America and celebrated the country's industrial and cultural achievements. The organizers had a fervent desire to outdo the wildly popular 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris (for which the Eiffel Tower was built). More than twenty-seven million visitors came to Chicago over the six-month run of the fair. It aimed to be global: forty-six countries had pavilions, showing off their wares and their cultures. The United States introduced the ferris wheel, the dishwasher, and the zipper, among other inventions. There was a curious mixture of technical innovations, educational presentations, and carnival sideshows. Cultures deemed "exotic" or "savage" were displayed in living dioramas.

Benguiat loaned his collection of Judaica after the fair to the Smithsonian Institution, where it stayed until after his death. He moved to San Francisco and there continued to deal in rugs and antiques and collect Judaica. He made the most of his romantic image in California, going about his business occasionally dressed in flowing robes and a turban. The local press mentioned him frequently, usually with a tone of patronizing humor.

After the Chicago fair, Benguiat had purchased and stored a reproduction of a Syrian palace that had been part of the Ottoman display. In 1904, when Saint Louis mounted a world's fair, he rebuilt it, named it the Benguiat Palace of Ancient Art, and used it to showcase his collection of gems, textiles, paintings, enamels, and other treasures. Once again using the mystique of the East as a marketing tool, he donned Turkish dress and installed himself in the palace rooms.

Benguiat_LargeLabels_8p.indd 1

A. E. Weed, cameraman American, born in 1873, died in 1961

Panorama from the German Building, Louisiana Purchase Exposition, Saint Louis, Missouri, August 26, 1904

Silent film, 90 seconds

Paper Print Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC

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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT

Hadji Ephraim Benguiat aboard the S.S. *Bremen*, early 1900s

Exterior view of the pavilion containing the H. Ephraim Benguiat Museum Collection and Historical Damascus Palace, 1904

Interior view of the Damascus Palace, 1904

From the Fine Art Portfolio Illustrating Some of the Exhibits of the H. Ephraim Benguiat Museum Collection and the Historical Damascus Palace Published by the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, Saint Louis, Missouri

Facsimiles

Benguiat sits near a young man, who is likely his son Mordecai, in the pavilion he built at the Saint Louis fair to display his collections and wares. It was a common practice at the American and European world's fairs to present non-Western cultures in patronizing terms, as colorful, romantic, backward, and a bit outlandish. Benguiat, a savvy merchant, consciously used his imposing appearance and eye-catching dress to attract the attention of visitors.

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Helen Dare, "King of Collectors, Chief of Connoisseurs, Crank of Cranks," December 3, 1899

From the San Francisco Examiner Sunday Magazine Facsimile

George H. Knight

American, born in 1851, died in 1922

Display of Judaica objects in the H. Ephraim Benguiat Museum Collection, c. 1904

San Francisco, California

Matte collodion print

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, X1994-570

Benguiat_Labels_7p.indd 11 9/3/19 5:20 PM

Grand Prize certificate, 1904

Awarded to H. Ephraim Benguiat for the Palace of Ancient Art, Louisiana Purchase Exposition, Saint Louis, Missouri

Smithsonian Institution Ioan acknowledgment to Hadji Ephraim Benguiat, 1905

Archives of the Jewish Museum, New York

The curator Cyrus Adler had hoped that the Smithsonian Institution would acquire Benguiat's Judaica for its permanent collection. Hadji's works remained on loan there after his death in 1918, but were not purchased, possibly due to litigation among Benguiat family members. Adler left the Smithsonian to become president of the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1924. He played a key role in the 1925 purchase by a group of Jewish philanthropists, led by Felix Warburg (in whose house you are now standing), of the Benguiat collection for the Jewish Theological Seminary. It was installed in a newly dedicated Jewish Museum in 1931.

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Torah mantle, between 1771 and 1772

Amsterdam

Velvet embroidered with silk and metallic thread and silk brocade

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 18

This mantle is decorated with implements from the ancient Temple in Jerusalem: the seven-branched menorah and table for the ceremonial bread. Its loaves represent the twelve tribes of Israel and serve as an offering to God. The Hebrew inscription is a dedication by Asher Anshil, son of Abraham Schoelhoff, and his wife, Havah Hevi, daughter of Wolf Reintel. Both the donor and his father-in-law served as officials in the Jewish community of Amsterdam.

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TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

Etrog container, late nineteenth or early twentieth century

Ottoman Empire
Cast, engraved, and punched silver

Torah pointer, nineteenth century Italy Cast and chased silver

Pilgrim jar, late sixth or early seventh century

Jerusalem

Mold-blown glass with intaglio decoration

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 108, S 26, S 242

Glass pilgrim jars were produced as souvenirs for ancient Jewish and Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem. The menorah on this jar shows that it was meant for a Jewish visitor.

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MIDDLE ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

Kiddush cup and saucer, between 1820 and 1835

Austrian Empire

Free-blown and wheel-cut glass with gold paint

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 66a-b

Disk, nineteenth century

Ottoman Empire

Stamped gold

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 185.1-2

Benguiat's trademark exaggeration and showmanship comes through in the catalogue of his collection published by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, when it was on loan there in 1908. The entry for this piece in the catalogue reads: "Mr. Benguiat thinks that the disk originated soon after the destruction of the Temple, and that only two copies of it are known to be in existence. It was perhaps intended for an amulet." While likely to have been intended as an amulet, Benguiat's guess about its classical date (70 CE) is dubious.

Tefillin bag, nineteenth century

Morocco

Silk velvet embroidered with metallic thread and gold ribbon and cotton

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 53a

Benguiat_Labels_7p.indd 15 9/3/19 5:20 PM

BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

Circumcision cap, eighteenth or nineteenth century

Europe

Silk embroidered with metallic thread and metallic lace

Circumcision set of the Torres family, 1827, 1866

Netherlands

Box: filigree, cast, and hammered silver inlaid with semiprecious stones Instruments: cast, filigree, and hammered silver and carved mother-of-pearl

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 235, S 232a-i

Benguiat_Labels_7p.indd 16 9/3/19 5:20 PM

LEFT

Francesco Griselini

Italian, born in 1717, died in 1787

Esther scroll, between 1740 and 1750

Venice, Italy

Ink and paint on parchment

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 122

Benguiat_Labels_7p.indd 17 9/3/19 5:20 PM

Marriage contract, 1830

Rhodes, Greece
Ink and paint on parchment

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 142

Israel David Luzzatto

Probably Italian, born in 1746, died in 1806

Sukkah decoration, c. 1775

Trieste, Italy

Ink and watercolor on paper

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 256

This paper decoration was made for the interior of a *sukkah*, a temporary booth where Jews eat, study, and sometimes sleep during the eight-day Sukkot harvest festival. During the holiday, Ecclesiastes is traditionally read in the synagogue. Its verses refer to the motion of the sea, wind, and sun, so the artist chose to render the text in the shape of an astrolabe, an instrument that measures the sun's altitude. This is an excellent example of Jewish micrography, in which lines of miniature writing are used to form images.

Benguiat_Labels_7p.indd 19 9/3/19 5:20 PM

Spice container, between 1810 and 1820

Berdichev, Russian Empire

Repoussé, cast, engraved, filigree, and parcel-gilt silver

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, JM 34-51

Benguiat_Labels_7p.indd 21 9/3/19 5:20 PM

Passover pillowcase, eighteenth century Samacov, Bulgaria Silk embroidered with silk and metallic thread and metal studs

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 76a

Benguiat_Labels_7p.indd 22 9/3/19 5:20 PM

Matar Ishmael ha-Ramhi
Nationality unknown, birth and death dates
unknown

Samaritan Torah case (tik), 1568
Damascus, Ottoman Empire
Copper inlaid with silver

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 21

In antiquity cloth mantles or bags (*tikim*) were used to protect Torah scrolls, the most sacred objects in Judaism. By the eleventh century, rigid cases, also called *tikim*, were made from wood, copper, and silver. This *tik* was made for the Samaritans, an ancient Near Eastern Jewish sect.

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H.A.

Nationality unknown, birth and death dates unknown

Study of a Torah ark curtain, nineteenth century

Possibly Europe
Watercolor on paper

JM 86-67

The care with which an unknown artist made this copy of the Torah ark curtain in the center of the room suggests that that it was considered remarkable and rare at the time when it was collected.

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CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT

Amulet, nineteenth century

Ottoman Empire

Ink and pencil on parchment

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 170

A Jewish protective amulet may be a written inscription. This one was made for Hadji Benguiat when he was sick as a child. The text follows Jewish tradition, referring to him by his own name and his mother's name. At top are a hexagram and a magic box with Hebrew letters that refer to the name of God (spelled various ways); below these are the names of angels. All of these elements were believed to have mystical healing powers.

Torah mantle, c. 1881

Istanbul, Ottoman Empire

Velvet embroidered with metallic thread

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 19

This Torah mantle is dedicated to the memory of Hadji's mother. Her gravesite appears in the family photograph on the wall behind you, to your right. The inscription reads, "For the repose of Mrs. Rachele, may her soul rest in the Garden, the wife of Avraham Benguiat, a pure Sephardi."

Torah finials inscribed in Hebrew to Joseph, son of Ephraim [Be]nguiat, nineteenth century

Western Ottoman Empire

Silver filigree

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 11a-b

Souvenir perfume flacon, c. 1893 Probably Germany, Bohemia, or Ottoman Empire Glass

Donated by Myron Mayers, JM 2-52

Perfume bottles like this one were sold as souvenirs at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where Benguiat's collection was on display. Hadji Benguiat's name is painted on the side, suggesting that he may have been promoting his antiques business at the fair.

350 Þ

Hadji Benguiat especially loved his collection of Jewish ceremonial objects, many of which were either used by members of his family or bear inscriptions in their honor or memory.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM

Handwritten label for a seder plate, date unknown

Archives of the Jewish Museum, New York

Passover dish, between 1864 and 1889 Savona or Albisola, Italy Majolica

The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 78a

When this seder plate was catalogued in 1899 by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, it was thought to have been made by Spanish Jews in the thirteenth century and glazed in Italy in the sixteenth. However it is actually one of a large number of forged Italian majolica (glazed earthenware) seder plates of similar design, made in the late nineteenth century. The Benguiats probably acquired it at that time, when they lived in Italy.

Handwashing vessel and laver for Passover, between 1849 and 1850

Istanbul, Ottoman Empire Gilt, repoussé, punched, and engraved copper The H. Ephraim and Mordecai Benguiat Family Collection, S 77a-b

This fine pitcher and basin, with their delicate serpentine pattern of trees and hills, display the exquisite craftsmanship of Ottoman metalsmiths. The Benguiats used them for ritual handwashing during the Passover seder. Special vessels like these were also commonly used in the Ottoman Empire for Muslim ritual ablutions and in the home, and indeed the inscription lists the original owner and date of manufacture as "Ahmad Pasha Karim ibn Sharif Zuleyha[?] [1]266," that is, 1849–50.