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HIST 670 Visual and Material Culture  
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*For Everything A Season: Jewish Ritual Art in Cleveland*  
(Cleveland: Cleveland State University Press, 2000, 140pp)

Conceptualized and directed by John Hunter, the exhibit *For Everything A Season: Jewish Ritual Art in Cleveland* at Cleveland State University was the culmination of four years of work with the Jewish community of Cleveland, Ohio, as well as other Jewish and secular universities, organizations, institutions, and individuals. Though himself a scholar of Italian Renaissance art, Hunter's interest in sacred art prompted him to explore Judaica, or objects used for Jewish rituals. *For Everything A Season* was displayed in the art gallery at Cleveland State University from September through November of 2000.

The exhibit brought together objects collected by institutions, synagogues, and individuals and recognized the vibrancy and diversity of Jewish life in Cleveland. It included Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox views, and the collection included objects from around the world, from both Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions.<sup>1</sup> The title of the exhibit is fitting, a line taken from part of the *Tenakh*, the Jewish bible. It comes from some of the additional writings, or *Ketuvim*, Ecclesiastes, 3:1. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven," it reads. The quote refers to the cyclical nature of the seasons, which relates directly to

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Ashkenazi" refers to Jews who originally came from a Germanic background. "Ashkenaz" originally meant German. These people migrated north and east. "Sephardi" (*Sepharad* literally means Spain) refers to Jews who migrated out from the Iberian Peninsula to the Mediterranean, North Africa, and parts of the Middle East. While essentially very similar, these two types of Judaism have different traditions and sometimes even different laws. This distinction is different than the more well-known "Reform," "Conservative," and "Orthodox" labels, which all came out of the Ashkenazi tradition.

the cyclical nature of Jewish life and ritual, and therefore to the objects themselves, which each have a special place and time to be used.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibit catalog for *For Everything A Season* is divided into two parts. The first is a trio of essays written by people involved in the creation of the exhibit. Hunter contributed the first essay, which chronicles the Jewish experience in Cleveland from the time the first Jews came from Germany up through the present day. Much of it also focuses on his experience putting the exhibit together. Though only a brief overview, it introduces the people involved in making the exhibit a success and gives the reader an idea of process of creating a good museum exhibit, even if it does seem as though this process was too simple and straightforward at times. Joseph Gutmann, whose work on Judaica inspired Hunter and formed the basis of his understanding of Jewish ritual objects, wrote the second essay. Gutmann gives a short history of Judaica, its role in Jewish life, and the European and ethnographic origins of displays of Jewish material culture. The final essay, by Claudia Z. Fechter, the curator of the Museum of Jewish Art at Temple Tifereth Israel in Cleveland and co-curator of *For Everything A Season*, focuses not on the Jewish community of Cleveland, but on the place of collections of Judaica in the city and the role of the individual and institutional collectors in the creation of the exhibit.

The second part of the catalog represents the exhibit itself. Like the original display, it is divided into three sections: Community Worship, Annual Festivals, and Life Cycle. In addition to a picture, provenance, and a description of each object, it also provides background information on the customs and traditions related to each subsection. Most objects in the exhibit come from the 17<sup>th</sup> century up through the present day. Nothing from the period of the Temple cult (before 70CE) survives, and very little has come down from the Middle Ages. The vast majority of Judaica around today comes from no earlier than the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and was made

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<sup>2</sup> *For Everything A Season*, 7.

either by Jews in the Islamic world (where metalworking was considered a lowly occupation), or Christian silversmiths in Europe (as Jews there were not allowed to join guilds and therefore work in silver). The influences of these two dominant cultures left their impact on Judaism as a religion, Jews as a people, and in Jewish art.<sup>3</sup> The first section of the exhibit includes objects used for Shabbat, and often in daily life, especially in more traditional Judaism. Annual Festivals refers to the observance of holidays throughout the year, such as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Passover, as well as less important holidays such as Chanukkah and Purim. Objects relating to events and times throughout a person's life, such as birth, childhood, adulthood, marriage, divorce, and death, make up the Jewish Life Cycle.

I examined this exhibit in conjunction with Colleen McDannell's *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. McDannell's book, as per the title, focuses almost exclusively on Christian objects, but when taken broadly, some of her ideas can be applied to Judaism as well. Like in Christianity, the symbols and rituals of Judaism are handed down from generation to generation through practice, by "learning, seeing, and doing."<sup>4</sup> McDannell's conception of the marketing of religious goods in the chapter "Christian Retailing" could easily apply to Jewish goods today, given the sheer number of knick-knacks, t-shirts, baseball caps, editions of religious texts, and decorative objects available for purchase. Like the material objects that represent Christianity, Jewish material culture cannot stand on its own; it requires not only historical context, but human relationships and beliefs to give them meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the objects displayed in *For Everything A Season* are still active pieces, treasured by families and used daily, weekly, or yearly in celebrations. Every one of the objects shown was

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<sup>3</sup> *For Everything A Season*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 2.

<sup>5</sup> McDannell., 4.

designed for a purpose. A person's acceptance or rejection of their ritual meaning shapes his or her own identity as a person and as a Jew. Even those who choose not to use the candlesticks to light candles on Friday night for Shabbat or to hear the *shofar* blown on Rosh Hashanah can find meaning in them as a representation of their cultural heritage. They can still relate to them on a personal level even if their intended purpose, use in ritual, means little. The title of the exhibit itself takes the human aspect into consideration.

*For Everything A Season* is limited in one important way: it's narrow focus on "ritual art." By placing special emphasis on ritual, many beautiful pieces that could have been used, including paintings, sculptures, etc. could not be displayed. These subjective works embody Jewish themes, especially those concerning individual relationships with religion and tradition, that cannot not be explored through only ritual art. Excepting a few amulets and *chamsot* (hand that guards against the evil eye) in the Community Worship section, categorized under Superstition, jewelry, very popular items among mildly to very observant Jews, was also left out. The habits of wearing a Star of David, *chai*, *chamsa*, or other symbol as a necklace, ring, or bracelet form a large part of many people's religious practice and Jewish identity. Additionally, by focusing only on ritual objects, the curatorial team, inadvertently perhaps, left out non-practicing Jews. In the increasingly complex world of American Jewish identity, adherence to traditional religious ritual does not always form the basis of Jewish identity.<sup>6</sup> The diversity and vibrancy of the Jewish community that the exhibit sought to display was dimmed by this omission.

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<sup>6</sup> An individual's Jewish identity has become a controversial subject, especially in America. Jewish law (*halachah*), assimilation, tradition, family, synagogue, and institutionalized religion are just a few of the concerns that factor in to a person's "Jewishness."