

## Vision of Colonial Judaism Australian Jewish Visual Legacy, 1838-1878

I propose to publish a richly illustrated monograph, *Vision of colonial Judaism*, an introduction to the history and theory of Jewish art and synagogue architecture in Australia, with a particular focus on Sydney during the mid-colonial period, 1838-1878. Based on my dissertation, completed in 2020 and revised in 2021, the volume aligns with a core thematic parameter of the Brill's Series in Jewish Studies. It elucidates the development of a distinct Jewish community which maintained strong links with the 'mother' congregation in London, and interacted with the governing representatives of the Crown colony.

### Abstract

The history of Jews in Australia has been closely linked with the British penal colony since 1788. Jewish convicts were amongst the first transportees, and by 1820, free Jewish settlers began to arrive, often to join their convicted or emancipated (a pardoned convict) relative. Jewish lives in the colony merged civilly with the governing society - a phenomenon essentially unknown in other countries. The fledgling religious life of Sydney Jews, barely one hundred of them in 1830, gained a certain level of respect from the colonial press, and when the first synagogue opened in the colony in 1844, it was an event heightened by piety and Hebrew melodies, witnessed also by the non-Jewish clergy and audience.



Captivated by rare silver *rimmonim* of obscured provenance in The Great Synagogue in Sydney (pictured), I set out to investigate their origins. Soon, more Jewish liturgical and historical objects began to appear. What motivated the nascent Jewish community of former convicts and free settlers at the edge of the colonial frontier to import spectacular silver and textile Torah ornaments?

Unlike in many European countries in the 1840s, in Australia, it was up to the Jews themselves to decide how visible they wished to be, where they build their synagogue and the kind of visual identity they choose to share. As a result, a notable Jewish visual culture has developed since the early colonial period, marked by Judaica objects and synagogue architecture. Curiously, while there is an extensive scholarship on the history of Jews in Australia, the recognition of Jewish visual legacy of British colonial Diaspora has been minimal.

Richly illustrated, the *Vision of colonial Judaism* deepens the knowledge of Jewish cultural heritage in Australia. The latter is presented as an undisputable continuation of European and British Jewish history and culture that emerged and matured outside the conventional boundaries of the world geography. In addition, the unique development of the early Australian Jewry and its visual legacy heralds the quintessential traits that will determine the character of the future Jewish community in Australia, the youngest of the Anglophone groups formed during the seminal period of emancipation.

### **Scholarly value of *Vision of colonial Judaism***

My research explores the neglected territory of Jewish art history and theory in Australia and, in essence, fills the lacuna in art historiography in Australia and internationally. In relation to existing literature and scholarship on the subject, the *Vision of colonial Judaism* offers three compelling claims on scholars' attention. The first is a novel analysis of particular semantics of Australian colonial Judaism when applied as a tool in defining the Jewish identity of the early congregation. Here, the Australian Jewry crosses paths with the emerging Anglophone Jewish Diaspora (as defined by Adam Mendelsohn in the early 2000).

Second, the book introduces a comparative design analysis of two Sydney's oldest synagogues to present an argument that architectural styles - by non-Jewish architects - played a significant role in forming the visual identity of two distinct generations of Jews in colonial Australia. Finally, the monograph *Vision of colonial Judaism* offers a pioneering classification of objects of Judaica. Section 'Defining objects of Australian Judaica' presents an original taxonomy in accordance to Judaica objects' provenance, integration and historical association.

The *Vision of colonial Judaism* is not a definitive survey of the art history of the Jewish community in Australia. Rather, it is a pilot study which will be valuable for future research as other artefacts, artworks, documents and connections come to light. A similar focused excursion into the past can be undertaken by other many communities, ethnic or religious, whether living in Australia or elsewhere.

### **Transforming the dissertation into a monograph**

My dissertation is called *The Journey of the Dutch Silver Rimmonim to The Great Synagogue in Sydney: The Search for Australian Jewish Visual Legacy, 1838-1878*. Arranged into six structured chapters, it prudently guided the reader, a.k.a. examiner, through the progression and logic of my research.

Conversely, the proposed monograph consist of seven chapters that provide context of and highlight the visual dimension of Jewish identity as it developed in Australian colony in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Before outlining the content of each chapter, I list the three core themes that hold the chapters' essays together:

- a. Provenance and symbolism of objects of Judaica and synagogue architecture attain a new meaning when transposed to the colonial frontier: resulting in new classification criteria.
- b. Analysis of the semantics and interpretation of visuality of the emerging Jewish community. Mapping the Jewish response to the occurrence of a particular historical event, such as the arrival of Christian missionaries in the colony, resulted in a pioneering hypothesis on the impact of the 'missions to the Jews' in Australia.
- c. Critical assessment of architectural style and visual language of Sydney's two oldest synagogues. Dialogue with current scholarship on the architectural style and juxtaposition of Jewish religious independence and social conformity in an unprecedented environment.

Importantly, also included are additional findings and unpublished material.

## TOC for *Vision of Colonial Judaism, Australian Jewish Visual Legacy, 1838-1878*

The central subject this book is visual Judaica in the broadest sense of the term. It comprises *synagogalia*, such as synagogue ceremonial objects in silver and textile, synagogue furniture and stained-glass window. Synagogue architecture and Jewish portraiture are included as they played a critical role in the formation of the colonial Jewish visual identity in Australia. Neither visual arts, nor manuscripts or Hebrew prints are part of this study.

<b>Preface</b>	<b>500</b>
My fascination with Judaica and synagogue architecture has its genesis in post-Holocaust Prague. Two decades later, this interest was greatly challenged in Sydney ... until a fateful encounter preceding this monograph.	
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>200</b>
Brief account of people critical to my research	
<b>List of Illustrations</b>	<b>1,300</b>

### **1 Introduction** **9,000**

The introductory chapter provides the theoretical, historical and visual underpinning for the book. The visual culture of European Jews has entered the niche scholarship since the turn of the twentieth century. The improved access to the Central and Eastern European Jewish heritage, resulted in increased scholarship on the subject. It is timely to review the conventional geography, which prevents Australia to enter the sphere of Jewish European heritage, and examine the contribution of the former British colonial Diaspora of Terra Australis.

This chapter sketches four decades of Jewish history in Sydney, framed by the years 1838 and 1878.



Bridge Street, Sydney, 1854. Toned postcard. Rooms in the first building on the left were converted to a temporary synagogue (1837–1844).

In essence, two distinct generations can be identified: one associated with the era of establishing the first synagogue in the colony (1844), and the second critical to the instituting of The Great Synagogue (1878).

Statistics are included thru the book to provide a scale for the overall understanding of the challenges faced by the relatively small Jewish community, and illustrations introduce the reader to the visual world of the Australian colonial Judaism.

### **2 Provenance, significance and symbolism: metamorphosis of an object of Judaica** **10,000**

The pair of silver rimmonim that inspired this book is the oldest known object of liturgical Judaica in Australia and this chapter traces its journey from Amsterdam to Sydney. Originally a significant Torah ornament in a Sephardic synagogue, once reaching Sydney's early Anglo-Ashkenazi congregation, the rimmonim assumed a new symbolic language and historical significance.

### 3 Semantics of Jewish identity and the 'missions to the Jews' in Australia

9,000

Chapter 3 is grounded in Sydney in the 1830s and 1840s. It sheds light on the Jewish milieu that decided to purchase an unprecedented - in colonial terms - ritual relic for the synagogue which was yet to be built. Alongside the Jewish community's endeavour for visibility, I detected a surprising semantic phenomenon heralding a historical event, not yet fully appreciated in Australian Jewish historiography. It was the noticeable increase of Christian missionaries in the colony after 1820, aiming to convert the Jews for the global movement of the Second Coming of Christ. Naturally, Jewish leaders in Australia were alarmed. Determined, a small group of Jewish communal leaders in Sydney, and across Australia shortly thereafter, took measures to reinforce the community's faith and counteract the gospel. In this chapter, I explore - through an analysis of semantic modifications - the changes that took place in expression of shared Jewish identity, one of the several characteristics of Australian colonial Judaism.

### 4 Jewish visual independence: Egyptian style architecture for Australian colonial Judaism Arrival of Jewish portraiture

15,000

Chapter 4 traces the next stage of the process of representation of Jewish identity. The highlight of this research phase was the pursuit of the origins of the distinctive Egyptian style of architecture of



York Street Synagogue, Sydney, 1844, architect James Hume, photo c.1870.

the colony's first synagogue (1844) and the three synagogues across the continent that soon followed. I argue – contrary to the views of many scholars – that the Egyptian style of colonial synagogues in Australia resulted neither from the widespread Egyptomania following the Napoleonic Wars nor from the Freemasons' dubious symbolic image of the universe. Staying with the Jews' desire for new visibility, this chapter further records the emergence of the colonial Jewish portraiture, which took place in the 1850s as the face of growing sense of Jewish individualism and cultural aspiration.



Portrait of Moses and Esther Moss, c. 1855, unknown artist. The Mosses were a London-born Jewish couple who joined a convict relative in Australia in 1851.

### 5 Jewish identity of conformity: The Great Synagogue in Sydney

9,000

Chapter 5 credits The Great Synagogue's architect Thomas Rowe with devising new architecture iconography to convey the message of Jews' acculturation and conformity. Sydney's second synagogue was consecrated in 1878 and is today the oldest continuing Jewish place of worship. Its

architect Thomas Rowe, a Cornish Anglican by origin, was one of the most prolific colonial architects, yet not always regarded as the most imaginative. In this chapter, I suggest otherwise. Although Rowe followed the Sydney Jewish leaders' request and drew on the core plan of the Central Synagogue in London, he did not blind-copy it. He reinterpreted the 'cathedral synagogue' in a way not previously observed in synagogue architecture. Himself involved in the politics of the colony, Rowe intuitively recognized the aspirations of the burgeoning Sydney Jewish community. At the backdrop of the social and political changes accompanying the emancipation of Jews in Europe, the architect constructed an antithesis to its early colonial predecessor, the York Street Synagogue.



'Opening of the new Jewish Synagogue', engraving, *Illustrated Sydney News*, 4 March 1878.

## 6 Judaica of colonial Judaism

14,000

Chapter 6 introduces key objects of Australian *Judaica* and formulates their pertinent definition. It also examines to what extent an identity visualisation can be carried – or instigated - by an object. The Anglo-Jews living in colonial Australia were a culturally diverse group comprising mostly of Anglo-European Ashkenazim with a minority of Anglo-Sephardim. It is commonly believed that not much consideration was given at the time to any distinction between the groups, neither religiously,



Detail of Illuminated address by John C. Fitzjohn-Hall (1841–1912), Sydney. Presented to George Myers, President of The Great Synagogue, 1879.

nor socially. Yet, in terms of visual aspects of the colonial Judaica objects, several distinct characteristics are examined here. Other group of artefacts included in this chapter are surviving topographic drawings – never published before - documenting 'topography of Jewish identity' before 1850. Silver objects, dating from 1849 to 1889 encompass both previously identified generations of Sydney Jews. Most of them transited from being secular pieces to become associated with the performance of Jewish liturgy, metamorphose observed and explored in this chapter.



**7 Conclusion: Australian Jewish visual legacy****5,000**

The concluding chapter 7 brings together what was deconstructed through the book to substantiate the claim that the Australian Jewish visual legacy not only exists but that it can be regarded as a significant – yet largely overlooked - element of the European Jewish history and its heritage.

Sydney rimmonim deconstructed. Detail of the middle bulbous part,

**Bibliography****5,000****Index****2,000****Technical aspects**

I propose the *Vision of colonial Judaism* to be published in a format and quality comparable to the recent art history monograph in the Brill's Series in Jewish Studies, *Secularizing the sacred, aspects of Israeli visual culture* by Alec Mishory, 2019, where the image selection and quality support the author's conclusions and hypotheses.

**Total word count estimate** (incl. footnotes, captions and bibliography): **80,000**

**Total number of images** 60-80

**Foreign scripts/accents** some Hebrew script, Czech and German accents

A **Pictorial glossary** (1,200 words) for basic terms and concepts of Judaism can be included, pending Brill's advice.

**Market**

*Vision of colonial Judaism* is an edited and advanced version of my dissertation, comprising significant new material. While the dissertation had a narrow readership not necessarily familiar with the subject of Jewish art nor with the subtleties of discourse on the very existence of Jewish art, the monograph targets readers interested in exploring new angles of Jewish art theory and interpretation. Students with the basics in Judaism who are aware of the debate about Jews and visual culture, will find it fresh and informative. For the wider international group of historians, the *Vision of colonial Judaism* expands on the theoretical application of art history to gain a new level of insight into the Jewish past. Finally, the monograph being first of its kind in Australia, it is my ambition to make the *Vision of colonial Judaism* indispensable to the secondary and tertiary education market, broadening the knowledge of the Australian colonial history through the understanding of the Anglo-Australian Jewish heritage.

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BRILL'S SERIES IN JEWISH STUDIES

Vision of Colonial Judaism  
*Australian Jewish Visual Legacy, 1838–1878*



Jana Vytrhlik

BRILL

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The history of Jews in Australia has been closely linked with the British penal colony since 1788. While the Jewish colonial past has been studied extensively, it is not well known that the Australian history of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century is also marked by a significant Jewish visual legacy. *Vision of colonial Judaism* is the first study investigating Jewish history in Australia through a visual-focused approach. It positions objects of Judaica and synagogue architecture within the wider context of Jewish tradition in British Diaspora and presents a first-time analysis of the role the new exposure played in formation of a distinct Jewish visual identity.

The monograph *Vision of colonial Judaism* is of particular interest to scholars reading history, art history, Anglo-Jewish colonial society, and Jewish art and architecture historiography. The content is based on a study of collection of unpublished artefacts of Judaica and related documentary material.

[Cover image: The Great Synagogue in Sydney, Elizabeth Street, opposite Hyde Park, c. 1870]