

“FOR DIGNITY AND ADORNMENT” TEXTILE TREASURES FROM BOHEMIAN AND MORAVIAN SYNAGOGUES

A unique exhibition of synagogue textiles from the Jewish Museum in Prague, entitled “For Dignity and Adornment”, has opened in the Imperial Stables, Prague Castle. This show, organised by the Museum in association with the Prague Castle Administration and running from 26 March until 23 June, is the Museum’s largest ever exhibition project to be held outside its base in the Czech Republic.



Since the early Middle Ages, Prague has been one of the most important Jewish centres in central Europe. Jewish religious life centred around its many synagogues, whose rich inventories were enriched by valuable donations that were presented as an expression of piety. Some of these donations were of exceptional value and many have been preserved to this day. The items of most value and interest can now be viewed at this newly opened exhibition.

The bulk of the Museum’s unique holdings, including its synagogue textiles, were sent here during World War II as confiscated property from Bohemia and Moravian Jewish communities. Most Bohemian and Moravian Jews died as a result of Nazi persecution; their memory is recalled only by ritual objects, rare items that document the age-old tradition of Jewish culture. Textiles from this part of the collection are also amply represented in the exhibition.

In its entirety, the textile collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague, which has never before been presented systematically, is unique in a world context. It is unique for its size, for the age and quality of the items it contains and, above all, for the fact that it comes exclusively from Bohemia and Moravia and constitutes a continuous whole in the development of textiles from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries

This exhibition in the Imperial Stables, Prague Castle, features a total of 138 items, comprising 44 curtains, 85 Torah mantles, 6 valances and 3 covers for the reading-desks in synagogues. For reasons of space, it would not have been possible to display these textiles to such an extent in the Museum’s permanent exhibitions. Likewise, a representative selection of items of such artistic and cultural-historical value could not have been presented here.

No doubt the viewer will most admire the expensive and rare fabrics (velvet, brocades, silk damask), some of which were imported from Italy, France and the Orient. The rarest exhibit is an Italian velvet piece with a pomegranate motif from Florence, dating from the end of the fifteenth century.

In terms of craftsmanship, textiles that employ silver and gold thread or fresh-water pearls are of particular interest. Of exceptional historical value is the set of textiles from the period of Rudolf II, which are decorated with appliquéd

Renaissance motifs. Among the exhibits is the earliest preserved Torah curtain in the Museum; this was made by the famous master embroiderer of Prague, Solomon Perl-sticker who donated it to the Old-New Synagogue in 1592.

The exhibition also documents the quality of Jewish calligraphy and ornament. The motifs, symbols and compositions that appear on synagogue textiles can also be found, for example, on tombstones in Jewish cemeteries. This reflects their profound importance and proves that they have been with the Jewish nation for centuries and have been an integral part of its culture from the very beginning.

Naturally, the preparation of such an ambitious project took several years of preparation, during which time attention became focused on the restoration of select pieces. Both the Museum's textile restoration workshop and a large group of external restorers were involved in this process. The exhibition curator is Dr. Ludmila Kybalová, the previous Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague (1990 to 1994).

There is plenty of available information on this exhibition. Basic details are provided on the Museum's website.

An interactive CD ROM ("Synagogue Textiles") has been released for visitors and for those who cannot get to the exhibition in person; this was prepared under the guidance of the Museum's textile curator Dana Veselská and is available in five languages – English, Czech, German, French and Italian. With experts in mind, a large English catalogue of the Museum's textile collection ("Synagogue Textiles") has been published for the exhibition. This contains scholarly texts and provides detailed information on a thousand carefully selected textiles. For more information visit the Museum's website. Without a doubt, the most attractive thing about both the CD ROM and the catalogue are the large full-colour illustrations. A 27 minute documentary on the Museum and its textile collection has also been prepared on the occasion of the exhibition. This is available in Czech and English on videocassette and is directed by Irena Pavlásková.

The catalogue, CD ROM and videocassette can be ordered COD from the Jewish Museum in Prague at U Staré školy 1, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic or via the Internet.

MOUNTAIN OF MOUNTAINS ALEŠ VESELÝ'S DESERT PROJECTS

A new exhibition of drawings and models by the sculptor Aleš Veselý opened in the Museum's Robert Guttman Gallery on 12 February. This show is a presentation of the artist's monumental landscape projects, which he has intensively worked on since the mid-1990s. These works on display reflect his experiences from visiting Israel, wandering in the Judean mountains and exploring the Negev desert and Mount Sinai, which



evoked in him a strong feeling of being at one with the desert landscape.

The desert projects of the internationally acclaimed artist Aleš Veselý are monumental, universal concepts that blur the boundaries between sculpture, architecture, and land art. The “Mountain of Mountains” project is a synthesis of concepts based on a natural formation that is several hundred metres tall and terminates in a plateau into which is embedded a three-sided pyramid of polished stainless steel.

A rough bolder of huge dimensions is placed inside the mountain hollow, eventually finding its footing inside the “world mountain”.

The exhibition was undertaken with the generous financial support of The Project Judaica Foundation, Carosso, and LLC Fine Art, New York . The Museum believes that the Prague show will be followed by a series of touring exhibitions in the US and Israel. The Prague show, which ran until 6 April 2003, was prepared by Michaela Hájková, curator of the Museum’s fine art collection, in association with the artist.

A 120-page bilingual Czech-English catalogue has been published for the exhibition. The catalogue contains an introductory text (by M. Hájková) about the desert projects, in addition to original texts by Aleš Veselý himself and numerous illustrations of his work . It may be ordered COD from the Jewish Museum in Prague at U Staré školy 1, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic or via the Internet

OPENING OF ARCHIVES

On 30 January, an agreement was signed in Prague between the Austrian Institute for Jewish History, the Jewish Museum in Prague and the Archive Department of the Czech Interior Ministry. This agreement gives researchers easier access to archive materials relating to the cultural and economic life of Jews in central Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the occasion of the signing of the agreement, the Czech Ambassador to Austria Jiří Gruša stated that historians will now have the opportunity to explore more closely the impulses that led to the development of Jewish culture in this region.

REPAIRS TO THE PINKAS SYNAGOGUE

In the last Newsletter (4/2002) we highlighted the extent of the flood damage to this unique architectural monument – a memorial to the victims of the Shoah from Bohemia and Moravia. We shall now acquaint you with the progress that has been made in preservation work .

Ever since the compulsory closure of the synagogue, a team of experts has been evaluating developments as the building is dried out and heated to an optimum temperature, and, in connection with this, has been determining the next steps to be taken by way of minimising damage. There have also been restoration and technical building investigations of the damaged interior elements, in particular of the inscriptions of the names of Shoah victims.

Dampness in the synagogue is being reduced on an ongoing basis by means of artificial condensation. Revolving ventilation fans are being used for air circulation and the temperature is being kept stable by the use of oil-filled radiators with thermostats. This has limited further deterioration of the damaged elements to a minimum. The flooding brought about changes to the internal qualities of the brickwork and led to increased traces of salts, which have made their way to the surface of the walls on which are inscribed the names of Shoah victims. Externally, the inscriptions have been at risk from organic alluvia, which have brought about the tissue growth of microorganisms. In accordance with the recommendations of experts, art academy graduate Michaela Poková carried out checks on the state of the wall inscriptions and preventative and technical measures connected with rehabilitation.

Filtered paper has been applied to the damaged inscriptions with the aim of limiting the occurrence of soils in the upper plaster-coated layers of inscriptions and, at the same time, of preventing soluble salts coming through to the surface. Salts that have dissolved in this way and pigmented mould were later soaked out of all the surfaces. A fungicidal and bactericidal solution was then applied to the damp plaster. Despite all these preventative measures, however, irreversible longterm changes have occurred in several spots. Only after a lengthy monitoring process will it become clear which inscriptions should be restored, and which rewritten.

Restorers Bláha Josef & Bláha Otto undertook the first phase of the restoration of the artificial marble surrounding the bimah and ark ; this involved removing impurities and damaged conservation layers.

A structural investigation revealed damage to the load-bearing members of the basement ventilation channels alongside the perimeter walls of the synagogue. Repair work began on these structures in February, on the basis of a project drawn up by structural engineers Němec & Polák . Measurement points were set in certain cracks in the walls and arches with the aim of monitoring the stability of the structure. This monitoring is continuing and the results will be assessed by the end of April 2001. A slight movement has been detected by the measurements carried out to date. In order to conserve the damaged structure it will be necessary to secure the building with steel rods and to treat individual cracks. At this stage, one cannot rule out the need for other measures, such as stabilising the building by pressurised injections of ballast material.

All the above results of individual operations have been included in project documentation coordinated by the engineer Jan Červenák and architect Josef Bradáč. Once relevant building permit has been received and contractors selected on the basis of a competition for tenders, further repair work will be begin as soon as possible. This involves (among other things) reconstruction of the under-floor heating and all other related building alterations.

So far in 2003, the following institutions have provided financial contributions towards the removal of damage to the Jewish Museum in Prague caused by the August floods, in particular towards the renovation of damaged buildings and facilities:

The American Friends of the Czech Republic, USA
The American Jewish Committee, USA
The Javne Fund, USA
The Centennial College Toronto, Canada
The Jewish Museum in Prague Foundation, Czech Republic
Donations have also been provided by: M. Kubeša and Ivo Páral (Czech Republic), V. Hems (Uk), E. Raport and J. Zimer (both from Canada) and H. Friedman (USA).

For their contributions and support, we would like to thank the above and all other donors who are concerned about the fate and renovation of damaged Jewish monuments.

RARE FIND IN SMÍCHOV SYNAGOGUE

A large portion of the Museum's resources goes towards the renovation of Jewish monuments. This includes the overall reconstruction of the synagogue in the Smíchov district of Prague, which, as of next year, will serve as the Museum's archive and depository. On Friday 23 January, we came across a rare find during building



work on this site – a memorial parchment document, which had been placed under the original clay slate floor at the base of the right column in front of the ark on the occasion of the building's completion on 30 August 1863. This document is of particular interest, both in terms of content and execution: it is divided into 12 sections, of which each is inscribed and decorated in a different style and with different lettering from classic Empire patterns with fine linear drawings to Neo-Gothic script and naturalistic ornamentation. The text itself commemorates the long history of the Smíchov Jewish community, which dates back to the mid-18th century, and its long-term endeavour to have its own synagogue built. The document was executed by the wellknown Jewish portraitist and lithographer from Prague, Josef Bindeles (1826-1914).

The completion of the new synagogue in the Romanesque and Moorish style was supervised by Ignatz Kapper and Filip Kaufmann and was financially supported by the then mayor of Smíchov, industrialist and member of the Provincial Assembly, František Ringhofer. To mark the completion of the building, a memorial document (the one that has just been found) was drawn up and signed on the back by the fourteen members of the Jewish community's representative body.

This August, the Smíchov Synagogue will celebrate its 140th anniversary. The memorial document will be kept at the Museum, but, after completion of repair work, a copy, together with other documents on the history and reconstruction of the synagogue will be placed where the original item was found in memory of those who built the synagogue and for the benefit of future generations.

**TOURING EXHIBITIONS –
“JEWISH CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS” AND “HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN
BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA”**

For a long time now, the Jewish Museum in Prague has been receiving requests from various parts of the Czech Republic for cooperation in the preparation of exhibitions on Jewish themes. As it is not always possible to meet these requests in terms of scope and time, Museum staff have created a touring panel-based version of two of its exhibitions which focus on Jewish traditions, religion and history in Bohemia and Moravia. The first public presentation of this show was at the Museum's Education and Culture Centre on 17 March 2003. These exhibitions (“Jewish Customs and Traditions” and “History of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia”) are based on the Museum's collections and permanent exhibitions which are on display in its historic buildings in Prague. Each exhibition comprises 12 panels which may be presented together or separately in accordance with the requirements of the individual organisers.

This project was conceived by Arno Pařík, an exhibition curator at the Museum. Specialist Museum staff, Alexandr Putík, Andrea Braunová and Olga Sixtová, contributed to the preparation of texts and Eva Kosáková a Vlastimila Hamáčková worked on the selection of items and archive materials. Regional museums and galleries in Děčín, Pilsen, Brno, Náchod, Mikulov and Karlovy Vary have already expressed interest in the project.

“THE BOOK OF LIFE” PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION

From 10 December 2002 until 31 January 2003, the Museum's Education and Culture Centre hosted an exhibition of photography entitled The Book of Life. This featured work by the Czech photographer Ben Eden and documented the lives of people living in the Charles Jordan Residential Home for Senior Citizens. This exhibition, comprising sixteen photographs that illustrate sixteen stories, took shape under the auspices of the Jewish Community of Prague with the support of the JOINT Jewish Distribution Committee, the Central Europe Research and Documentation Centre and the Jewish Museum in Prague. The opening was attended by residents of the Charles Jordan Home, for whom it was a great experience, as well as the Israeli Ambassador Arthur Avnon and children from the Lauder Elementary School. All the photographs can be seen at www.beneden.com/lifebook.

IMPORTANT VISITS

Senator Tom Lantos, USA
Renowned film director Roman Polanski