

HANNAH ALTMAN: NOT A CIRCLE BUT A SPIRAL

Hannah Altman (born in 1995, New Jersey; lives and works in Boston) is a photographer whose work engages with myth, performance, and memory, often through the lens of Jewish ritual and folklore. Drawing on her background as a dancer, Altman thinks about the photograph as a stage. The building blocks of the scenes she constructs are, for the most part, ordinary—a chair, a mirror, a piece of fruit—but the artist uses them to conjure unexpectedly charged atmospheres.

Inspired by Jewish spiritual practice, Altman's photographs locate the holy within the everyday: spangles of light reflecting off the surface of water or delicate blue veins, faintly visible beneath the drum-taut skin of a pregnant belly. Here Altman also works with specifically Jewish ceremonial objects, including a house-shaped tzedakah box (alms container) reminiscent of the architecturally inspired religious objects on view in the exhibition *Sacred Splendor*, on the museum's second floor.

The frame, for Altman, is a generative boundary within which narrative and meaning take shape. In *Protection (Carrying)*, she references the eruv, a type of enclosure that offers a practical solution to the religious prohibition against carrying objects outside of the home on the Sabbath by uniting discrete structures into a single symbolic domain. Like the prescribed movements of ritual, Altman's photographs transpose the specificity of the bodies, objects, and moments they depict into an eternal or universal register. In this installation, her work is paired with Jewish and Christian ceremonial objects that likewise make the body a locus of connection with the divine, expanding on, in Altman's words, "an ongoing dialogue about inheritance, ritual, and reinvention."

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Artists Respond to *Sacred Splendor: Jewish Ritual Art and Christian Treasures from St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague*

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Curators: Claudia J. Nahson, Morris and Eva Feld Senior Curator, and Abigail Rapoport, Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Curator of Judaica; Consulting Curator: Jiří Fajt; Contemporary Curator: Shira Backer, Leon Levy Associate Curator; Assistant Curator: Danny Smith Salfati; Blanksteen Curatorial Interns: Talia Goldman and Isa Rosario-Blake

**All works are by Hannah Altman and
courtesy of the artist, unless
otherwise noted.**

Eruv (Interior), 2026

Archival pigment print

Touch, 2022

Archival pigment print

Like many of Altman's works, *Touch* has a distinctly tactile sensibility. Cupped hands, cast in ice, hold a tiny lit candle that causes the ice to melt and crack. This striking image recalls numerous metaphors for the fleetingness of human life, such as Isaiah 40:6, "All flesh is grass." In the context of Altman's work, the composition also suggests the tension inherent in photography's splintering of time.

To Catch One's Breath (Shofar), 2024

Archival pigment print

Architecture of Memory, 2026

Archival pigment print

In analog photography, the elusive play of light that makes vision possible is translated, through photosensitive chemicals, into a solid and enduring object. Altman's images often push back against this fixity: Here, a solid object—a *tzedakah* box (alms container) with an architectural form—seems to dissolve in a puddle, suggesting that light can both reveal and transfigure reality.

From the Heat, 2024

Archival pigment print

Not a Circle But a Spiral, 2024

Archival pigment print

The string that winds around the woman's finger in this photograph is reminiscent of the straps that hold the cases of tefillin, or phylacteries, in place. Rhythmic and repetitive, the action of wrapping a string or strap has a meditative quality, perhaps akin to the experience of praying with a rosary, like the one on view nearby. In this image, the string also suggests the umbilical cord that vitally links a pregnant person and fetus.

Telling You, 2021

Archival pigment print

Listening, 2021

Archival pigment print

In this tender image, dappled light and shadow blur the boundaries between a woman and the baby she holds in her arms. Seen from behind, these anonymous figures become emblematic of the primal bond between a mother and an infant; in this way, they relate to representations of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child, such as the one engraved on the silver medallion on view nearby.

Looking Up and Down, 2024

Archival pigment print

Curing, 2023

Archival pigment print

Photographs like this one exemplify the camera's ability to fragment and estrange. The title, *Curing*, underscores the theme of objectification, as if the photograph's subject—a hand encased in a plastic bag, immersed up to the wrist in water—were a pickle or an anchovy rather than a partially visible person. The disembodied hand also recalls some of the reliquaries, which take the shape of the body parts they were believed to contain, that are currently on view in *Sacred Splendor* on the museum's second floor.

Olifant, eleventh–twelfth century

Probably Sicily

Ivory with iron chain

The Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague

This olifant (named for the elephant tusk from which it was carved) is an ornate version of a hunting or signaling horn. Its three bands of decoration are deeply carved with depictions of warriors, racing chariots, and animals. In the Middle Ages horns like these were sometimes held in the collections of cathedrals and were often associated with holy figures and warrior saints such as Saint Wenceslas. In Jewish religious practice, the shofar—a ram's horn—is used to awaken the soul for prayer, particularly during the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Eruv (Exterior), 2026

Archival pigment print

Observant Jews construct an enclosure called an eruv, a practical solution to restrictions Jewish law places on carrying objects from one “domain” to another on the Sabbath. An eruv is a ritual boundary mapped onto a variety of objects: Walls, fences, and riverbanks have all, at various times, been incorporated into eruvim. Even a simple string, carefully placed, can symbolically merge many domains into a single ritual space. This image recalls a parallel technology: the camera, which isolates a portion of reality within the frame while excluding all that falls outside of it.

Medallion containing a relic of the veil of Mary, 1354

Prague

Gilt, embossed, and engraved silver, embossed,
rock crystal, and Byssus fabric

The Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague

Concealed within this tiny medallion is a
fragment of fabric said to have belonged to the
veil of the Virgin Mary; an engraving on the side
depicts her holding the infant Christ.

Ottavio Miseroni (1567–1624)

Rosary, 1600–1625

Prague

Gold and opaque enamel (frame), gold filigree, lapis lazuli with pyrite inclusions, and silk ribbon

The Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague

The user of a rosary, while passing its beads through the hand, recites a sequence of prayers meditating on the life of the Virgin Mary. This rosary belonged to Holy Roman Empress Eleanora Gonzaga (1598–1655). Lapis lazuli, a precious mineral used in the Middle Ages to make blue pigment, is a key component of the work. Handling lapis lazuli was believed to guard against premature birth.

Frame reliquary, seventeenth– eighteenth century (base and crown)

Prague

Silver, gilt, textiles, and pearls

The Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague

Saint Ursula, a princess of pagan Britain, fled on the eve of her wedding to pursue a life of Christian devotion, according to widespread medieval legend. Accompanied at first by ten other pious virgins, she was eventually joined on a march to Rome by eleven thousand virgins, some of whose relics are believed to be enclosed in this reliquary. The group of women is said to have been massacred in what is now Cologne, Germany. During the Middle Ages, Ursula became a patron saint of education and a popular figure at many early universities, including the one Charles IV founded in Prague in 1348.

Reliquary bust of Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child, c. 1500

Prague

Parcel-gilt silver, precious stones, and glass

The Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague

In this bust of Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, a glass window set into the chest frames a relic believed to be a piece of Anne's robes. Cradled in Anne's arms are miniature figures of Mary and the Christ Child, linking three generations of the Holy Family.

Rinaldo Ranzoni (1671–1737)

Reliquary of Saint Scholastica, early sixteenth century (monile), 1716 or 1718 (base)

Prague (monile), Bohemia (now in Czech Republic) (base)

Silver, parcel-gilt silver, rock crystal, glass, and Bohemian garnets

The Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague

Monile of Saint Justina with sculptural depiction of the Crucifixion, 1450–1500

Bohemia (now in Czech Republic)

Gilt silver, rock crystal, Bohemian garnets, and enamel

Relics of Saints Adalbert, Afra, Bride of Scotland, Cecilia, Christopher, Eoban, the Five Holy Brothers, Justina, Philip the Apostle, and Richard of England

The Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague

Possibly Marek Fišer (active in the early sixteenth century)

Reliquary incorporating a monile depicting the mystical marriage of Saint Catherine, 1513 (monile), 1607 (base)

Prague

Gilt silver and doublet with rock crystal, glass, stone, and pearl

The Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague

These three reliquaries incorporate moniles, decorated medallions worn by clergymen during Mass. Originally moniles were a form of popular jewelry among wealthy ancient Romans; medieval Christian goldsmiths replaced their precious gems and jewels with the relics of Christian saints.

Childbirth amulet, nineteenth century

Italy

Filigreed and granulated silver and ink on parchment

The Jewish Museum, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 3102

Provenance: unknown owner; acquired by Harry G. Friedman for the Jewish Museum, 1950

The silver filigree of this amulet encloses a parchment with invocations, blessings, and symbols intended to safeguard a mother and child immediately after birth. These protective measures specifically guard against Lilith, a demonic figure often described as Adam's scorned first wife who menaces women and newborn babies.

Marriage ring, nineteenth century

Jerusalem

Cast and engraved copper

The Jewish Museum, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 2011

Provenance: unknown owner; R. Merein, Jerusalem (dealer active in 1930s–50s);
acquired by Harry G. Friedman for the Jewish Museum, 1950s

While the earliest house-shaped Jewish marriage rings date to the Middle Ages, this example was made much later. Rings of this kind played an important role in medieval Jewish weddings ceremonies. The architectural bezel may evoke the couple's future home, as well as the Temple in Jerusalem. The gilt layer that once covered this ring's copper surface has worn away almost completely, suggesting its passage through many hands.

Torah pointer, 1748–66

Danzig (now Gdańsk, Poland)

Cast and engraved silver

The Jewish Museum, Gift of the Danzig Jewish Community, D 37

Provenance: unknown owner; transferred to Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, 1939; accessioned by the Jewish Museum, 1954

A Torah pointer helps the reader track their place in the text. Because the Torah scroll is considered sacred, the pointer or *yad* (“hand” in Hebrew) is used to prevent contact with the parchment, protecting both its physical integrity and holiness. Often the tapering end of the pointer is fashioned as a tiny hand with a pointed finger. Connecting the reader to the words on the Torah parchment, the *yad* bridges the gap between the physical and spiritual realms.

Ilya Schor (1904–1961)

Tefillin cases, 1950s

Engraved and pierced silver, leather, and wood

The Jewish Museum, Gift of Erich Segal, Thomas Segal, and David Segal, 2005-39a-b
Provenance: the artist; his friend Rabbi Samuel Segal (died in 1961); his wife, Cynthia Zeger; donated to the Jewish Museum, 2005

Protected within cases, tefillin, or phylacteries, are worn during morning prayers on weekdays. One square box is attached to the upper arm by leather straps that spiral down the forearm, then around the hand and middle finger. Another is worn on the forehead. Each case contains parchment inscribed with biblical verses pertaining to the covenant between God and the Jewish people. By binding these texts close to the head and heart, the wearer demonstrates their relationship to the divine.

Spice containers, first half of the nineteenth century

Poland or Russia

Pierced, punched, engraved, cast, and rolled silver

The Jewish Museum, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 4526, F 2622

Provenance: unknown owner; acquired by Harry G. Friedman for the Jewish Museum, 1950s

These spice containers take the form of leafy plants crowned by bulbous fruits. Filled with fragrant spices, they were used in the Havdalah ceremony (Hebrew for “separation”) that marks the end of the sacred time of the Sabbath and the beginning of the new week. Havdalah, which takes place after sundown, includes the kindling of a candle, the light of which would have reflected dramatically on these intricate silver objects as they were passed from person to person to smell the spices within.

Handwashing pitcher and basin, early twentieth century

Iran

Cast, engraved, punched, and hammered silver

The Jewish Museum, Gift of Mena Rokhsar in memory of Ebrahim Khalil Rokhsar,
1993-240a-b

Provenance: unknown owner; Ebrahim Khalil Rokhsar and Mena Rokhsar; donated to
the Jewish Museum, 1993

This delicate pitcher and basin were used for ritual handwashing before the recitation of prayer at the conclusion of a meal. The imagery on the pitcher evokes paradise through rabbits at play in a field of flowers, a motif common across religious communities in Iran.