

2.1 On the Definition of Judaica Objects

In a broader sense, the term Judaica denotes material cultural assets relating to Judaism. In a narrower sense, Judaica refers, on the one hand, to objects of an inherently holy quality such as the Torah itself and, on the other hand, to objects necessary to perform Jewish rituals.

In the field of art history, Judaica objects fall into the category of religious art. They are objects that are used in Jewish ritual, both in the synagogue and at home. They would lack usefulness in any non-Jewish ritual; rather, they make sense only in the context of Jewish tradition. Their character is above all functional, but decorative and aesthetic as well. The closer their manufacturing date approaches the modern era, the more the importance of decoration increases.

Synagogal Judaica objects are usually set in a hierarchical order according to their sacred character: The most sacred item of all is the Torah scroll containing the Five Books of Moses. As the core of Jewish religion revealed by God, it endows materials that touch it with a degree of its sacredness: the staves it is attached to on both ends, the binders that fasten it, and the mantle that envelops it, the decorating crown and finials, the shield that indicates its time of use in the annual cycle, and the pointer with which one follows the holy text while reading, as well as the ark with curtain where the Torah is kept, the Eternal Flame that hangs in front of the ark, and finally the desk and its cover on which the Torah is placed for reading. Further objects used in religious practice are the *Shofar* horn blown on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the Levite pitcher and bowl for the ritual priestly cleansing, the *Kiddush* cup and *Besamim* container for a holiday's starting and concluding ceremonies, the Hanukkah candelabrum for the Feast of Dedication as well as the Esther Scroll read during Purim and donation boxes for the support of the indigents.

The *Kiddush* cup and *Besamim* container, Hannukah candelabrum and Esther Scroll are also among those objects used in the private household. Also used at home are all objects needed for Shabbat, Passover, and Sukkoth as well as phylacteries and prayer shawls, the *Mezuzah* on the doorpost, calligraphies indicating the direction of prayer toward Jerusalem, marriage contracts, and *Yahrtzeit* plaques for the commemoration of the dead. The more prosperous a society, the more elaborate these objects become.

Jewish cult objects are signs of identification. They symbolize affiliation with the Jewish religion. But beyond that, they can also signify identification with the majority society. The closer an object's manufacturing date to the era of emancipation, the more likely that its design will signify identification with the majority society.