

Suggested reading

Zahava SEEWALD, *Traditions. Un regard sur nos collections. Dossier pédagogique*, Brussels, 2018, éd. Musée Juif de Belgique, 40 pp.

Zahava SEEWALD, *Une première ébauche de musée juif à Bruxelles : la collection juive de la Maison d'Érasme, dans 75 ans. La Maison d'Érasme*, Bruxelles, 2007, éd. La Maison d'Érasme, pp. 213-229

Acknowledgements

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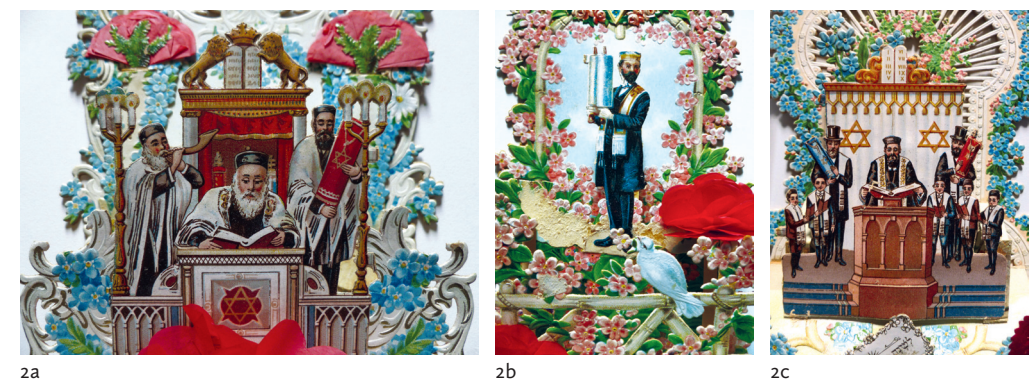
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THE UNUSUAL OBJECTS No. 2

Greeting cards for the Jewish New Year

While the Béguinage remains closed for renovation, Erasmus House is putting an unusual object from the vast historical, archaeological, folk art and religious collections of Anderlecht's municipal museums on display each month. This September, three unusual objects are actually on display, that is, three beautiful illustrated greeting cards for sending best wishes for the Jewish New Year. How did they end up in the Erasmus House collections?



Daniel Van Damme and the “Jewish Collection”

When in the early 1930s Daniel Van Damme (1893-1967), the founder and first curator of the municipal museums, was tasked with putting together collections illustrating the borough's local history, Anderlecht was home to a large Jewish community, most of them part of the Eastern European diaspora who had settled in Cureghem.

As someone who was curious about everything, Daniel Van Damme took an interest in this community and its culture and decided, as of the creation of the museum, to give a place to Jewish history and culture in its exhibits. To do that, he got in touch with such major figures as the High Rabbi of Belgium, Joseph Wiener (1870-1943); the Philippson banking family, and Schone Katzenelenbogen (1884-1945), who taught Hebrew at the *Institut des Hautes Études*. He also became a friend of an Anderlecht family, the Turczynskis, whom he helped to hide during the war.

He thus received from various generous donors several hundred documents related to the social, cultural, and economic history of Jews in Belgium and abroad, i.e., religious books, magazines, and religious objects. These materials now make up the museum's “Jewish collection”. That is how these greeting cards made it to the Erasmus House museum.

Rosh Hashanah or the Jewish New Year

The Jewish New Year is a religious holiday called *Rosh Hashanah* in Hebrew. It commemorates the creation of the world and corresponds to the first day of the month *Tishri*, when the Jewish calendar year starts. It falls in September or October, depending on the year.

That is because the Hebrew calendar, which is used to calculate the dates of Jewish holy days, is a lunisolar calendar based on both the solar year and the lunar months. This complicated system, in which the year consists of twelve months that alternate between 29 and 30 days, regularly requires the addition of a thirteenth month, determined by sophisticated computations, to match the solar cycle.

So, *Rosh Hashanah* is a variable holy day that falls this year (2021 in the Christian era, according to the Gregorian calendar), on Monday, 6 September, in the evening (for in the Hebraic tradition, the day starts and ends at sunset). Finally, according to the Hebraic calendar, time begins with the supposed date of the world's creation, as determined from Genesis. So, this 6 September 2021 marks the start of the year 5782.

Rosh Hashanah is considered to be a judgment day for humanity. Its celebration marks the start of a period of penitence that ends with *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement) ten days later. It is accompanied by customs such as eating apples dipped in honey to express the wish for a sweet, successful new year. At the synagogue, a long blast on a ram's horn, called a *shofar*, invites the congregation to repent and engage in introspection.

Richly illustrated pop-up cards

The three greeting cards are paper masterpieces combining delicacy, perfection, and refinement. These lacy confections of cut-out and embossed paper also have the distinction of being pop-up cards: the images pop up or move when they are opened! They can also be singled out for the quality of their printed polychrome backgrounds spread across several superimposed planes. These fanciful backgrounds are floral for the most part: roses, daisies, forget-me-nots (the German name, *Vergissmeinnicht*, has the same meaning), tissue paper poppies, and so on.

As the bilingual texts in Hebrew and German attest, the cards were made in Germany or Austria. The Austrian post office printed the very first Jewish greeting card in 1869. However, the centre of production swiftly shifted to Germany, where these cards were mass produced, often for the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe.

The themes illustrated are both many and varied, ranging from episodes from the Bible to scenes of daily life and from typical trades to religious ceremonies. The three cards on display belong to this last category, for all three are illustrated with scenes taking place in a synagogue, which can be recognised by a series of specific furnishings such as the ark or cupboard housing the scrolls of the *Torah* and the lectern – placed in the middle or at the back of the building – where the rabbi officiates and the *Torah* is read. These religious scenes are associated with symbols or recurrent iconographic motifs, such as the Star of David, Tablets of the Law, and a lion (the emblem of the tribe of Judah).

2a MEFJ 452

Dimensions (closed): 228 mm high x 140 mm wide

Text in German (*Die besten Wünsche* = Best Wishes) and Hebrew (translation: "Happy New Year").

Prayer scene in a synagogue: a man is praying in a pulpit in front of the ark containing the Torah; a man on the right holds a scroll of the *Torah* in its protective mantel; another man on the left is sounding the *shofar*, the trumpet made from a ram's horn. This instrument, which recalls the ram sacrificed in Isaac's stead, is used during services at *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

2b MEFJ 453

Dimensions (closed): 220 mm high x 115 mm wide

Text in German (*Herzlichen Glückwunsch* = Wishing you great success!) and Hebrew (translation: "For a good year!")

Prayer scene in a synagogue: Under a flowered arch decorated with a Star of David, a man wearing a cantor's hat and a prayer shawl holds a scroll of the Torah in both hands. The Torah contains the five books of Moses, i.e., the Pentateuch. The Torah is calligraphed on parchment by a specialised scribe and read in public at temple services. A pair of white doves completes the scene. The dove is a symbol of peace and love. It can also refer to the biblical episode of Noah's ark.

2c MEFJ 454

Dimensions (closed): 180 mm high x 155 mm wide

Text in German (*Herzlichen Glückwunsch* = Wishing you great success!) and Hebrew (translation: "May a good year be on the cards")

Prayer scene in a synagogue: a man is praying in the pulpit surrounded by five young boys wearing prayer shawls and holding books and two men in top hats, each of whom holds a scroll of the Torah. The men represent the integrated Jewish bourgeoisie of Central Europe.

So, these scenes depict praying at the temple, taking the scrolls of the *Torah* out of the ark, and sounding the *shofar* as key moments in the New Year's ritual that takes place in the synagogue.

Finally, we must point out that these cards, which bear neither signatures nor handwritten messages, were never sent.