

The Jewish Museum – Audio Description Guide

Sacred Splendor:

Jewish Ritual Art and Christian Treasures from St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague

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900. Master Wenceslas, Sacrament house, c. 1375

NARRATOR: In this gallery, we find an architectural model titled “Sacrament house.” Created around 1375 by the craftsman Master Wenceslas in gilded iron, the object resembles the arched entrance to a Gothic cathedral. Similar in height to a bookshelf, the object is about 82 inches high and 20 inches wide at its base. In metric units, that’s about 208 centimeters high and 51 centimeters wide.

This Sacrament house was created at the same time as the construction of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague, in what is today the Czech Republic, and as a result, took much inspiration from it. But instead of replicating the entire structure, the Sacrament house isolates a portion of the cathedral: one of its grand entrances. Here’s Curator Abigail Rapoport:

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: It rises like a small architectural world in its own right. It's a structure of pinnacles. You see tracery and openwork, a prominent rose window at the center. It stands upright and vertical and almost becomes weightless in its appearance, as if the Gothic architectural language of the city itself has been translated into metal and gold.

NARRATOR: With its brilliant metallic surface, the Sacrament house shines and gleams in the gallery, radiating from every angle. Yet almost every surface is pierced, so the piece’s decoration looks as delicate as finely cut paper.

Let’s explore the object’s structure in greater detail, moving from bottom to top.

The base, or foot of the object, is constructed from smooth golden panels. Two tall columns rise from either side of the platform to frame an ornate gate, suggesting the entrance. The bottom two-thirds of the gate is a grid of 16 slim vertical openings, stacked in two rows of eight. Each one takes the form of a pointed arch with delicate tracery, or patterns like the curves and swirling lines one might find on a piece of lace. The top third of the gate takes the shape of a pointed arch with a sharp tip.

At the center of the arch is a decorative element called a “rose window,” a circular window filled with geometric patterns. Imagine a bicycle wheel with spokes radiating out from the center, except here, the spaces between the spokes are filled with looping, petal-shaped openings. In an actual cathedral this window would have been filled with stained glass.

Dotted across the arched top of the gate are six three-dimensional stylized flowers. There are three flanking each side, separated by a short pinnacle. Moving out toward the sides of the object, we find two small enamel shields—the only hint of color on the otherwise all-gold object. On the left, the shield shows a black lion against a dark maroon background – this is the Coat of arms of the House of Luxembourg–Bohemia, the ruling family of Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV. And on the right, a black eagle with spread wings is emblazoned on a gold background, Charles IV’s personal coat of

arms as Holy Roman Emperor. These shields appear on the back corners of the object as well.

Now, let's move on to the top half of the Sacrament House. Above the pointed arch gate, a narrow tower soars upward. The base of the tower is four-sided. Each side is pierced with three tall, pointed windows, echoing the ones below. Buttresses, or curved physical supports, emerge from the corners, connecting it with the tall columns of the lower tower.

As we travel upward, the tower tapers into sheets of elongated triangles, forming a tall conical roof, its tip narrows into an elongated spire topped by a small gold orb.

A crown of twelve pinnacles sprouts around the tower like tall stalks of corn. Four of these needle-like structures are adorned from top to bottom with curling leaf shapes and, near the top, saucer-like orbs like two wide domes stacked atop one another. The other eight are slightly shorter and rise up to flower-like motifs at the top. If we were to run our hands over these structures, they would feel prickly, almost like a thorned stem on a rose.

The Sacrament House is a blend of decorative splendor and functionality, as it was originally used as a container. It would house the consecrated bread used in Christian Mass for the sacrament of communion.

901. Virgin Mary on a lion throne, Rengersdorf church, Lower Silesia, c. 1360–70

NARRATOR: Before us is a carved and painted wooden sculpture called Virgin Mary on a lion throne. Though the artist is unknown, the work is estimated to have been made sometime between 1360 and 1370 in Lower Silesia, a region in what is now southwestern Poland. The sculpture's height is 34 inches—a little over half of a life-size figure. It is 14 inches wide and 7 inches deep. In metric units, that's about 86 centimeters high, 35 centimeters wide, and 18 centimeters deep.

This sculpture depicts a young woman seated on a throne, cradling a child in her right arm. Two small wingless angels clutch at either side of the skirt of her dress. The woman represents the Virgin Mary, the mother who gave birth to Christ, who is depicted here as the child in her arms. Two lions crouch at her feet beneath each angel figure, as if guarding or protecting this small family.

Despite the scene's sacred nature, there is a modest quality to the sculpture. It is rendered with a muted palette of brown, beige, and warm ivory. There is an incredible amount of detail, especially in the drape and folds of each figure's garments. If we could run a hand across the surface, we would feel the smooth ripples of the drapery and fine cracks running through the painted surfaces.

We will describe the sculpture from top to bottom, beginning with the central figure: the Virgin Mary.

She has fair skin, represented by a light beige color, and rosy lips and cheeks. Her features are quite delicate, brows like gentle arcs across her relaxed eyes, which gaze to her right, and her pink lips form a soft smile of contentment. Her head tilts down slightly, as if mid-nod, and atop her head, she wears a low, plain, cylindrical crown. Curls of light brown hair spill down her shoulders and slender neck.

Her upper body is slender, dressed in a muted gold-colored gown with a fitted bodice. A large shawl drapes over her shoulders, the excess fabric gathering across her lap in deep, cascading folds, so that her knees and legs are buried in layers of cloth. In her left hand, she grips a scepter that rises like a staff, while in her right, she cups the elbow of the Christ child whose body burrows into the crook of her arm and rests upon her right knee.

The Christ child is small and round-cheeked, with short curly brown hair. He, too, wears a flowing gown that drapes and pools below his bent knees. He raises his right hand in a gesture of blessing, two fingers extended, while his other arm cradles a dove against his chest, a Christian embodiment of the Holy Spirit.

Two angels, rendered as childlike figures, huddle low at Mary's sides. They wrap around her legs, tucked into the folds of her dress. The angel to Mary's right looks toward the mother and child. A blissful smile blossoms across their round face as one

hand lifts to cup the Christ child's pudgy foot. The other child, the one on Mary's left, gazes up at her with curiosity and reaches a hand to the base of her scepter.

Both angels balance atop the heads of two lions perched on the sculpture's base. The lions' broad heads nestle between the thick folds of Mary's dress, front paws stretched forward as if perched into a resting position. The lions have round eyes and blunted muzzles that seem to smile at us. Below them, the wood is carved into a low, rocky mound that forms the sculpture's base.

Here is Curator Claudia Nahson, recounting the details that make this sculpture unique:

CLAUDIA NAHSON: The sculpture was made in the late 14th century. This period was also a time during which devotion to the Virgin Mary grew significantly. Representations of Mary from this period often depict her as a young, beautiful woman with a delicate smile, as a young mother being crowned Queen of Heaven by her own son.

902. Aquamanile (handwashing vessel), late twelfth century with later inscription

NARRATOR: This object is a pitcher-like container called an *Aquamanile*. It is a medieval handwashing vessel from northern Germany, made during the late 12th century. This one is in the shape of a lion. It is made out of a copper alloy that was cast, or melted down into a liquid and poured into a hollow mold. An additional engraving was added at a later date. Close in size to a small house cat, it is roughly 10 inches high and 11 inches long. In metric units, that's about 24 centimeters high and 28 centimeters long.

Let's begin by describing the creature's head, which is held up high in a proud gesture.

The lion's face is broad and blunt, with small, rounded ears, wide, teardrop-shaped eyes, and a short muzzle. Its mouth opens into a wide grin, engraved lines carving out square teeth. A short, straight tube juts out from the mouth's center, like a pipe. Yet, here, it functions as the vessel's spout. *Aquamanilae* like this one served as water jugs to be used for washing hands before and after meals or religious ceremonies.

Just beneath the spout, we find the lion's mane, subtly carved from the chin to cover the puffed-out chest like a long, bushy beard. The mane is rendered with dense, fine lines combed into pointed tufts of hair, evoking a feathery texture. The rest of the body, by contrast, is quite sleek. On the right side of the creature's chest is a crack, about 1 inch long.

The lion's belly is long and lean, carried on four sturdy legs that end in small, simple feet. The legs are slightly splayed, giving the creature a planted, stable stance. Behind the shoulders and along the animal's left flank, a row of 11 engraved Hebrew characters is incised into the surface.

Reading from right to left, the first engraved character is positioned near the lion's rump, where a tall, arching tail doubles as the vessel's handle. It shoots upwards, bending to meet the back of the lion's head. It forms one continuous swoop like a cleanly bent branch. At the base of the handle, located on top of the head, there is a small, hinged opening with a missing flap where water would have been deposited.

The vessel's surface is colored richly, like heavily tarnished metal often is, with shifting greenish-brown and gold tones. The head, chest, and lower legs are the darkest, while the handle gleams brightly in comparison, perhaps a sign of the many years of human use.

Here is Curator Claudia Nahson:

CLAUDIA NAHSON: Though many medieval aquamaniles are extant, what makes this example rare is the presence of a Hebrew inscription, probably added several centuries after the piece was created. The inscription reads: 'This is a donation of the owner Berekhiah Segal.'

Who he was and when he lived remain a mystery. He most likely presented the vessel to a synagogue in Germany sometime after the mid-16th century. This aquamanile was likely used during the synagogue service when Levites washed the hands of the descendants of the Kohanim, the ancient priests, before they recite the priestly blessing.

NARRATOR: Imagine touching this object. Our fingers would pass over sloping curves, crisp ridges, rounded hollows, finely etched lines, as well as small dents and pockmarks. Most notably, we would observe a jagged crack on the right side of the lower chest where a gash reveals the vessel's hollow interior. If we were to gently tap the exterior with our knuckles, the vessel would respond with a faint echo and a humming vibration as the metal resounds.

903. Reliquary bust of Saint Wenceslas, late fifteenth century

NARRATOR: This object is a Reliquary bust, or a container shaped like the head and upper torso of a Christian saint. In this case, the bust takes the shape of Saint Wenceslas, the Patron Saint of Czechia. From 921 to 935, Wenceslas was also the Duke of Bohemia (a region in the modern-day Czech Republic). Shortly after his death he became recognized as a martyr and a saint.

This reliquary bust of Saint Wenceslas was made in Prague in the late 15th century, using both plain and gilded silver, as well as amethysts and imitation glass. It is roughly 23 inches tall and 18 inches wide. In metric units, that's about 59 centimeters tall and 45 centimeters wide.

The bust depicts a regal bearded man with long, flowing locks of wavy hair topped by a dome-shaped crown. The entire sculpture is worked in polished metal, giving the figure a radiant finish. Some areas, such as the skin, beard, and garment, are mostly silver and gleam a cool, bright white, while other areas—the hair and some of the decorative detailing on the crown and clothing—have been plated with yellow gold. Let's begin by describing the crown and working our way down to the sculpture's base. The crown is shaped like a small dome. Two thick, gold bands run across the top in a cross shape, creating slight indentations that divide the dome into four smooth lobes that puff up like soft cushions.

At the very top center of the crown, where the two bands intersect, we find a small square clasp that opens into a hollow interior. The base of the crown is encircled by another thick, gold band. It is studded with pale stones as well as small silver flowers and thin ripples of metal that swell up like ornate plumes. At the center of this bottom band is a disc of clear imitation glass. Behind it is a fragment of a bone of the saint, held in place with a tiny piece of golden wire. Around this bone fragment are a small string of pearls and pieces of gold filigree. This is the relic of the saint that the reliquary contains.

A cascade of wavy golden strands of hair unfurls below the crown, falling down both sides of the head and spilling onto the shoulders. The figure's face wears a solemn expression, appearing to stare out toward some faraway place. Beneath his furrowed brows, the man's eyes squint slightly, creating soft wrinkles around his eyes. His long, straight nose leads down to a small mouth enveloped by a full silver beard and mustache of finely engraved curling lines.

Let's hear a bit more about the decorative nature of this object from Art historian Jiří Fajt:

JIRÍ FAJT: The material value of the reliquaries was really enormous, but where the core is to protect actually the relic, which was inside. There are some exceptions, but almost all of them contained part of skulls, or the whole skull of the saints. And so the importance of the relics should be presented through the precious execution of the reliquaries itself.

NARRATOR: The man wears a garment reminiscent of plate armor. It has a layered silver collar for the neck, and a smooth silver chest plate adorned with a single black stone at the center and two engraved half-circles. A silver cape drapes over the man's shoulder, connected across his clavicle by two rope-like metal chains. The cape's collar and opening are bordered by thick gold trim encrusted with a column of pale grey stones and shiny, dark black gems, both in intricate filigree frames. In between each, there is also a pair of small silver flowers, like the ones included on the crown.

The bust concludes with a gold rim that surrounds the perimeter of the sculpture's base and is periodically studded with dark purple amethysts. The base hovers a few inches off the ground, supported by three small human figures cast in silver. They wear long robes and kneel on one knee, hands outstretched as if speaking, tiny attendants announcing the saint's presence.

904. Torah ark valance, 1718–19

NARRATOR: This object is a valance, or decorative textile that hangs across the top of a Torah ark, the cabinet that holds the sacred Torah scrolls in a synagogue. The object was created between 1718 and 1719 for the High Synagogue in Prague. It is primarily made of deep red velvet, a lush, dense fabric, and has been heavily embroidered with golden silk threads. About as wide as a three-seat sofa but shorter in height, the textile is roughly 96 inches wide and 31 inches tall. In metric units, that's about 244 centimeters wide and 80 centimeters tall.

This textile is long and stout, with a symmetrical design where the right half mirrors the left. The top is pointed, like a squat long triangle along an equally long rectangle. Rather than a straight line across the bottom edge, a series of seven swooping U-shapes forms a scallop-edged trim. Along the left and right sides of the rectangle, we find outstretched wings, each with about 16 plumes fanned up and out. Together, they make a pair, giving the impression that the overall valance, or textile, is capable of flight.

We will now describe the intricate details of the embroidered elements. At the center stands the largest motif: two creatures with clawed feet and widespread wings. They face each other, shown in profile. Only one wing is visible, but its dramatic length spans both sides of the wide, triangular top. Above it, a jeweled, dome-shaped crown completely obscures the birds' heads. At one point, the crown was studded with 15 gems in shades of red, green, white, and blue. However, with time, many gems have become loose, and there are now gaps with missing stones.

Above the wings, a thick band outlines the textile's triangular top. In keeping with the decorative design, the embroidered band includes 14 circular openings that reveal the red velvet background. The circles are evenly spaced across the band, and at the center of each, we find a simple flower with six long petals.

Below the eagles' wings are two rectangles outlined with a decorative, embroidered frame and inscribed with single lines of Hebrew. In translation the inscription cites a verse from Exodus describing the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and proclaims the work was made by a generous donation to the High Synagogue in Prague. These inscriptions, as well as the tips of each wing, are flanked by two more jeweled crowns that sit high in the textile's upper corners. Like the one in the center, these are encrusted with jewels, many of which have been lost.

The bottom half of the design is where a row of seven U-shaped panels hang like tabs or shields. Each panel contains a single embroidered emblem with a Hebrew caption and fringe along the scalloped bottom. Each emblem corresponds to an element used in the Ancient Temple in Jerusalem.

The leftmost panel depicts a rectangle set with rows of round, jewel-like studs—many of which are missing. Pairs of gold, interlocking circular chains float above each top

corner. This represents the breastplate a high priest may have worn. Next is a seven-branched menorah, or candleholder with a wide, rounded base like a lidded pot. The next is an altar for the burnt offering, a low squat octagonal structure with a pile of flaming wooden logs and a haze of smoke rendered in shades of dark and light brown.

In the fourth and center panel, we find two stone tablets with rounded tops. They are placed directly beneath the two-winged creatures at the center and partially obscuring their legs. The slabs sit side by side, each with five lines of horizontal Hebrew text showing the Ten Commandments. The slabs are set atop a chest identified as the golden ark of the covenant.

The fifth panel, and to the right, shows a lidded vessel like those used to burn incense. It has a spherical, orb-shaped body attached to a pedestal with a thin neck and flared base. The sixth tab contains the emblem of a table with two stacks of bread totaling 12 unleavened loaves – the bread consumed as part of ritual practice in the Temple. And then, finally, at the far right, there is another rectangular form with a decorative pattern.

Both the velvet and the thread show signs of age. In spots, the crimson material is worn away, leaving flatter or rougher patches visible. The metallic thread used throughout has tarnished over time, dulling from bright silver to a dark grey brown. In other places, the thread retains the glint of gold and yellow silk.

For Curator Abigail Rapoport, the dense blend of imagery on this piece gives the object a sense of liveliness.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: At first glance, this object feels almost overwhelming. Every surface has been activated. Crowns, inscriptions, scrolling foliage, sacred symbols, and embroidered borders press against one another in this tightly ordered composition. You can imagine, in the flicker of candlelight, the way synagogue interiors were typically illuminated, how this metallic thread would have continually caught and released the light as people moved through the sanctuary. Rather than appearing static, the surface would have shimmered and shifted throughout the course of the ceremonial service.

More than 16 centuries after the destruction of the ancient temple, its sacred furnishings are gathered together once again above the Torah ark in the high synagogue. The synagogue cannot replace the ancient temple in Jerusalem, but through objects like this, it can remember it. It can memorialize it.