

Presseinformation Museum am Rothenbaum Rothenbaumchaussee 64 | 20148 Hamburg Germany | markk-hamburg.de

Exhibition Texts

Label: Jewish

Label: Jewish. Questioning MARKK's History

The museum began building a collection of Jewish everyday and ceremonial objects in 1913 with a permanent loan from the Society for Jewish Folklore. Displayed as the "Jewish section" of the new permanent exhibition, it was supplemented in the following years with further objects from the museum's own holdings.

In 1935, the new director, Franz Termer, had the exhibition display removed. The museum's own objects disappeared into storage for the time being. The Society, whose members were already facing mounting persecution under the Nazi regime, took its collections back.

This history of the collection at the museum raises questions explored in the exhibition: What was understood by the label "Jewish" throughout the years? What can a contemporary perspective on these objects reveal, among them ten objects from the Society for Jewish Folklore?

Since 2021, these questions have also been addressed at the MARKK as part of a provenance research project examining the collection for Nazi-looted cultural property. This work also critically examines the museum's history under National Socialism. It asks how the museum's leadership positioned itself under political pressure, how the museum benefited and what continuities remain identifiable today.

Constructing the "Jewish Collection"

Following the example of Jewish museums, other institutions also began collecting Jewish ceremonial and everyday objects in the early 20th century. Their composition was comparable, but the perspectives differed.

One aspect of the "Jewish Collection" at the Museum für Völkerkunde makes this clear. In the new building in Hamburg's Rothenbaum district, the Hamburg Society for Jewish Folklore's collection was put on display. It emerged from an internal Jewish engagement with everyday culture and tradition, but at the museum, it was incorporated into the institution's own systems of classification and display.

In ethnology, it was standard practice to assign objects an "ethnic" origin. The "Jewish Collection" was broadly classified under the origin category "Jews" and assigned to an exhibition hall with objects from West Asia, North Africa and south-eastern Europe. Today, this reads as an Orientalist image of the "Other", framed primarily through religion.

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Labels: What Makes an Object Jewish?

Labels assign meanings and characteristics. They categorise individuals, groups and even objects. They may be complex or one-dimensional, but they are always tied to perspective, time and the information available. What does the label “Jewish object” mean? What interpretations arise from details about an object’s creation, use or ownership?

An object used in everyday religious life can be assigned different meanings. On closer inspection, an object labelled as a Jewish ceremonial object may instead be understood as a secular everyday item, an object made specifically for museum purposes, or a purely decorative piece.

Other objects, like their owners, were only made “Jewish” through National Socialist racialised classification. In general, the designation of a “Jewish” origin is based on a problematic categorisation that shapes how objects are understood.

A Question of Self-Reassurance

The Society for Jewish Folklore, founded in Hamburg in 1898, attracted considerable interest. Its collection grew rapidly, objects were loaned to Copenhagen and Dresden, and its membership extended far beyond Hamburg. The Hamburg press reported on the Society regularly. Yet its attempt to establish a museum of its own was unsuccessful.

Jewish associations stood for civic engagement and collective self-reassurance. Jewish folklore studies, which emerged around 1900, formed part of a scholarly engagement with tradition and customs. In Hamburg, the Jewish population had doubled over the course of the 19th century. The Jewish community became increasingly integrated into bourgeois society and more religiously diverse, while many achieved social advancement. At the same time, the limits of integration became increasingly apparent, particularly with the rise of political antisemitism. This prompted reflection on questions of identity and belonging.

Objects of Trade – Objects of Collection

The objects shown here entered the “Jewish Collection” through dealers in ethnographica, the art trade and collectors. The information supplied with them is often limited, and their attributed origin and significance are not always reliable. Renewed examination of these objects cannot fill every gap. Against the backdrop of current research into Jewish everyday and ceremonial objects, and through scholarly exchange, their contexts of origin, meaning and use are becoming clearer.

For example, knowledge of the growing demand for, and production of, Jewish ceremonial objects from the 19th century onwards makes it easier to assess how an object was made and used. Alongside objects that were actually used, this also makes it possible to identify objects with no practical function, as well as falsified objects.

Extensive research into regional Jewish history also helps to contextualise a stated context of origin.

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Private Objects

Presumably as a result of the display of the Society for Jewish Folklore's collection, donations from private and family collections also entered the museum. Beyond their use and significance, these objects are bearers of personal stories that shed light on Jewish life in Hamburg and beyond. The Torah binder from Halberstadt, for example, offers insight into both the history of its creation and the later family history of its original owners in Lower Saxony and Hamburg.

Countless objects looted under National Socialism also came from private ownership. In 1961, some of the many silver objects that Jews had been forced to surrender from 1939 onwards entered the museum. In most cases, it is no longer possible to reconstruct the names of the owners or the personal significance of these objects. On closer inspection, however, a personal dimension becomes visible in the history of each object.

Additions to the Collection after 1945

Even after 1945, objects classified as Jewish continued to enter the museum's collections. Some can be dated to this period, while others were produced much earlier. For objects made before 1945, research into their provenance between 1933 and 1945 is essential. This is often difficult due to insufficient information. Even for more recent objects, however, origin and context cannot always be readily verified, particularly in the case of purchases. Nor can the stated use or intended function of every object be confirmed.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the collections were expanded through acquisitions made in connection with exhibitions on Jewish history.

During the same period, the museum also collected contemporary stereotypical, and therefore antisemitic, depictions. These are not shown here, in order to avoid reproducing discriminatory imagery.

The Museum under National Socialism

Even before the National Socialism period, racist and antisemitic approaches shaped the museum's scholarly work, particularly in its former departments of anthropology and prehistory. There, researchers worked to categorise people according to supposed criteria of "racial science" and presented prejudiced knowledge as objective truth. Between 1933 and 1945, such categories were used to lend scientific legitimacy to National Socialist policies of exclusion and persecution.

During this period, the museum also benefited from expropriations resulting from persecution and war. At the same time, the museum itself was subject to National Socialist influence. As a result of antisemitic legislation, Jewish employees were dismissed in 1933. The exhibition programme of the period shows how National Socialist ideologies influenced the museum's work.

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Why Provenance Research?

Provenance research examines the origins of cultural property and the circumstances under which ownership changed. Building on several years of provenance research in colonial contexts, the MARKK has also been examining its holdings for Nazi-looted cultural property since 2021. With funding from the German Lost Art Foundation, two consecutive research projects have been carried out. While the first project examined known suspected cases, Judaica and transfers of objects from public institutions after 1945, the second project, underway since 2023, focuses on selected object accessions between 1933 and 1952. Its aim is to establish whether there are possible links to National Socialist injustice. The research examines contexts of persecution, looting and confiscation, and critically considers labels assigned under National Socialism.