

Review of Jana Vytrhlik, *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney: The story of a visual heritage* (Sydney: Longueville Media, 2024)

Kip Green

Dr Jana Vytrhlik is the curator of the Great Synagogue's AM Rosenblum Museum. Her childhood in Prague established her interest in European Judaica, and she learned about Jewish history from the neglected synagogues, cemeteries and objects of Judaica that the murdered Jews of Europe had left behind. Vytrhlik holds a double PhD. The first is in Jewish ritual objects from a Moravian town called Boskovice. The second, attained at the University of Sydney, combines art history and Jewish studies. This personal and academic background provides Vytrhlik with the necessary tools to recognise and assess important items from Sydney's Jewish artistic history, which is what she has done with this beautiful collection: *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney: The Story of a Visual Heritage*.

In this stunningly photographed tome, Vytrhlik combines research of objects, archives, art history, local history and architecture to build a rich picture of Jewish Sydney in the past. Her research spanned museums, galleries, libraries and private collections, and stretched from Sydney to Amsterdam and London. The result is a comprehensive representation of Jewish life since the establishment of Sydney as a colony. In his admiring foreword, Rabbi Benjamin J. Elton, Chief Minister of the Great Synagogue, calls the book an "outstanding contribution to the study of the material culture of early Sydney Jewry".¹

Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney showcases objects of Judaica, furniture, stained glass windows, portraiture and architecture. There are ceremonial ornaments, embroidered textiles, illuminated folia and colonial portraits. All are stunningly photographed and presented in generous

1. Benjamin J. Elton, "Foreword," in Jana Vytrhlik, *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney: The Story of a Visual Heritage* (Sydney: Longueville Media, 2024), ix.

coloured plates. Vytrhlik has written engaging essays to accompany the objects, revealing their context and history, and linking them to early Australia.

This work challenges the notion that Judaism is a religion that rejects art. Vytrhlik cites the Bible's Second Commandment, which prohibits the making of graven images, as the source of this idea. She notes the centuries-old debate about how this commandment should be interpreted, and argues that it led to a conception of Jews as people of the book, rather than people of artistic creation. However, twenty-first century academia has recognised the fallacy in that assumption. Recent scholars, including Vytrhlik, are investigating Jewish visual culture and exposing a long, rich artistic history. From medieval illustrated Hebrew manuscripts, to the decoration of the Great Synagogue in Sydney, Jews have been creating works of visual culture for centuries.

The artefacts in the body of the book are divided into six sections. The first is a short essay called 'Setting the Scene', which establishes the book's intent to "illustrate the variety of Judaica styles and forms across many iterations..."² The following sections address Synagogue Architecture, Jewish Art, Traditional Piety, and Synagogue Ritual Objects.

In the chapter entitled "Synagogue Architecture", Vytrhlik uncovers the origins and design of the Bridge Street Synagogue (est. 1837), and the Egyptian-influenced York Street Synagogue (est. 1844). Early drawings and photographs provide visual evidence to support her historical notes. Vytrhlik then turns to the Great Synagogue in Elizabeth Street, detailing how the cornerstone was laid on the anniversary of the colony in 1875, and how a ladies' committee held a six-day "Fancy Fair" in Martin Place to fund its construction. An interesting inclusion here is an open-view model of the Great Synagogue, which the author rightly states has "universal magnetic power".³

The following chapters highlight art and ritual objects, including silver rimmonim. Rimmonim are ornamental finials that are used in Torah decoration. One pair adorns the covers of *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney*, and Vytrhlik

2. Jana Vytrhlik, *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney: The Story of a Visual Heritage* (Sydney: Longueville Media, 2024), 49.

Henceforth only page numbers will be listed.

3. 78.

explains that the mystery surrounding their provenance was the inspiration for her to write the book. She ultimately traced them from their creation in Amsterdam in the late eighteenth-century, to their purchase by the Sydney Synagogue community in 1839.

Other items of particular beauty include etrog containers in silver and wood,⁴ and two colourful Mizrahs (Figs. 110 and 111.) The latter are tablets traditionally hung in homes to indicate the proper direction of prayer, and the two examples included here contrast a central European folk Judaica style with an Ashkenazi-style creation that is probably from Australia or England. A number of intricately decorated “illuminated addresses” or folios are presented in whole and in detail. These are both beautiful works of art, and revealing historical documents, the texts of which provide detailed information for genealogists and historians. One example commemorates the retirement of George Myers as President of the Great Synagogue in February 1879. Another shows appreciation to the recipient, Aaron Blashki, for his service to the Sydney Jewish Aid Society, and celebrates his overseas travel. A third was presented to Louis Phillips, Esq, JP, in appreciation of his service to the Great Synagogue, and on the occasion of his travel to Europe. All include explosions of colour where painted native Australian flora adorns the text. Golden wattle and vermilion kangaroo’s paw add a distinctly Australian flavour to the artefacts, as do the paintings of Sydney harbour included in two of the three examples. The history and illustrations of these artefacts reveal the relationship between Jews, their community, and Australia.

The final chapter of *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney* is entitled “Those who Inspired”. It looks at six of the early Jews of Sydney, and by focussing on objects they owned or created, it reveals both the human and artistic foundations of the city’s Jewish community. Notably, Vytrhlik spotlights “Adler’s Kiddush Cup”, a finely smithed gold presentation cup, made only two years after the discovery of gold in Australia. The cup is decorated with traditional imagery such as biblical symbols, laurels and oak leaf wreaths, with a very Australian addition: on the abse of the cup stand a pair of kangaroos and an emu. The piece was presented to

4. 167ff.

the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, Dr Nathan Marcus Adler, as a gift from the Jews of Victoria. It was intended for use within the Sabbath prayer rituals. This piece is one of the earliest extant ecclesiastical artefacts made from Australian gold.

The only female highlighted in this chapter is Esther Abrahams, who was sentenced to transportation in 1786. While travelling to the colony aboard the First Fleet, Esther met and romanced the Marine Officer in charge, Lieutenant George Johnston. They later married, and Abrahams reinvented herself as a respectable wife and mother. The book includes two portraits of Esther, and a well-executed watercolour of her daughter Julia. In the latter, Julia stands in the grounds of the family's Annandale estate, the light and the plants speaking eloquently of Australian conditions.

When Vytrhlik examines the life of Aaron Alexander Levi, she includes an excellent section on yadayim, or torah pointers. This might have sat well in the chapter on "Synagogue Ritual Objects", but Vytrhlik chose to include it here instead, as one example was created by the contemporary artist Zac Levi in honour of Aaron Alexander, who was his great-great-great-grandfather. The younger Levi's work is seen elsewhere in the book; he has used architectural drawings and modern technology to create renderings of the York Street Synagogue. (Figs. 24 and 25.) The renderings are impressive, although it is not possible to appreciate them fully through the static representations here.

With *Treasures of Old Jewish Sydney*, Vytrhlik has created an engaging book of cross-disciplinary appeal. The crisply photographed objects alone will reward those whose interest is aesthetic. And Vytrhlik's well-researched essays add considerable depth for those exploring the history of Jewish Sydney and its artistic heritage. Vytrhlik has constructed a worthy tribute to the religious, cultural, communal and artistic heritage of Jewish Sydney.

Author Biography

Dr Kip Green is a historian and educator at the Sydney Jewish Museum, working in the field of Holocaust studies. Dr Green has presented at Australian and international conferences on the topic of theatre performances as a tool for recovery in Displaced Persons camps after World War Two.