

The Jewish Museum – Audio Guide

Sacred Splendor:

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

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200. Introduction

JAMES S. SNYDER: I'm James S. Snyder, Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director at the Jewish Museum. and I'm pleased to welcome you to *Sacred Splendor: Jewish Ritual Art and Christian Treasures from St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague*.

This exhibition brings together Jewish and Christian sacred art from medieval to early modern times in Europe, revealing complex, interconnected histories across more than six centuries. At its heart is the human impulse – across time and place – to contain what is precious, treasured, and believed to be sacred.

Throughout this period, the city of Prague, in the modern-day Czech Republic, was a major spiritual and political capital. The 14th century King of Bohemia and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles IV, refashioned the city's St. Vitus Cathedral into a Gothic marvel and endowed it with important relics, commissioning elaborate reliquaries to house them. On display in dialogue with these precious objects you will find Jewish ceremonial art both from Prague and from across the surrounding Central European landscape.

To broaden – and reflect further – on the exhibition's themes, we have also engaged contemporary artists whose work can be seen here, in *Sacred Splendor* and also in our 3rd Floor collection galleries.

Throughout the exhibition, you will encounter works of art and objects of veneration. Often, these objects were intended for ceremonial use and viewed only on special occasions or from a distance. Here and now in our Museum, you have a rare opportunity to see treasures from the St. Vitus Cathedral together with many of the Jewish Museum's own holdings – and from sister museums and sites in the U.S. and across Europe – and to engage with their shared aesthetic iconographies and their theological divergences. You can also learn more about the surprising phenomenon that, in many instances, these treasures serving the needs of two different faiths were actually crafted by the same artisans.

As you explore our galleries, you will hear from the exhibition's co-curators Abigail Rapoport and Claudia Nahson, along with other experts, who will share their perspectives on the objects on view.

Here is Curator Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: This exhibition began with an extraordinary opportunity for the Jewish Museum to present more than 60 reliquaries from the treasury of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague, the largest presentation of these remarkable objects ever shown outside of Europe. That's an incredible story in and of itself but for us, it quickly became an opportunity to ask a much bigger set of questions. What constitutes a Jewish treasure? And what happens when we place Jewish ritual art alongside one of Europe's great cathedral treasuries?

JAMES S. SNYDER: Curator Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: The objects in the exhibition are all unique and very rare. Some are quite small but exquisite and intricate in their design. I hope you will pause and look closely to take in that intricacy and beauty, and at the same time, bear in mind that all the magnificent craftsmanship was placed at the service of the sacred content of a reliquary, which is the relic itself, while in Jewish ritual objects, their beauty is meant to enhance the performance of the ritual associated with them.

201. Capital of supporting column decorated with sycamore (?) leaves, from the Altneuschul, Prague, 1250-1300

NARRATOR: Prague's Altneuschul, built around 1270, is the oldest synagogue in Europe still in use today. This is a fragment of stone from its interior. Abigail Rapoport, Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Curator of Judaica at the Jewish Museum and curator of the exhibition explains:

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: What I find so compelling about it is that it's not just debris from a building; it's a capital, the carved top of a column. So it wasn't simply decorative: it's structural, holding up the weight of the vault above. And then you start to notice what's happening on the surface. These leaves are spreading across the stone. They are suggesting this growth, this movement. Another detail I love is how the stone itself becomes soft and organic. And this visual language is really central to Gothic architecture more broadly.

NARRATOR: Now compare it with another capital, displayed nearby, from a Christian building, the Convent of St Agnes.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: Visually the similarity is striking: the same deeply cut foliage, the same curly movement across the stone, the same sense that the surface is really being animated rather than simply carved.

NARRATOR: In fact, both pieces were carved by the same – Christian – masonry workshop.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: Jewish communities in medieval Prague were excluded from craft guilds that controlled construction, training, and building trades. So this is not a shared workshop economy and it's not a case of Jews and Christians working side by side within these same guild structures.

NARRATOR: What is striking is that the synagogue still participates in the same Gothic visual language, albeit under legal and social restrictions.

202. Master Wenceslas, Sacrament house, c. 1375

JÍŘÍ FAJT: The sacrament house is a unique object as it is a completely gilt model of a church building with miniature elements of the architecture of St. Vitus Cathedral in which it stands.

NARRATOR: Art historian Jiří Fajt specializes in medieval art and architecture.

JÍŘÍ FAJT: The gilt iron sacrament house still stands in the place for which it was created, one of the most sacred spots in the Kingdom of Bohemia.

NARRATOR: The sacrament house, dating from the late 14th century, was made to hold the consecrated wafers shared during the liturgy of the Eucharist – the central Christian rite commemorating the Last Supper. Many Christians believe that, during this rite, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. During the medieval period there was increasing emphasis on the visual display of the sacrament.

Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: It doesn't look like a container. It rises like a small architectural world in its own right. It's a structure of pinnacles. You see a prominent rose window at the center as if the Gothic architectural language of the city itself has been translated into metal and gold that you see here.

NARRATOR: Jews and Christians inhabited the same urban environment of medieval Prague, with its soaring towers and pointed arches.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: So it's natural that Gothic architectural language became a language of spirituality for both communities.

NARRATOR: Displayed nearby are tower-shaped spice containers, used for the Jewish Havdalah ceremony marking the end of the Sabbath. Claudia Nahson is Morris & Eva Feld Senior Curator at the Jewish Museum and curator of the exhibition.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: The sacrament house dialogues beautifully with the spice containers from the Jewish Museum Collection. These objects were inspired by surrounding Gothic architecture.

NARRATOR: Together, they create a Gothic urban landscape of sorts within the gallery.

203. Solomon ben Neriyah (scribe), Hebrew Bible, 1313

NARRATOR: This medieval Hebrew Bible is both a sacred book and a work of art. Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: The opening page immediately draws your eye to the first Hebrew word written in brilliant gold. Hebrew has no capital letters, so scribes announced the beginning of a new biblical book through scale, color, and ornament, to really set it apart. Around it rises an elaborate architectural framework, giving the impression of an entrance or portal. We can think about the book here as a sacred container. Gold, ornament, architecture, all things you see here, are not added simply to beautify the page. They create a setting that is truly worthy of the words they surround.

NARRATOR: The manuscript belongs to the same Gothic world you're encountering throughout this gallery.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: Jewish communities lived within the same medieval cities as their Christian neighbors. They walked the same streets and experienced the same soaring churches, pointed arches, rose windows, and richly ornamented façades that transformed their urban landscapes. Yet Jewish buildings often existed under legal and social restrictions that limited their size, height, or visibility within the city. And what's so striking and poignant is that these illuminated manuscripts like the one you see here offered another place where this architectural language could flourish.

NARRATOR: The scribe who copied the text was Jewish. He would have worked with a Christian illuminator, a member of a Christian guild, from which Jews were excluded. Rather than competing with the text, the decoration directs the eye towards it, inviting the reader to cross a threshold before encountering the sacred words.

204. Relic of the Staff of Moses, possibly Late Antique (c. third-seventh century CE)

NARRATOR: Here we are looking at a Christian relic believed to be a fragment from the staff of Moses, the biblical leader of the Israelites.

In the book of Exodus, Moses uses his staff to part the Red Sea as the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt, and to strike much needed water from a rock when they are wandering in the desert. Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: This is one of the rarest holdings in the treasury of the St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague.

The relic consists of four pieces of wood intricately put together with terminals made of ivory attached to the ends. It is the segment of an original longer staff and is reminiscent of late antique scepters held, for instance, by Roman rulers in portraits from the time.

NARRATOR: Many relics were reported to be the staff of Moses during the Middle Ages. The King of Bohemia, Charles IV, gave this one to St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague in 1354, shortly before he was made Holy Roman Emperor.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: A relic of the staff of St. Peter on display nearby is an interesting parallel to the so-called relic of the staff of Moses, as both Peter and Moses are seminal religious figures, Moses as the leader of the Israelites from bondage to freedom and dispenser of the law, and Peter as the first leader of the Christian church, and founder of the papacy.

NARRATOR: Also donated by Charles IV, the relic of St. Peter's staff strengthened a lineage the church was keen to establish, with Peter as the heir to Moses. For Charles IV, securing these important relics helped affirm his own legitimate position as a Christian ruler.

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

NARRATOR: During the medieval period, Christian devotion to the Virgin Mary grew. In this sculpture, carved from a tree trunk, she is shown as a beautiful and gentle young mother. Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: Mary is crowned with a diadem, and her face is delicately framed by the ringlets of her hair. She holds the young Christ, who rests on her right knee. He raises his right hand in a gesture of blessing while holding a dove in his left hand, indicating his divine nature and a symbol of the Holy Spirit, implying that Jesus knows his role from the very beginning. Two kneeling angels flank Mary and child. The angel at left further supports young Jesus from below with one hand while holding his right foot tenderly with the other. The angel at right reaches for the scepter held by Mary, a symbol of justice.

NARRATOR: The sculpture dates to around the 1360s, when Charles IV was King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor. The two lions supporting Mary's throne evoke the description in the Hebrew Bible of the throne of Solomon, the biblical king who erected the First Temple in ancient Jerusalem. The imagery suggests a link with the Emperor, who cultivated his image as a wise, powerful ruler akin to a new Solomon.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: Also, the fact that the lion is the symbol of the Kingdom of Bohemia added further meaning, as if the Kingdom of Bohemia were entrusted to the care of the Virgin.

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

CLAUDIA NAHSON: This is a medieval handwashing vessel, or aquamanile, from the Latin words *aqua* for water, and *manus*, for hand. To fill the vessel, water would have been poured into it through a small, hinged opening on the top of the head of the lion. The water would have then poured through the spout protruding from the mouth of the lion.

NARRATOR: Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: These vessels are among the most charming objects to come down to us from the Middle Ages. They take the form of knights and horses and mythical figures such as dragons and centaurs, and most commonly of various animals, including horses and roosters, with the lions being the most popular form, such as the lion-shaped example with a dragon handle here. 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 honored Berekhiah Segal.'

NARRATOR: This name tells us how the vessel was probably used.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: The name Segal is a Hebrew abbreviation that identifies the donor as a descendent of the Levites, responsible for helping priests in the ancient Temple of Jerusalem. In Judaism, the laws of ritual purity call for the washing of hands in various occasions such as before the recitation of certain prayers and blessings. Using an aquamanile in the shape of a lion would have also carried a meaning, as the lion in Judaism is the symbol of the tribe of Judah.

NARRATOR: The inscription identifies this particular vessel as being intended for use in a Jewish context. But the design could easily be adapted – for example, for the washing of the priest's hands during a Christian mass. There, the lion would have carried symbolic associations with Christ. So a vessel like this would have had wide appeal and transcended ritual differences between Christians and Jews.

207. Wedding ring from the Weißenfels Treasure, early fourteenth century

NARRATOR: Rings such as this played an important ceremonial role in medieval Jewish weddings – though, given how large and elaborate they were, a simpler band may have been used for every day.

The tiny building can be interpreted as a miniature representation of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. This association is especially meaningful in a Jewish wedding. Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: At the joyous climactic moment of the ceremony, a glass is broken to remember the destruction of the temple, a reminder that even in moments of greatest happiness, the memory of Jerusalem remains.

NARRATOR: If you look closely, you can see a Hebrew inscription on the roof of the small structure.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: One word you see says *Mazel* and the other one says *Tov*, meaning good fortune or best wishes or congratulations. It is this collective expression of joy and here it feels as if that spoken blessing has been pressed into the object itself.

NARRATOR: But the ring also carries a second, more difficult history. It was found during modern day construction work in Central Germany – part of a hoard of precious objects, deliberately buried underground at a moment of danger.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: When the Black Death swept across Europe in the late 1340s, Jews were falsely accused of causing the plague through claims that they'd poisoned wells. Across central Europe, these accusations led to expulsions, massacres, and the destruction of long-established Jewish communities. In this climate, many Jewish families buried their possessions, like this one, before fleeing or while facing persecution, hoping to return and recover them. Many never could. So what remains is not only its extraordinary, beautiful form, but the tension it holds between visibility and concealment and celebration and loss.

208. Edmund de Waal, *tehillim*, 2018

EDMUND DE WAAL: The work is called *tehillim*, and it's the Hebrew word for the Psalms which are part of the foundational scripture for the Jewish faith. The Psalms are really the great poems about displacement, about missing your homeland.

NARRATOR: *tehillim* is by the artist and writer Edmund de Waal. It is comprised of 11 tiny vitrines. It was first shown in an installation at the Canton Synagogue, a 16th century synagogue in Venice's historic Jewish ghetto. Edmund de Waal.

EDMUND DE WAAL: A vitrine is just a way of describing a glass-fronted cabinet that holds things that matter to you.

And they're near, some of the most extraordinary Christian reliquaries, that hold fragments of saints, fragments of holy brokenness. So in some senses, contemporary vitrines like mine and these medieval and early Renaissance reliquaries have some beautiful conversation happening between them.

NARRATOR: Each vitrine holds a composition of porcelain, marble and gold leaf.

EDMUND DE WAAL: There's a very particular reason why I've used these materials, because in the time of the ghetto, when the Jewish population of Venice was walled up every night in this tiny space, those were the materials you weren't allowed to use. You weren't allowed to bring marble in; you weren't allowed to use gold.

NARRATOR: Also on display in this gallery is de Waal's *Von Klemperer Plate*. The plate was looted by the Nazis from the Von Klemperers, a German Jewish family of collectors, and broken during the bombing of Dresden. The shards were restituted to heirs of the family and de Waal later purchased the pieces of the plate and invited Japanese artist Maiko Tsutsumi to mend it using the kintsugi method.

EDMUND DE WAAL: It's an art of bringing fragments together using gold and lacquer. For me, it's about marking loss. These gold lines mark this incredibly painful history of a family and of a city. So this plate holds for me enormous symbolic value.

209. Golden cross with a relic of Christ's loincloth, donated by Pope Urban V, 1369 (cross), 1509 (base)

NARRATOR: In the center of this cross is an oval container under a crystal cover. An inscription states that it holds a fragment of the loincloth that Jesus wore when he died on the cross. Surrounding the sacred relic are engraved scenes of exceptional quality. The scene above the relic relates to it directly: Jesus is shown on the cross with his mother, the Virgin Mary and the disciple John.

Pope Urban V donated this extremely important relic to Charles IV, King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, in 1368. The scenes on the other three arms of the cross refer to this event. Immediately below the relic, the Pope himself is shown on the left, in his three-tiered headdress, presenting the relic to Charles IV. The side arms of the cross show them again, venerating the relic: the Pope, on the left, with a cardinal; the Emperor, on the right, with his son.

Important reliquaries such as this were shown in annual displays in public places. Jiří Fajt.

JIŘÍ FAJT: Such pieces were thus frequently on the move, presented to the people in striking displays on imposing platforms, so as to convey and reinforce both religious and political convictions.

NARRATOR: The cross demonstrates the significant role that relics played in the politics of gift-giving.

JIŘÍ FAJT: Every donation of a relic was actually a political act and we see it quite clearly on this sample because Urban V donated to Charles IV a very important relic and he wanted to express his great appreciation to the Emperor and to gain the interest and the attention of the Emperor. So relic donations are tools of political communication.

210. Reliquary bust of Saint Wenceslas, late fifteenth century

JIŘÍ FAJT: St. Wenceslas is the principal patron saint of Czech lands and from 921 until his death he ruled the Czech state as a prince.

NARRATOR: Wenceslas was associated with the founding of St. Vitus Cathedral. Jiří Fajt.

JIŘÍ FAJT: St. Wenceslas had the first stone structure built on the site of today's cathedral, a rotunda which he dedicated to the memory of St. Vitus, a young Sicilian martyr. And St. Wenceslas found his final resting place in the rotunda of St. Vitus.

NARRATOR: Reliquary busts like this would traditionally be created to house the precious remains of a saint. This particular bust was made in the 16th century to replace an earlier reliquary, dating from the reign of Charles IV.

JIŘÍ FAJT: The golden age of the St. Vitus treasury is associated with the reign of Charles IV in the 14th century. Thanks to Charles' enthusiastic collecting, the most significant relics of the saints were brought to the Cathedral over the course of three years, from 1352 to 1355.

NARRATOR: Charles IV commissioned busts of the patron saints of the Bohemian lands to contain their relics.

JIŘÍ FAJT: However, his son, Sigismund of Luxembourg, decided immediately after his coronation to remove the busts made of silver, gold, and precious stones, and melt them down.

NARRATOR: A hundred years later, new busts – including this one – were created for the cathedral. A reliquary in the shape of an arm containing other remains of the saint is displayed nearby. Both have been venerated by generations of Christian worshippers.

211. Medieval Treasure Found in Środa Śląska (now in Poland)

NARRATOR: The Środa Treasure is a medieval hoard discovered in Środa Śląska, in modern-day Poland. It includes gold and silver jewelry, ornaments, coins and – most strikingly – a jeweled crown, decorated with heraldic eagles.

The treasure dates to the 14th century during the reign of Charles IV of Bohemia. Some of the pieces may even have belonged to Charles's first wife, Blanche of Valois.

The hoard sheds light on the entangled nature of Jewish and Christian relations at this time. It seems to have been given to a Jewish man named Muscho as security for a loan he made to Charles IV. Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: Barred from many professions, Jews were often pushed into moneylending, as Christian law prohibited Christians from lending money at interest. Jewish moneylending in this period was not a free economic choice but it was the result of this structural restriction. Credit and lending became one of the few available roles and rulers, including Charles IV, depended on that credit.

NARRATOR: It was thanks to financial arrangements like these that Charles IV – campaigning to become Holy Roman Emperor – was able to buy important relics for St. Vitus Cathedral and elevate Prague into a major center of Christian Europe.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: In return, Jewish lenders operated under royal protection, granted legal status and residence in specific urban centers, but always in this condition of dependence on the shifting political favor of the ruler.

NARRATOR: The fact that the hoard was buried – and never reclaimed – poignantly underlines the precarious nature of this financial arrangement.

212. Front cover of the Prague Gospel Book with a panel from a Roman consular diptych (400–450), book cover (tenth century), diptych panel (400–450), with additional metal work (after 1540)

NARRATOR: This magnificent, bejeweled book cover is steeped in history. It was designed for a beautifully decorated 10th century manuscript of the gospels – the first four books of the Christian New Testament. The ivory panel at the center was created much earlier. It dates from the Roman period and was originally a portrait of a consul or Roman official. Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: In order to adapt the secular ivory plaque for Christian use, the figure of the Roman consul was turned into a depiction of St. Peter by adding a halo to the figure and by modifying the upper part of the consular scepter held in the figure's left hand into the crenellations of a key, thus transforming the consular scepter into the key to heaven, St Peter's attribute.

NARRATOR: The book was one of the most valuable manuscripts belonging to the St. Vitus Cathedral.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: There is so much in it, including relics that are actually embedded: there are four areas – they're transparent and you can see inscriptions in them that are indicating the relics contained. So these books really were portable treasures that in times of danger it's important to protect.

NARRATOR: During the Hussite Wars, a series of Christian conflicts in the early 15th century, the book was moved to the Karlštejn castle near Prague for safekeeping. The cover was damaged during a siege of the castle and was afterwards remodeled with the gilded plates you see today. The book is extremely precious and is even thought to have been used during the coronation ceremonies of the Kings of Bohemia.

213. Mattathias ben Jonah of Laun (scribe), Workshop of Valentine Noh (artists, active in the 1470s), Prague Hebrew Bible, 1489

NARRATOR: These two beautifully decorated manuscripts are part of a three-volume Hebrew Bible, copied and illuminated in Prague in the late 15th century. We know from an inscription inside that the Bible was commissioned by an affluent private individual, Israel ben Pinkhas. The scribe, Mattathias ben Jonah, copied the manuscript at his patron's home, as was usual for Jewish scribes of the time.

Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: While the commissioner and the scribe were Jewish, the superb decorations in the Prague Bible were the work of a Christian workshop. In the Middle Ages, the copying of Hebrew texts at times brought Jews and Christians together and Jewish scribes often commissioned Christian painters to illuminate sumptuous Hebrew manuscripts. The Prague Bible is an extraordinary example of that kind of collaboration. The second half of the 15th century and first half of the 16th century was an unstable time for Jews, with various expulsions from towns in Bohemia. Despite political circumstances, book culture offers salient points of encounter between Christians and Jews.

NARRATOR: The Prague Bible was decorated in the workshop of Valentine Noh. Displayed nearby is a Christian prayerbook, written in Latin, which features decorative borders, similar to those in the Hebrew Bible, with plant-like scrollwork. These objects clearly come from the same workshop, underlining once again this meeting of Jews and Christians in the world of books.

214. Beaker of the Polná Burial Society, 1691 (date of inscription)

NARRATOR: This glass beaker, made for a Jewish burial society in the Bohemian town of Polná, is one of the treasures of the Jewish Museum collection. Dating from 1691, it is the earliest known glass burial society beaker in existence. Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: Burial societies are responsible for the ritual cleansing and burial of the dead in accordance with Jewish law, the highest kind of mitzvah or good deed, since the recipient cannot express gratitude.

Large, decorated beakers such as this one were often used at various societies' annual banquets, from which the members drank wine, a custom adapted from the practices of Christian guilds.

In the late 16th century, during the reign of Rudolph II, glass with enamel decoration as featured in this beaker became a specialty in Bohemia. Enamel is a durable painting technique that produces brilliant colors.

On this beaker, members of the burial society are depicted carrying a casket to the cemetery. The men are wearing the ruffled collar that was mandatory for Jews in the Czech lands from the 1670s until 1750. These collars had been in vogue in the Renaissance but were outmoded by the late 17th century and were therefore meant to ridicule Jews. Instead, members of the Polná Burial Society who commissioned this glass beaker chose to have themselves depicted wearing the ruff collar, turning a mark of difference into one of self-identification.

NARRATOR: The cup attests to the fundamental role of burial societies in Jewish communal life.

215. Torah ark valance, 1718–19

NARRATOR: This embroidered valance was made for Prague's High Synagogue to hang above the Torah ark – that is, the structure housing the handwritten scrolls of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: It's made of deep crimson velvet and densely worked with silk and metallic thread. 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 how this metallic thread would have continually caught and released the light as people moved through the sanctuary.

NARRATOR: Under the spreading wings of cherubim are symbols of the ritual implements from the ancient Temple in Jerusalem.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: This is absolutely my favorite part. It's like an encyclopedia of the ancient temple.

NARRATOR: Arranged within their separate compartments are the objects associated with temple worship, from the High Priest's breastplate and seven branched menorah or candelabrum, on the left to ritual vessels and finally the High Priest's forehead plate on the right.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: The synagogue cannot replace the ancient temple in Jerusalem but through objects like this it can memorialize it.

NARRATOR: The valance belongs to a period of renewed flourishing in Prague's Jewish community. In the 16th and early 17th centuries, the many synagogues of Prague's Jewish quarter played a vital role.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: The individual motifs on this valance – the cherubim, the crowns, and the temple references – continually direct attention back toward the Torah as a living center of communal life passed down from generation to generation.

216. Contemporary works

NARRATOR: Several contemporary works, including new commissions, complement the exhibition. Look out for works by Edmund de Waal, Afruz Amighi, and Hannah Altman: they are identified by special labels. De Waal's works are on the second floor, and you will find works by the artists Amighi and Altman on this floor, the Museum's collection galleries.

Shira Backer is Leon Levy Associate Curator here at the Jewish Museum.

SHIRA BACKER: A reliquary is a conversation across time. So you have a maker or a patron in the present who is framing and constructing meaning around a piece of the past, whether that's a bit of the True Cross or a shard of bone or a tooth. So there is this wonderful seed for the idea of bringing in a contemporary perspective on this material. It's just adding another layer to a conversation that's already occurring. The artists who we selected for this project, all of them deal in various ways with spirituality, the body, the idea of a fragment, and are thinking about how objects can be conduits for memory, and using materials in ways that are parallel to the ways that the makers of these ritual objects were using them.

NARRATOR: The works also reflect the cross-cultural encounters at the heart of the exhibition, which brings together Christian and Jewish objects.

SHIRA BACKER: I think these artists are also coming from places where, through their biography and experiences or through the ways that they think about their work, are bringing in similarly complex, multilayered, perhaps multicultural perspectives.