

The material in these notes is taken from *The Jewish Journey: 4000 Years in 22 Objects* by Rebecca Abrams, published by The Ashmolean Museum, October 2017

Objects linked with Judaism at The Ashmolean Museum

- Objects in the Ashmolean's collections reveal aspects of the history of the Jewish people from Ancient Mesopotamia to the present day. Spanning 4000 years and 14 countries, they document the diversity of Jewish life over the centuries, and the long history of close interaction with other cultures and religions of the world.
- Objects in the collections range from a ring seal from the siege of Bronze Age Lachish; a Dead Sea Scroll jar from 1st century Judaea; a clay camel from Tang Dynasty China; a medieval magic amulet; an English five pound note forged by Jewish prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp.
- These objects reveal the fascinating stories about the people who owned, made and used them, from kings, courtiers and scholars, to merchants, musicians and market-stall holders.
- Paintings and artworks in the collection from the early 19th century onwards reflect Jewish emancipation and assimilation into mainstream society throughout Europe which opened the door to many fields including the visual arts. This led to the emergence of outstanding Jewish artists, including Camille Pissarro, Jacob Epstein, David Bomberg and Mark Gertler. The Ashmolean Museum holds a huge archive of work by Camille Pissarro and his descendants, including his son, Lucien Pissarro and granddaughter, Orovida Pissarro.

Gallery 19: Ancient Near East

1. Sumerian King List, baked clay, c1800 BCE, Larsa, Iraq



From a Biblical perspective the story of the Jewish people begins in Ancient Mesopotamia, birthplace of the Hebrew patriarch Abraham. The King List provides fascinating clues to the political and cultural context from which monotheistic Judaism started to emerge as well as shedding light on the origins of the story of Noah's Ark, one of the best known and important stories in the Hebrew Bible. AN 1923.444

Gallery 19: Ancient Near East

2. Jasper seal, 750-700 BCE, Lachish, Israel



The seal is engraved with a winged sphinx and an inscription in Paleo-Hebrew, which reads 'belonging to Hannah', the earliest reference to the name outside of the Bible. Seals belonging to women from this period are very rare. Discovered during 20th century excavations, it comes from Lachish, a major settlement in the ancient Kingdom of Judah. Lachish was besieged in 701 BCE during the Assyrians' campaign to conquer Judah. LI1104.1

Gallery 19: Ancient Near East

3. Royal jar handles, c700BCE, Jerusalem



In 701 BCE the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem. To meet the threat of invasion, King Hezekiah reorganized the system of collecting and storing taxes received in kind. Goods were placed in large jars, which contained a standard official measure. The jar handles bear the Hebrew letters 'l-m-l-k', meaning 'belonging to the king', along with a four-winged beetle or double winged symbol and the name of one of the four store-cities in Judah where taxes were collected. AN1968.1394/1380/1382/1331

Gallery 19: Ancient Near East

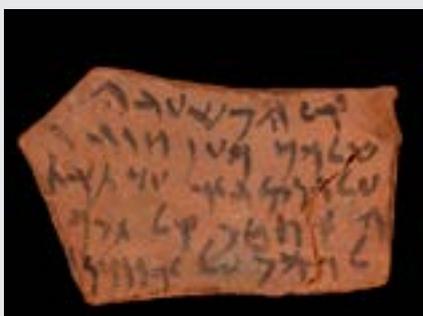
4. Shekel weights, 650-587 BCE, Jerusalem



These stone shekels come from Jerusalem and date to the time of the Babylonian conquest of Judah. Shekels were one of the earliest currencies in use in the Ancient Near East, and are frequently referred to in the Bible. The word 'shekel' means 'weight'. Before the 5th century BCE, shekels were small stones, used as measures to facilitate bartering. A shekel's 'value' was based on its equivalent weight in grain, and later, silver. AN1965.475-462

Gallery 19 : Ancient Near East

5. Passover potsherd from Elephantine, 475 BCE, Egypt



This letter, written in Aramaic on a potsherd (ostraca), contains one of the earliest known references to the Jewish festival of Passover. It comes from the 5th century BCE settlement of Elephantine, Egypt, home to a thriving Jewish community. Clay potsherds were a cheap alternative to papyrus and ideal for writing short messages. Passover commemorates the escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, led by Moses through the wilderness back to the land of Canaan.

Ostracon No7

Gallery 7: Money

6. Gold coin, 70CE, Jerusalem, found in Finstock, Oxfordshire, 1850 by a farmer



This small gold coin was minted in Judaea in 70 CE immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple, and discovered in England 2000 years later. Rome had been battling the Judaeen rebels since 66 CE, many of whom had retreated to Jerusalem. In 70CE Emperor Vespasian ordered his son Titus to capture Jerusalem. The coin shows the Emperor Vespasian on one side and Justice on the other. LI1997.1

Gallery 40: Mediterranean World

7. Gold glass fragment, c350 CE, Italy



This glass fragment comes from the Jewish catacombs at Vigna Randinini in Rome, where there was a well-established Jewish community. It originally formed the base of a shallow glass bowl, and shows part of a menorah, the Jewish seven-branch candlestick. The bowl would have been used at the funeral feast. The base was then broken off and mounted in the tomb wall of the deceased. Similar gold glass vessels were used in pagan and Christian funerals. AN2007.6

Gallery 41: England

8. Bodleian Bowl, bronze bowl, 13th century, England



The bowl was discovered in the 18th century in a disused moat in Norfolk and given to the University. It has a long Hebrew inscription encircling the rim and was probably used to collect charitable donations. The bowl's decorative features, inscription and owners, reflect the origins of England's medieval Jewish community, which came over from France in the 11th century, and was expelled from England en masse in 1290. AN2009.10

Gallery 62: Modern Art

9. Procession, David Bomberg, c1914, England



Born in England in 1890, David Bomberg was the son of Jewish immigrants who fled to England from Poland to escape rising anti-Semitism and economic hardship in Eastern Europe and the Russian empire. In his early work, Bomberg frequently drew upon the Jewish world of his upbringing in the East End of London. He employed modernist art forms to express his intense interest in form and colour. This painting is thought to depict a Jewish funeral procession and was made soon after the death of Bomberg's mother. WA1981.604

Gallery 28: Asian Crossroads

10. Tang Dynasty pottery camel, 10th century BCE, China



This camel, made in Tang Dynasty China in the 10th century CE, was brought to England in the 1930s by a German Jewish Professor who was forced to flee Germany because of Nazi anti-Semitism. It was made to be buried in the tomb of a wealthy member of Chinese society and represents the Silk Road, which also has ancient associations with Jewish merchants who were active along most of the trade routes.

EAL 1891.1

Other related objects:

Gallery 19: Ancient Near East, Perfume Flask, 1650-1550 BCE Jericho

Gallery 19: Ancient Near East, Pillar figurines, 750-650 BCE, Jerusalem,

Gallery 30: Mediterranean World, Memorial plaque to a sausage seller, c350-55 CE, Rome

Gallery 30: Mediterranean World, Egyptian dinner service, fragments of plates, 1150 CE, Egypt

Gallery 41: England, Magic Amulet, copper, 1450-1600 CE, provenance unknown

Gallery 56: Arts of the Renaissance, Jewish wedding rings, 16th century, Italy

Gallery 39: Music and Tapestry, Viola da gambas, 16th century Italy

Gallery 65: European Art, Vue de ma fenetre, Eragny and other works by Camille Pissarro, 1888, France

Gallery 62: Modern Art, Gilbert Cannan and his Mill by Mark Gertler, 1916, England

Lines of enquiry RE:

- Consider how historical artefacts can help develop knowledge and understanding about religious beliefs and teachings.
- Look at how objects reflect the influence of religion on individuals, communities and societies and their links with peace and conflict.
- Consider the role of religious beliefs, teaching and practices in society and how they are represented by objects and artworks.
- Explore how objects represent values, meaning, purpose, truth and their influences on human life and relationships.



Vue de ma Fenetre, Eragny Camille Pissarro, 1888, France WA1959.185

Further resources

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Working with objects: key questions

- Who made it?
- Where and when was it made?
- What materials is it made from?
- How was it made?
- What was it used for? How was it used?
- Who used / owned it?
- How might it be interpreted by different people and at different times?