

Nomination form

International Memory of the World Register

The Rothschild Miscellany
Northern Italy, ca.1460–80
Handwritten on vellum; brown ink, tempera, gold and silver leaf
The Israel Museum Collection

Gift of James A. de Rothschild, London
180/51; B61.09.0803 o.s.

Ref N° 2012-17

0 Summary (max 200 words)

The Rothschild Miscellany is a unique, lavish Hebrew illuminated manuscript created in Northern Italy during the Renaissance. Most of its 946 pages are adorned with magnificent illuminations in gold and silver leaf, painted with precious pigments. The codex comprises an exceptional collection of thirty-seven texts of various literary genres, ranging from religious to more universal subjects, such as history, political science, poems and fables. No other extant Hebrew manuscript presents such an array of literary works within one volume so profusely illustrated. Its illustrations are unrivalled among Hebrew manuscripts in that it contains the greatest range of scenes — from religious to secular — found anywhere. In its texts, artistry, and imagery, the Rothschild Miscellany is without parallel.

For its splendour and uniqueness, it is counted among the masterpieces of the Museum's internationally important collections. Preserved in its entirety and in excellent condition over the centuries, it is an outstanding example of Jewish heritage of a period from which few Jewish objects remain. James de Rothschild, the last private owner of the manuscript, viewed it as being of such national importance that he donated it to the Israel Museum.

2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage

Ownership

2.3 Contact person(s) (to provide information on nomination)

Miriam Apfeldorf, Registrar

2.4 Contact details

Name

Miriam Apfeldorf

Address

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, P.O.B. 71117, Jerusalem
91710, Israel

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3.0 Identity and description of the documentary heritage

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

If inscribed, the exact title and institution(s) to appear on the certificate should be given

The Rothschild Miscellany

Northern Italy, ca.1460–80

Handwritten on vellum; brown ink, tempera, gold and silver leaf

The Israel Museum Collection

Gift of James A. de Rothschild, London

Department no.: 180/51

Registration no: B61.09.0803 o.s.

Full page measurement: 20cm x 15.6cm ca.

3.2 Catalogue or registration details

The Rothschild Miscellany comprises 37 textual units of various literary genres, copied in the body of the page as well in the margins. The first part includes biblical books (Psalms, Job and Proverbs), and a complete prayer-book for the entire year, including the Passover Haggadah, and other treatises dealing with Jewish law and religious customs, such as the Book of Customs, and the Ethic of the Fathers. The second part of the manuscript contains philosophical, ethical, scientific, and historical treatises, as well as entertaining literature. A considerable part of such works are by Maimonides (Spain, 1135 – Egypt, 1204), the most prominent philosopher and physician and authority in Jewish law and precepts of the Middle Ages, whose contribution to Jewish philosophy and the codification of precepts and customs continue to be of considerable weight in our time. Some of the works are Hebrew translations from the Arabic of classical and medieval works. An example is the text *Higgeret Ha-Musar*, a moralistic epistle attributed to Aristotle that was popular in the Middle Ages.

Almost all of the manuscript's 946 pages are illuminated, including hundreds of initial word panels and illustrations to the text. The illustrations most likely were executed under the instruction of a Jewish patron. The most profusely illustrated parts are the biblical books and the prayer-book, and especially the Passover Haggadah. The miniatures vary from visual representations of religious customs for Festivals and special occasions, such as the kindling of the Hanukkah lamp, circumcision, marriage, mourning, blessing for the moon, to text illustrations and even biblical scenes.

Another significant literary work copied in the Rothschild miscellany and lavishly illustrated is the *Meshal ha-Kadmoni* (Proverb of the Ancients), a compendium of aphorisms and didactic fables in rhymed prose by 13th century Jewish author Isaac Ibn Sahula. This is one of the rare illustrated extant copies of this work, almost each fable opens with a fine detailed vignette illustrating the main topic.

All the depictions offer a rare window into the religious customs and daily life of Italian Renaissance Jews, and testify to the absorption of the aesthetic and humanistic values among the elite of the time. The superb illumination has been attributed to the atelier of the master painter Leonardo Bellini, one of the leading Christian miniaturists of the late fifteenth century.

3.3 Visual documentation if appropriate (for example, photographs, or a DVD of the documentary heritage)

Online site of the facsimile edition:

<http://www.facsimile-editions.com/en/rm/>

Online label of the site of the Museum:

<http://www.imj.org.il/imagine/galleries/viewItemE.asp?case=26&itemNum=199819>

3.4 History/provenance

As is often the case with Medieval manuscripts, in the Rothschild Miscellany the exact place and date of production are not stated. It can be ascertained that Moses ben Yekutiel ha-Kohen, whose name is recorded within the prayer book on folio 106r, was a pious man of culture who commissioned this prestigious and expensive codex. By examining a selection of some of the textual units and palaeographic and codicological features, it may be deduced that Moses ben Yekutiel was a German Jew who settled in one Northern Italy communities in the 15th century.

In the 18th century, the Miscellany was recorded as belonging to the Jewish community of Gorizia, at the northeastern border between Italy and modern Slovenia. There, it was documented by two renowned Hebraists and manuscripts collectors of that time: Benjamin Kennicot, Protestant canon from the Christ Church of Oxford, and Giovan Bernardo De Rossi, priest and professor at the University of Parma.

Later on, in the 19th century, the manuscript was recorded in the library of Salomone de Parente, a Jewish merchant of Trieste, Italy, between 1832 to 1855. It was eventually acquired for the library of Baron Edmond de Rothschild of Paris, where it remained until 1942.

Under Nazi occupation, the manuscript disappeared and was considered lost until it was presented for sale at the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York in the early 1950's. The head librarian and scholar, Alexander Marx, recognised the famous Rothschild codex and returned it to its official heir, Baron James de Rothschild of London. In 1957, Baron de Rothschild, viewing the manuscript as being of such national importance, presented the Miscellany as a gift to the Bezalel National Museum in Jerusalem. In 1965, the manuscript was transferred to the newly opened Israel Museum, Jerusalem, where it was preserved and has been on permanent display ever since.

Given the importance of this richly illuminated manuscript, in 1989 the Israel Museum issued a complete facsimile edition, published by Michael and Linda Falter of the "London Facsimile Editions". A compendium volume with essays by scholars expert in all the fields related to the Miscellany (codicology, history, literary content, iconography and style) is a precious contribution to the understanding and research of the Miscellany.

3.5 Bibliography

Selected Bibliography:

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Bauer-Eberhardt, Ulrike, "Die Rothschild Miscellanea in Jerusalem. Hauptwerk des Leonardo Bellini", *Pantheon* (1984): 229-237.

De Hamel, Christopher, *The Rothschilds and their collections of illuminated manuscripts* (London: British Library, 2005).

Gutmann, Joseph, *Hebrew Manuscript Painting* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978), 30, 112-114.

Levi, Israel, "Le manuscrit Hébreu no. 24 de la Bibliothèque du Baron Edmond de Rothschild à Paris", *Revue des Etudes Juives* (1930): 281-292.

Narkiss, Bezalel, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*, New York, 1969, pp. 38, 152. Narkiss,

Bezalel - Sed-Rajna, Gabrielle, "The Rothschild Miscellany, Jerusalem Israel Museum 180/51",

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(Jerusalem: The Index of Jewish Art, 1983), vol. III.

Metzger, Mendel, *La Haggadà Enluminée*, (Leiden : E. J. Brill, 1973), index on p. 501. Mortara-

Ottolenghi, Luisa, "The Wandering Codex", *Franco Maria Ricci*, 31 (1988):63-76.

Müller, David Heinrich – Schlosser, Julius von, *Die Haggadah von Serajevo*, Vienna 1898.

Roth, Cecil, "Mediaeval Illustrations of Mouse Traps", *The Bodleian Record* 1954/1956, V, 244-251.

The Rothschild Miscellany, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Facsimile edition and compendium volume (Iris Fishof ed., with contributions by Shlomo Simonsohn, Israel Ta-Shema, Malachi Beit-Arié, Luisa Mortara-Ottolenghi, Mirjam Foot), London 1989.

Romano Schreiber, Maria, "Un famoso codice ebraico del Rinascimento italiano", *Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 1959, 211-214.

Sed-Rajna, Gabrielle, *The Hebraic Bible*, Fribourg-Jerusalem 1987, Index on p. 170.

4.0 Legal information

4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

Name Miriam Apfeldorf
Address The Israel Museum, P.O.B. 71117, Jerusalem 91710
Telephone 97226708030
Facsimile 97226708032
Email miriama@imj.org.il

4.3 Legal status

Provide details of legal and administrative responsibility for the preservation of the documentary heritage

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

4.4 Accessibility

Describe how the item(s) / collection may be accessed

The Rothschild Miscellany is on display in the permanent gallery of Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts in the Jewish Art and Life Wing at the Israel Museum.

In order to enable the visitor to view the splendour and variety of the miniatures, the display is accompanied by a digital presentation showing a selection of thirty of the most beautiful and interesting double spreads. A film showing the main stages in the production of an illuminated manuscript is also displayed and the part dedicated to the illumination (gilding of letters and colouring), is based on the reproduction of a page from the Miscellany.

The manuscript has recently been digitally photographed in high definition, in its entirety, by Ardon Bar-Hama, funded by George B. Blumenthal of New York. This material is currently accessible in the Falk Information Center of the Jewish Art and Life Wing, while an image with extended label is available in the Museum's website in the frame of digitization of the collections on permanent exhibition.

The facsimile edition of the Rothschild Miscellany faithfully reproduces the original texture of the fine vellum, as well as the original colours and the shine of burnished gold. This enables scholars and amateurs to examine the manuscript, without affecting the fragile original work. Scholars are allowed access to the original manuscript for research purposes upon written request and provided references, as is customary policy in public and private libraries regarding accessibility of rare collections.

4.5 Copyright status

Describe the copyright status of the item(s) / collection

IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

5.1 Authenticity.

The authenticity of the Rothschild Miscellany has been proven by several reliable scholars: see **3.4 History/provenance**

Since the manuscript arrived to the Israel Museum, and before the facsimile edition, it was documented by Professor Bezalel Narkiss, founder and head of the Index for Jewish Art and Professor of Art History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, either in the 1960's and in the 1980's, in collaboration with Dr. Gabrielle Sed-Rajna of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris.

5.2 World significance

In describing the literary content of the Rothschild Miscellany in his contribution to the facsimile edition, the scholar Israel Ta-Shema pointed out that it "is not so much a book as a rich, highly varied library with the copious volumes bound together as a single entity" (*Ta-Shema, "The Literary Content of the Manuscript", in The Rothschild Miscellany, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, London 1989, compendium volume, Facsimile edition and compendium volume, p. 49*). No other extant Hebrew manuscript presents this array of literary works, of which many are illustrated. The intellectual world of the Renaissance with its manifold interests is widely presented here within one codex.

Beyond its significance for the period in which it was produced, the manuscript is an important

record of the triumph of the acculturation of an immigrant minority and its ascendance to the highest rungs of society. A combination of Ashkenazic (Germany and Northern France area) and Italian elements, it is unique among decorated Hebrew manuscripts in reflecting not only Jewish life in Renaissance Italy, but in exemplifying how Jews from Ashkenaz were able to integrate themselves into Italian culture, and excel.

5.3 Comparative criteria: Form and style

Measuring only 210 x 160mm and containing 946 leaves, the rather diminutive Rothschild Miscellany is outstanding not only as a great compendium of texts, but as a masterpiece on Renaissance art. The most lavishly illuminated Hebrew manuscript of the fifteenth century, it is a superb example of the artistic genre of miniature painting in Italy in general. The high level of its miniatures and border designs suggest that it was created in the workshop Leonardo Bellini, who is credited with having revitalized the illumination of Venetian books in the second half of the fifteenth century. In fact, Ulrike Bauer-Eberhardt considers the miscellany to be the principle work attributed to this master painter of panels and Latin manuscripts.

Social/ spiritual/ community significance:

The illustrations for the religious texts in the Rothschild Miscellany provide a visual record of religious customs and practices that would otherwise be unknowable. Scenes depict life cycle events from the cradle to the grave, with the inclusion of images of mourning that extend beyond even that. Places and objects relating to worship, such as the interior of Italian synagogues, including Torah arks with their curtains, Torah mantles, and Hanukkah menorahs, for which no physical traces remain, are all documented in this manuscript, as are a myriad of customs relating to prayer and religious observance.

On a more universal level, the realia of quotidian life in the Renaissance is revealed in images of palaces, farms, tableware, and clothing. The depictions run the gamut — from elegant couples dancing to the accompaniment of musicians, to prisoners restrained in their cells; people of all walks of life are represented: kings and courtesans, Jews, non-Jews.

Produced for a patron from an Ashkenazic background, the text is written in Ashkenazic script. The prayer book is of the Ashkenazic rite, as are the customs mentioned in the instructions. Not surprisingly, the Ashkenazic Passover tradition of the head of the household pointing to his wife when mentioning the bitter herbs appears here. On the other hand, the illustrations, executed by an important Renaissance workshop, reflect the patron's integration into Italian society as well. This is true not only of the high quality of the style of the art, but the choice of images that reflect the relatively exalted position of women in Renaissance Italy. As a consequence, the scenes relating to ritual practices for Passover reveal a strong female presence, while biblical heroines are depicted whenever possible. Most striking is the decision to eschew the illustration of Solomon that traditionally accompanied the book of Proverbs in favour of the only known representation of the "woman of valour" mentioned at the end of the biblical text.

6.1 Rarity

The Miscellany is a one of a kind object in terms of its art, its comprehensive textual content and its production. It is the most outstanding Hebrew illuminated manuscript from 15th century, as well as one of the rare Jewish art objects from Italy held at the Israel Museum's collection.

Besides its literary importance, as an artistic work is a masterpiece of Italian illumination. Attributed to the workshop of the illustrious fifteenth-century painter Leonardo Bellini, it is the only Hebrew manuscript to be included in the now classic catalogue *The Painted Page: Italian Renaissance Book Illumination 1450–1550*, edited by Jonathan J. G. Alexander (1994). It is one of the great examples of manuscript illumination from Italy from the latter part of the fifteenth century, at a time in which the art form was arguably at its peak. Its illustrations are unrivalled among Hebrew manuscripts in that it contains the greatest range of scenes — from religious to secular — found anywhere. In its texts, artistry, and imagery, the Rothschild Miscellany is incomparable.

6.2 Integrity

The manuscript is perfectly maintained; no pages are missing or damaged, and the colours, gold and ink are preserved in excellent condition. See section 9 for more details.