

A KISS FOR THE MEZUZAH

DECEMBER 6, 2007 – FEBRUARY 1, 2008



CANDY DEPEW • JEANNE JAFFE • ISAAC LIN • VIRGIL MARTI • STUART NETSKY
NORM PARIS • BRUCE POLLOCK • ISAAC RESNIKOFF • SHELLEY SPECTOR

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF JEWISH ART



Candy Depew
Untitled
(*Log Mezuzah*)
2007.
Porcelain with
hand-stamped
sprigs based on the
Tree of Life pattern,
parchment.
7¹/₂ x 2¹/₂ x 1¹/₂ inches.
Collection of
the artist.

A Kiss for the Mezuzah is an affectionate experiment. Nine Philadelphia-based artists—all celebrated for the skill and inspiration they bring to creating art in both two and three dimensions—were invited to make *mezuzot* (sing. *mezuzah*), the small cases found hanging on an angle on the doorposts of most Jewish homes. Each participating artist received the handwritten parchment scroll that goes inside the mezuzah. The words inscribed on this scroll—passages from the Jewish Scriptures, or *Torah*—begin with Judaism’s guiding call, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One,” continue with allegories invoking the covenant of mutual responsibility between God and the Jewish people, and include repeated commandments to “inscribe [these words] on the doorposts of your house and upon your gates” (see facing page). The artists were encouraged to “interpret, create metaphors, comment, celebrate, critique, cross cultures, translate, make it yours.” They were free to make their mezuzah cases in whatever forms and from whatever materials they desired. The only requirements were that their completed mezuzah must hold its scroll and be no larger than an average doorpost.

Candy Depew, Jeanne Jaffe, Virgil Marti, Stuart Netsky, Norm Paris, Bruce Pollock, Isaac Resnikoff, and Shelley Spector accepted the invitation to kiss the mezuzah case with their creativity. The results are startlingly original, surprising, engaging, thought-provoking, beautiful, and more. **Isaac Lin** meditated upon the medium and message—calligraphy and content—of the mezuzah scroll, conjuring a work as monumental and mesmerizing as the typical mezuzah is modest in scale and understated in appearance.

The 2000–1 National Jewish Population Survey found that 63% of American Jewish households own a mezuzah, making it one of the most commonly held ritual objects among American Jews. It is the only such item that distinguishes a Jewish home from the outside. In major urban areas—especially those, like Philadelphia, that have a large and long-established Jewish presence—mezuzot are familiar, albeit enigmatic to many, elements of the residential streetscape. While all of the artists in this exhibition were acquainted with mezuzot, the mezuzah was a form they had not previously explored in their work (with the exception of Shelley Spector, whose insights and enthusiasm for the subject were central to launching and shaping this project).

A Kiss for the Mezuzah refers to a traditional expression of respect: when passing through a doorway with a mezuzah, the individual first touches the mezuzah and then kisses his or her fingers. This *Kiss* explores the conceptual, cultural, and spiritual significances of the mezuzah, while providing a forum for artists of widely diverging approaches and backgrounds to explore issues of identity, experience, sensibility, values, and worldview. The mezuzah is a vessel for Torah, the ongoing process of revelation that is life. While making her or his personal mezuzah, Depew, Jaffe, Lin, Marti, Netsky, Paris, Pollock, Resnikoff, and Spector lived with the myriad messages, meanings, memories, and reminders contained in mezuzot across continents and centuries. Thanks to these artists, the mezuzah has new stories to tell. Let’s hear them.

Matthew F. Singer, *Curator, Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art*

***A Kiss for the Mezuzah* and its accompanying publication are made possible by a generous gift from Mary Bert and Alvin P. Gutman.**

**THE MEZUZAH
SCROLL,
TRANSLATED**

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God; the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them to your children and speak of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for ornaments between your eyes. And you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates. [Deuteronomy 6:4-9]

And it will be, if you hearken to My commandments that I command you this day to love the Lord, your God, and to serve God with all your heart and with all your soul, I will give the rain of your land at its time, the early rain and the latter rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. And I will give grass in your field for your livestock, and you will eat and be

sated. Beware, lest your heart be misled, and you turn away and worship strange gods and prostrate yourselves before them. And the wrath of the Lord will be kindled against you, and God will close off the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the ground will not give its produce, and you will perish quickly from upon the good land that the Lord gives you. And you shall set these words of Mine upon your heart and upon your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand and they shall be a reminder between your eyes. And you shall teach them to your children to speak with them, when you sit in your house and when you walk on the way and when you lie down and when you rise. And you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates, in order that your days may increase and the days of your children, on the land which the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as the days of heaven above the earth. [Deuteronomy 11:13-21]



Isaac Lin
Law and Order
2007.

Detail. Ink on paper.
9 x 10 feet.
Collection of
the artist

"I find that painting and drawing are calming, meditative activities. I think calligraphy plays a similar role in religion. With my piece for *A Kiss of the Mezuzah*, I hope to bring to mind confusion and clarity, chaos and order."

A HISTORY OF THE MEZUZAH

Vivian B. Mann,
*The Morris and
Eva Feld Chair
of Judaica, The
Jewish Museum,
New York*



Mezuzah of Haym Salomon
Late Eighteenth Century.
Tin: painted
12.4 x 2.4 cm.
The Jewish Museum. Gift of Mrs. Nathan Leavy in memory of her sister, Alice L. Miller, JM 92-72.

The commandment to place a *mezuzah*, a scroll inscribed with biblical verses, on the doorpost of Jewish homes has its origins in the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt. Prior to bringing the plague of death on the Egyptian firstborn, God commanded the Israelites to paint the blood of a lamb on their doorposts (*mezuzot*) so that the Angel of Death could distinguish their homes from those of the Egyptians.

In time, Jewish households were marked by texts placed on the doorposts of all the livable rooms in a Jewish home, on the doors of businesses owned by Jews, and rooms in communal buildings. The term *mezuzot* came to be used for the texts as well as the doorposts that supported them. The text incorporated into the mezuzah is the *Sh'ma Yisro'el* ("Hear O Israel"), which proclaims the unity of God and the obligation of every Jew to love Him/Her. This text is written in the square Ashuri (Assyrian) Hebrew script on parchment made from a kosher animal that is scored so that the letters hang below the lines. This is the same mode of writing used for a Torah scroll, and indicates the sanctity accorded to the scroll of a mezuzah. The earliest existing example was found at Qumram among the Dead Sea Scrolls. By the Middle Ages, some scribes added amuletic verses and the name of angels to the scroll, which gave it the character of an amulet. This practice was condemned by Maimonides (1138-1204). Today, the only additional texts are on the reverse: *Shaddai* ("Almighty" or "Guardian of the Doors of Israel") and a phrase that translates "the Lord, our God, the Lord."

The sanctity of the mezuzah scroll requires a protective cover and these have varied in form among the Jewish groups of the diaspora. The earliest evidence comes from the medieval Jewish quarters of Spanish cities whose homes have hollowed out depressions for the text on

the right post of the entry. These were probably covered with an embroidered cloth as became the custom in Morocco, whose Sephardi refugees continued many Iberian customs. Silver *ajourée* covers used inside the home were a particularly fine type of Moroccan cover. In Ashkenazi lands, with their more severe climates, a rectangular box was made to hold the text, with the word *Shaddai* or its first letter visible through an aperture or glass. In Eastern Europe, the box was usually of wood and was often carved with flora and fauna related in style and theme to the elaborate wooden Torah arks of local synagogues. The Jews who settled in colonial America seem to have had mezuzot of tin, as indicated by a surviving example in the Jewish Museum, New York, owned by Haym M. Salomon (1785-1858), the son of Haym Salomon (1740-85), who aided the Revolutionary cause and was a major contributor to the building of Philadelphia's Congregation Mikveh Israel.

The nineteenth century was largely a period of stylistic revivals, and the same was true of mezuzah design. With the advent of modernism in the twentieth century, mezuzah covers began to reflect minimalism and were marked by the use of new materials. Although the writing of the text has remained constant over time in accord with Jewish law, the lack of regulations governing the protective cover gave artists and patrons the freedom to choose among many styles and materials.



Mezuzah Cover of Mess'ud el-Carif
Morocco.
Twentieth Century.
Silver: engraved and pierced.
27.6 x 17.8 cm.
The Jewish Museum, purchased with funds given by the Judaica Acquisitions Fund, 1997-170.



Candy Depew
Untitled (Oval Mezuzah)

2007. Porcelain with hand-stamped sprigs based on the Tree of Life pattern, parchment.

5¹/₂ x 2¹/₂ x 1¹/₂ inches.

Collection of the artist.

"I have always loved porcelain. Over the years, I have created many love tokens and protective talismans from its pure whiteness and fine quality for detail. The Tree of Life pattern, symbolically found in mystical Jewish Kabbalah and in antique decorative art, is the inspiration and departure point for my mezuzah designs. Bisqued clay and plaster stamps made from antique dress buttons and decorative ironwork were used to create the dozens of tiny little sprigs of flowers, leaves, tendrils, and buds that adorn the surface of these protective amulets."



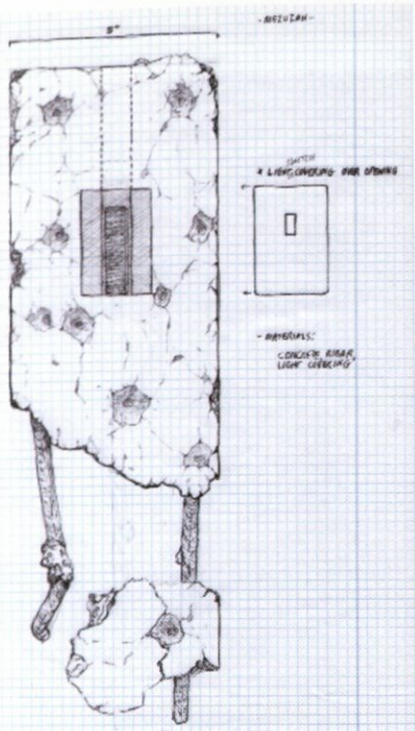
Jeanne Jaffe
Still Small Voice

2007. Resin, clay, thread, parchment.

6 1/2 x 6 x 5 inches (variable).

Collection of the artist. Photo: Meagan Frisch.

"A sequence of associations led to the image of an ear and language in the mezuzah I made. The prayer starts with the Hebrew word 'Shema,' which means 'hear' or 'listen.' This led to the association with the story of Elijah and the sound of God as a still small voice, which I always associated with the voice of conscience. Then I began to think about language and the phrase 'In the Beginning was the Word.' So the mezuzah became a reminder to listen deeply and to act in accordance with the still small voice of conscience at all times, both in leaving and entering the home. My mind then jumped to the phrase 'Let there be light.' With that comes sight and, hopefully, insight. So I gave concrete form to the words from the story of Elijah and placed the prayer inside the ear, fusing hearing and vision, so that the whole body participates in listening and remembering."



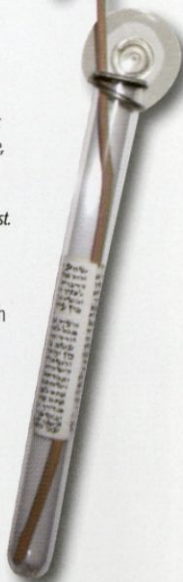
Norm Paris
*Preparatory drawing for
 Rubble Fragment 1
 (Mezuzah)*
 2007. Concrete, foam,
 parchment.
 20 x 5 x 7 inches.
 Collection of the artist.

"The industrial fragment is an ambiguous and loaded symbol. Robert Smithson might speak about entropy if he saw this sort of fragmented structure. But when one considers the embattled history of Judaism, one may also think about destruction and a conflicted yet transcendent faith."



Stuart Netsky
*Homage to My
 Father*
 2007. Rose, cosmetic
 foundation, test-tube,
 parchment.
 15 x 3 x 3 inches.
 Collection of the artist.

"My father passed away on August 5, 2007. This mezuzah is an homage to him."



Virgil Marti
Untitled (Mezuzah)
 2007. Forton MC, fiberglass, epoxy resin,
 aluminum leaf, plastic, paraffin, parchment.
 6^{1/2} x 2^{1/2} x 13^{1/8} inches.
 Collection of the artist.

"Having been raised by a superstitious mother, I tried to follow the required mezuzah protocols faithfully while working with my usual materials and iconography. I have my fair share of obsessive/compulsive rituals, so I don't really need to add another. As it is, every time I leave my apartment, I have to go back in to check that the coffee maker is turned off."



THE REMINDER ON THE DOORPOST

Rabbi Michael
Holzman,
Congregation
Rodeph Shalom,
Philadelphia

The word *mezuzah* literally means doorpost. While we use the word to describe the scroll of Torah we place on the doorpost, in Hebrew, the word *is* the doorpost. *Mezuzah* as a word figures prominently in three areas of the Torah. The more familiar is the command in Deuteronomy to write “these words” upon the doorposts of your house, and from this injunction we have beautiful containers of Torah scrolls that dot Jewish homes and even individual rooms. By passing next to this scroll every time we enter a room, we are supposed to bring our covenant with God into that room.

We are supposed to fill the room with righteous deeds. But what exactly are those deeds? How do we understand that covenant?

The answers to those questions can be found in the other two episodes where mezuzot play a large role. First we have the story of the Exodus. In that story, the ultimate symbol of evil and destruction is the murder of children. Pharaoh demonstrates this evil initially through his attempts at wiping out the Israelite people by murdering all newborn boys. The parallel to this is God’s final attempt to sway Pharaoh’s attitude: the slaying of the firstborn children of Egypt. What will protect the Israelite’s from this destruction is the mark of sacrificial blood on their doorposts, on the *mezuzah*.

Shelley Spector
Honor to Carry (open view)
2007. Cigar-box, ball-chain, found and
painted wood, parchment. 6 x 1 x 1^{3/4} inches.
Collection of the artist.

“Being Jewish informs the way I look, think, act, and feel. It is an honor to have inside me something so ancient and spiritual. I am a carrier of tradition, connecting the past to the future.”

The message is clear. Pharaoh was a king of unbridled power. His people had made him into a deity, and in Judaism we have a word for gods made from human hands: idolatry. Idol kings know no limits to power. They are corrupted and use their power to selfish and eventually evil ends. What separates us from such limitless power? The mark on the mezuzah. Just as the angel of death once passed over Israelite homes because of the mezuzah, so too do we shield our homes from the intoxicating, addictive, and corrupting effects of limitless power by placing Torah on our mezuzot.

The third place where we find the word *mezuzah*, is in the laws concerning a slave who does not wish to be freed. In ancient societies, a slave was not a piece of property, but was actually a member of the household. Slaves had rights based on the fact that they would one day be freed. But what if a slave abdicated those rights? What if a slave chose to stay, granting the master of the home pretty much unlimited power and control? In that case, the master needed to pierce the ear of the slave, and he did so by driving an awl through his ear into a doorpost—a place that reminds us of our covenant with God. The lesson: have self-control. Even though the master may have power, we curb that power with restraint, with the ethics espoused in the Torah, and with compassion.

Every time a Jew finds a place to call home, she or he has achieved a level of power. That home symbolizes a sphere of control—control over self, over family, children, guests, friends, and so forth. As we have achieved incredible success in the United States, our homes, and our doorposts, reflect that success, and reflect an increase in our power. The mezuzah is our reminder to curb that power, to use it towards productive ends and to remember that we too were once slaves in Egypt.



MIGHTY MEZUZOT: AN OBLIGATION WITH STYLE

Elisabeth R. Agro,
*The Nancy M. McNeil
Associate Curator
of American
Modern and
Contemporary
Crafts and
Decorative Arts,
Philadelphia
Museum of Art*

Judaism is regarded as a living religion. Ritual objects, called Judaica, have been created over many millennia and visually recount the evolution of design, changing styles, and dictates in taste. Items of Judaica are found in homes and synagogues and are integral to religious observances, celebrations, and holidays throughout the Jewish year. In comparison to most Judaica, the mezuzah is silent and small in stature, but, ironically, could be considered the mightiest of all Jewish ritual objects. It commands the daily attention of every Jew, reminded at each threshold they pass to call awareness to and love God. The mezuzah is an interactive reminder of covenant with and responsibility toward God—hanging a mezuzah is an obligation, or *mitzvah*; “kissing the mezuzah” is a widely practiced sign of gratitude for the gift of Divine wisdom.

Although it is the *klaf*, or scroll, that is truly the essential part of the mezuzah, over the years it the mezuzah case that has caught my attention and, I believe, that of many Jews as well. It is the only type of Judaica that can be found prominently placed both outside and inside a Jewish home. It is in the public eye. Often abandoning traditional and historical styles, which are usually made of metal or stone, many Jews today are seeking mezuzot that reflect their personality or the style of their home in addition to their commitment to God. The selection of mezuzot cases made in a wide variety of materials is endless.

It is no surprise that artists who work in glass, metal, wood, clay, and fiber are attracted to Judaica as an outlet for their artistic output. Contemporary Judaica combines stylistic freedom with ritual use. Artists are creating cases that are one-off and

handmade. These mezuzah cases are sought after and treasured by their owners. Since Jews are to be commanded daily by their mezuzot, they may as well surround themselves with those that reflect their taste and bring them joy. The mezuzot of today are powerful symbols that exude style and personal expression. I say, kiss away.



Bruce Pollock Polychrome Mezuzah

2007. Wood, enamels,
parchment.
20 x 2¹/₂ x 1¹/₂ inches.
Collection of the artist.

“My mezuzah began as a found piece of wood. I responded to the naturally formed knothole in the wood that provided a window for viewing the parchment. It takes the form of a simple architectural element like a door-post. I covered the form with multiple coats of enamel paint and then carefully sanded it down to reveal the many layers of polychrome. In this way the mezuzah appears timeworn by passing hands.”

A KISS FOR PHILADELPHIA: ARTISTIC IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY HERE AND NOW

Roberta Fallon

The City of Brotherly Love has long been a hotbed of artist groups. Think back to Thomas Eakins. When the rebellious Eakins was fired from his teaching job at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (remember the loincloth incident) students grouped around him and followed him out creating their own ad hoc academy in the artist's studio.

Today, Philadelphia has many artist groups. Some of them, like Nexus (established 1975), Muse (1979), Highwire (1988), and Vox Populi (1988), are vibrant leaders in the community after twenty or thirty years of art-making and exhibiting. Space 1026, turning ten next year, is the inspiration for a new crop of artist collectives like Copy, Art Making Machine Studios, I, Little Berlin, Bobo's on 9th, and others cropping up in apartments, storefronts, and warehouses from Fishtown to the Italian Market.

factor, perhaps the most important. Artists may be mavericks but they love nothing better than to talk, do a project together, drink beer, crack jokes, gossip and kvetch, cheer and help each other. What draws artists together most is the human need for community and that intuitive sense that the Musketeers were right—all for one and one for all really works.

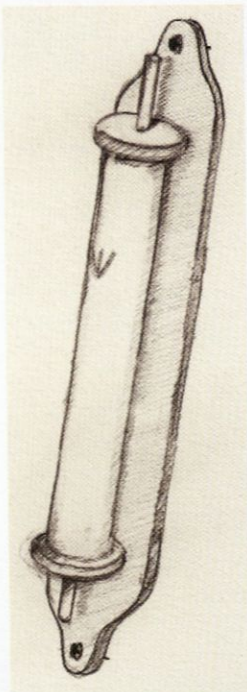
Philadelphia artists and artist groups are almost preternaturally collegial. This is especially noteworthy since they all compete for the same small buckets of money. Philadelphia's groups foster healthy competition for Pew fellowships and other valued prizes, knowing that an individual who wins a grant or fellowship brings pride to the group as well. Inter-group activities and friendly joint programming happen here regularly. And the online group, InLiquid, has brought everyone under one big, happy cyber-umbrella.

The groups' collegiality and generosity of spirit pour out into the larger community of art lovers, students, teachers, everyone. All are embraced and welcomed with open arms to openings and lectures and events whose atmospheres bubble over with enthusiasm and warmth. It's a non-stop group hug here in Philadelphia. It's a helluva town and a helluva time to be here.

Roberta Fallon writes about art for Philadelphia Weekly and is the co-founder with Libby Rosof of roberta fallon and libby rosof's artblog, <http://fallonandrosof.blogspot.com>

Isaac Resnikoff
Preparatory drawing for Untitled (Mezuzah)
2007. Acrylic on carved maple and alder wood, parchment.
2 x 6 x 1 inches.
Collection of the artist.

"What interested me about the Mezuzah project was the chance to engage with my childhood (I was raised Modern Orthodox) as an adult. By crafting a matter-of-fact mezuzah, like the one on my door growing up—but approaching it as a sculpture—I tried to integrate those personal experiences into my artistic practice."



Why Philadelphia should be such fertile ground for these wonderful do-it-yourself groups with their can-do spirits is, of course, complicated. Art-school friendship networks are part of the answer (remember Eakins). The artists' natural DIY inclinations enter in, especially in a town with relatively few commercial galleries. Philadelphia's cheap rents and available gallery/warehouse spaces are also reasons. And then there's the pack

A KISS FOR THE MEZUZAH

December 6, 2007 – February 1, 2008

Opening: Thursday, December 6, 2007

6:00 – 7:30 p.m.: Panel discussion with:

■ *A Kiss for the Mezuzah* artists Candy Depew, Jeanne Jaffe, Isaac Lin, Virgil Marti, Stuart Netsky, Norm Paris, Bruce Pollock, Isaac Resnikoff, and Shelley Spector

■ Elisabeth R. Agro

The Nancy M. McNeil Associate Curator of American Modern and Contemporary Crafts and Decorative Arts, Philadelphia Museum of Art

■ Roberta Fallon

Arts writer for the Philadelphia Weekly and co-founder of roberta fallon and libby rosos's artblog

■ Daniel Belasco

The Henry J. Leir Assistant Curator, The Jewish Museum, New York

■ Rabbi Michael Holzman

Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Philadelphia

Free and Open to the Public

7:30 – 9:00 p.m.

Latke/Vodka Chanukah Party and Buffet Supper,

a subscription event benefiting the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art and celebration of *A Kiss for the Mezuzah*.

For an invitation, call (215) 627-6747

Shelley Spector
Honor to Carry (closed view)
2007. Cigar-box, ball-chain, found and painted wood, parchment. 6 x 1 x 1^{3/4} inches.
Collection of the artist.



Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art Congregation Rodeph Shalom

615 North Broad Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Entrance and parking on Mt. Vernon Street

Monday – Thursday: 10 – 4; Friday: 10 – 2; Sunday: 10 – noon
Hours are subject to change; please call (215) 627-6747 to confirm

The Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art is dedicated in memory of Jacob C. Gutman.

Gail S. Rosenberg, *Chair*
Joan C. Sall, *Director*

Presenting contemporary art that illuminates the Jewish experience, the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art (PMJA) has, since 1975, presented solo and group exhibitions of work in the broadest range of mediums by artists of diverse backgrounds. The PMJA is located within Congregation Rodeph Shalom.

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