

Wimpel! Wrapped Wishes

December 17 - February 21

Works by

Polly Apfelbaum

P. Timothy Gierschick II

Kym Hepworth

Daniel Heyman

Tristin Lowe

Kathryn Pannepacker

Lance Pawling

Alexander Stadler

Leslie Sudock

Jane Trigère

Estelle Kessler Yarinsky

Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art at Congregation Rodeph Shalom

Wimpel! Wrapped Wishes

A wimpel is a traditional German-Jewish ceremonial textile inscribed with prayers and wishes. The wimpel was created in the first weeks of a child's life and was used to celebrate the milestone life-cycle events of *b'nai mitzvah* and marriage. Inspired by examples in the Leon J. and Julia S. Obermayer Collection at Rodeph Shalom, the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art invited artists to create wimpels for the exhibition *Wimpel! Wrapped Wishes*.

The eleven artists contributing to *Wimpel! Wrapped Wishes* were provided with identical information and instructions. The resulting works are astounding, not only because of their variety and diversity of form, but because of the path each artist took to approach the concept of the wimpel.

One facet of the ceremonial wimpel, as utilized in Germany through the mid-nineteenth century, is its use as a conveyor of expectations. The hopes, prayers, and wishes of parents for their child are put into material form. The wimpel was then stored in the local synagogue, making it a public document. Thus, the wimpel also reinforced the expectations of the community and encouraged conformity—this child *will* have a *bar mitzvah* and get married to someone Jewish under the *huppah* and produce more Jewish children. For much of history, this was not an unrealistic expectation. There were not many choices available. The circumstances of one's birth determined how one would worship, if and how one would be educated, the type of work one would do, and the person to whom one would be joined in marriage. There were very few, if any, choices. The parents would routinely make all of these decisions for their children, beginning at—and sometimes before—birth.

How different it is today. Today's children have a world of choices available to them, an almost unlimited array of possibilities. It seems unrealistic that the choices of the child will align perfectly with the expectations of the parents. When they reach adulthood the children in our culture make their own choices about where to live, what work to do, if and how to worship, and who to love. Parents still have hopes, dreams, and expectations for their children, but must find a way, at some point, to surrender their wishes and dreams to those of the child.

Some of the artists participating in *Wimpel! Wrapped Wishes*—including K. Pannepacker, Lance Pawling and Alexander Stadler—chose this path toward the wimpel, creating works that display prayers, wishes, and dreams for children. Whether it is their own inner-child, a child born or unborn, or children facing the difficulties of war and unrest, hopes for a safe and happy life are expressed.

Other artists chose to explore and question rituals associated with the wimpel. Two rituals bookend the lifespan of a wimpel: the *brit milah* or *bris* (ritual circumcision) and the wedding ceremony. The *bris* provides the raw material for a wimpel. The swaddling cloth that wraps the baby for the event is used as the base for the object. A wimpel was also incorporated into the *huppah* (the traditional Jewish wedding canopy); this was the wimpel's final use. These rituals of circumcision and marriage—and the wimpel's association with both—are explored by artists in *Wimpel! Wrapped Wishes*. Daniel Heyman questions the ritual of circumcision itself, and by extension the choices parents make for their children. Kym Hepworth looks at marriage with a probing eye and explores issues of life cycles, continuity, and security while acknowledging the limitations of the institution of marriage.

Another approach was to explore the form itself. How can one play with the dimensions 7" x 7"? This unusual format inspired mirrored images and multiplication, as seen in the wimpels of Polly Apfelbaum and P. Timothy Gierschick II.

Jewish texts, both sacred and mystical, inspired other works in the exhibition, particularly the contributions of Leslie Sudock, Jane Trigère, and Tristin Lowe. Scholarly research is put into material forms that explore the core stories of Judaism and the mystical writings that expand Jewish thought to universal abstract concepts. How do we interpret these texts for use in our own lives? How can the wimpel connect the past, present, and future? How do the teachings of the past relate to our lives and protect the next generation?

As parents, perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our children is to accept them for who they are and the choices they make. Estelle Kessler Yarinsky turned the tables on the wimpel by using it as a tribute to her legacy, embroidering the names and birth dates of each of her grandchildren and incorporating iconography to symbolize each of their personalities and life choices. The smiling grandmother is not looking ahead with expectations and wishes, rather she is accepting and celebrating the people her grandchildren are today.

Wendi Furman

Director, Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art, and exhibition co-organizer

Polly Apfelbaum



ARTIST STATEMENT

I started with the dimensions of the wimple (seven feet by seven inches) and went to the fabric store and bought a hunk of fabric that was seven feet long and 50 inches wide. I pinned the fabric on the wall, measured seven inches, and realized I'd have a lot of leftover fabric. Not wanting to be wasteful I decided to make five wimpels. I always love choices, and five seemed better than one. Why not?

My wimple is magic marker on synthetic rayon silk velvet. The velvet takes the marker beautifully, I think. The marker bleeds into the material like dye, which is something I use a lot of in my installations. The fabric has no warp or weft, so I decided to make wavy lines that mimic weaving—a craft in which an old-fashioned wimple might have been made.

I honestly did not know anything about wimpels when I started this project—but the fact that it is a celebratory object made me want to use all the colors that I had available so that it has all the possibilities of the colors of a life.

5 wimpels in one

2009

Magic marker on synthetic rayon silk velvet
43" x 87"

Courtesy of the artist and Locks Gallery

P. Timothy Gierschick II



ARTIST STATEMENT

Arrows quickly came to mind as an appropriate motif with which to conceive of a contemporary wimpel: they are particularly directional, for good or ill. Our lives move and cycle on, regardless of our choices, and a wimpel commemorates and even celebrates that fact. Arrows also relate to some Biblical allusions, such as the reminder that children are arrows against the evil one: “blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.” The traditional seven-by-seventy wimpel size also corresponds with the number of times that a man should forgive a brother, “seventy times seven.” Thus, instead of simply referencing movement, the stylized arrows (what my father calls “Dutch arrows,” or roadway curve signs) carry an ethical or causal meaning: our lives are a series of good or bad decisions, which need to be considered, forgiven, rectified. Woven visually into this arrow matrix are two talismanic and enigmatic expressions of shalom (peace) and a two-way *dalet*—the Hebrew letter inspired by the shape of a door—between them.

Quiver
2009

Block print, latex, enamel on canvas
7" x 70"

Courtesy of the artist

Kym Hepworth



ARTIST STATEMENT

I chose to focus on the use of the wimple as part of the wedding canopy used during the marriage ceremony and its embedded concepts of union, fertility, and endlessly repeating life cycles. *To part no more* explores both positive and negative aspects of marriage, family, gender roles, and domesticity. Here, the house/birdcage motif represents continuity, security, and hope for the future. However, there are cracks in this foundation and the overall stability of the structure is threatened by the tension of entrapment and anxiety of abandonment.

To part no more
2009
Mixed media
73" x 27" x 13-1/3"
Courtesy of the artist

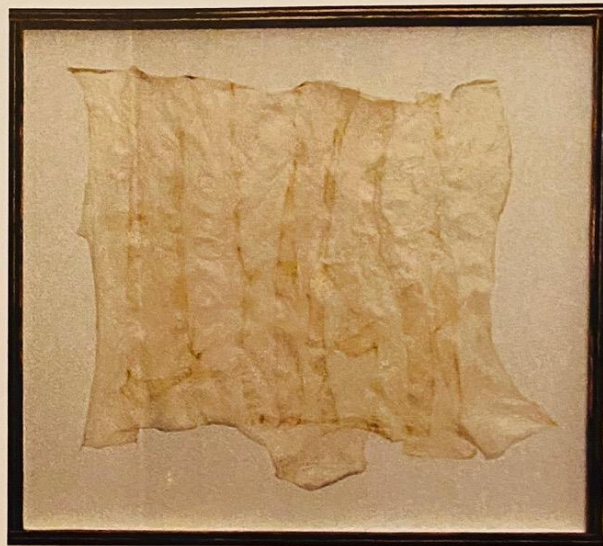
Daniel Heyman

ARTIST STATEMENT

The inspiration for my wimpel comes from the cloth's first outing, the moment of a male baby's bris. A foreskin—such a maligned body part in Jewish culture with its removal so deeply expected (more than expected—demanded as a commandment from God!) as to be entirely unexamined—that skin which is now not even a memory to me, as, upon examination, it is not there—though I was surely born with one. I was never asked my opinion on this—my own—very personal bit of skin, or its removal. As with so many things bequeathed me at my birth it took years to realize the value of that skin, long after it was too late to say “Stop! Hold off that knife, like Abraham's on the throat of Isaac, for I do not want

that cut to happen!” Alas, there was no ram caught in the brambles, and so the knife came down, and the blood demanded was provided. For many years I was none the wiser.

Now I have been asked to make a wimpel, another wrapping, from the remaining cloth that swaddled me when I was eight days old, from a ceremony whose cut still makes me ever more sore. What can I make my wimpel from when both the natural wrapper that was my birthright is gone, as is the swaddling cotton that held me as I bled? My unwitting sacrifice thus thought about now inspires me to use this simple lamb skin, remnant of another cutting, the donor also ignorant of what was being asked. This then is my wimpel, skin for skin, given here in the hope that when this new cloth made from an involuntary sacrifice is lifted off our sacred texts, it reminds us as the inheritors of those sacred scrolls and the customs passed down within them not to misconstrue sacrifice for self-inflicted harm, or confuse willing surrender with theft from those incapable of protest, lest unnecessary blood be spilt.

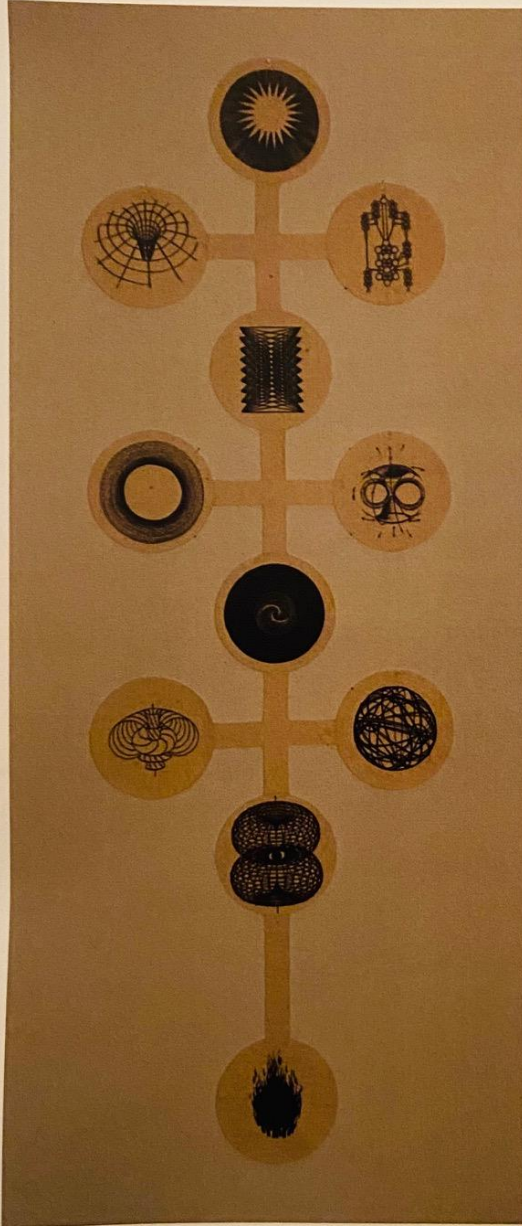


Tender Wrapping
2009

Sheep casing
10" x 15"

Courtesy of the artist

Tristin Lowe



ARTIST STATEMENT

A wimpel is a humble piece of cloth that expresses hopes, dreams, and aspirations—all that is infinite, eternal, universal, existential, and transcendent. While planning and making my wimpel, I found myself thinking about the Big Bang and String Theory and began a modest investigation of Kabbalah. These theories, concepts, and practices—two based in science, the other in theology—seem unrelated, yet they contain striking similarities. Each is a “theory of everything.” Each seeks to make sense of the universe, the human being—of all life in all of its cycles. And each has inspired diagrammatic interpretations that are as engaging to the eye as they are fascinating for the mind. My wimpel doesn’t answer life’s questions—or our collective hopes, dreams, and aspirations. But it does celebrate those who search for the sources and meanings of existence and the purposes of our lives.

The Wimpel Effect

2009

Silkscreen on felt 63" x 21"

Courtesy of the artist and Fleisher-Ollman Gallery

K. Pannepacker



ARTIST STATEMENT

May God bless this child, both daughter & son of Israel & Palestine, born under the good star of the same moon. May God raise this child to study the teachings of peace, partnership & good deeds, by example. Amen.

This wimple is a peace cloth, imbedded with prayers and blessings while on my loom. In my studio as a textile artist, I often weave with materials thinking of metaphor. For example, paper-matches symbolizing that our hearts be 'set on fire' for peace; or, with CAUTION tape, depicting fragile relations...

However for this piece, I decided to select various fine threads, and have cotton and wool and silk and linen and rayon all 'live' together on my bobbin, and thus mingle to form the structure of the cloth I wove. Oh, that all our cultural, spiritual, personal & political 'variations' as humans be celebrated and respected!

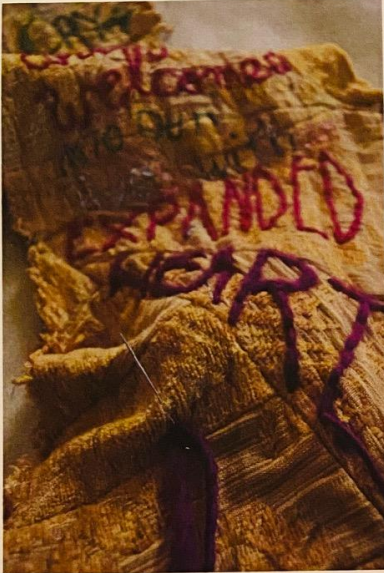
The bands of color represent the flags for the people of Israel and the people of Palestine...and my prayer is that there be peace within, between and among...let there be peace on earth and let it begin with each of us, each new day.

When stitching, I thought of mark-making and tattooing and painful associations with the Holocaust and branding done throughout history to segregate people.

Now, more than ever before, may an insistence for peace be what's indelibly carved into new resolutions as we forge ahead.

Peace Within, Between & Among Us, Each & All
Hand-woven with stitching: linen, wool, and mixed fibers
80" (plus fringe) x 7"
Courtesy of the artist

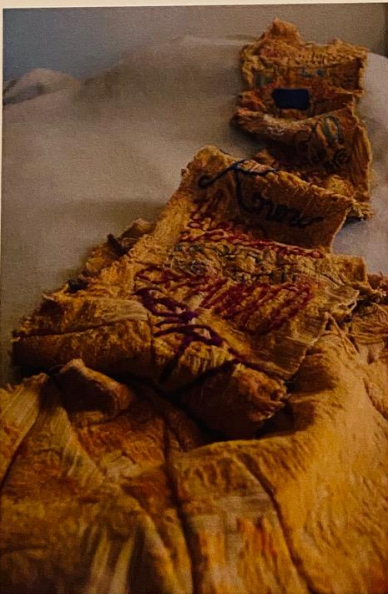
Lance Pawling



ARTIST STATEMENT

To you our child; we surrender our lives as we have made yours. We will love & respect you. We will wash you, care for and raise you. We will laugh, cry & scream. We welcome you into our lives with an open heart. We will nurture then till it is time to release you. There is no emotion that will be unseen between us as we earn each others respect. We will give you all the hope and power to become more than we will ever be. Our love is yours; your happiness is our gratitude.

Throughout my life I have been introduced to so many creative sparks: people, ideas, methods, and techniques. From my modest beginnings I thirsted for knowledge in sewing, needlecraft, and any other skill or practice I was exposed to. My teachers were my grandmother and a wonderful assortment of blue-haired great-aunts; each woman showed me a new perspective in the marvel of creation. They, quite literally, crafted me, and that's a gift as wonderful and enduring as a wimpel.



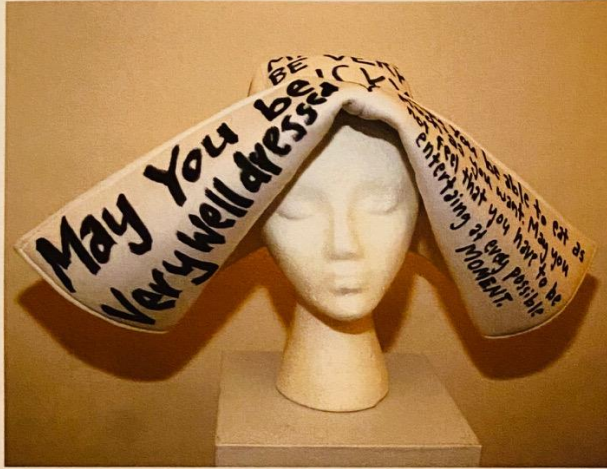
Fortunately, this yearning has stayed with me to this day. All that any of us really need to see the beauty that the world offers is to simply stop and look. As I see it, an artist is one who positions him or her self in a place to do just that—take the time to observe the grand and the small, the obvious and the obscure, and then let the muses play.

Aspirations to you our child
2009

Upholstery fabric with velvet accents on the back, yarn, cord, and embroidery floss
84" x 7" (approximately)

Courtesy of the artist
Photo: John Donges

Alexander Stadler



ARTIST STATEMENT

What did I know from a wimple? Even my spell check was confused. And I have to say that even after Matt Singer explained it all to me I still had trouble imagining how or why I would respond to an object that felt so foreign. I had no bris. I had no bar mitzvah. I like to say that I was raised by Jewish wolves.

It was my older brother Daniel's childhood obsession with *The Sound of Music* that gave me the necessary key.

In the summer of 1975, Daniel went to see the newly re-released movie musical nine times. Sometimes he went twice a day. Occasionally he dragged me along with him for company. That was when I first learned about WIMPLES. "And underneath her wimple she has pin curls in her hair"—from "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?" by Rogers and Hammerstein.

My brother and I were both captivated by the women's winged headdresses, and years later Daniel would relay a dream to me in which he and I were mischievous nuns who giggled and strayed from the pack and got into trouble with their Mother Superior.

Wimpel/Wimple?

wimpel:wimple
Foam, polyester, and permanent magic marker
15" x 24" x 18"
Collection of Sister Betrill

Leslie Sudock



ARTIST STATEMENT

Kamia Lilit (Lilith Amulet) and *Seyag b'Shoshanim* (Hedge of Roses) are specifically “knitterly” responses to the wimpel tradition. These fulled woolen Torah binders take as their point of departure the countless infant garments and blankets Jewish mothers and grandmothers have made to welcome their newborns. Whereas traditional wimpels “wore” embroidered and painted customary prayers for the healthy and righteous lives of boys circumcised into the community, these wimpels offer many and deep pockets to hold the prayers collected during life’s journey.

Kamia Lilit (Lilith Amulet) invokes longstanding Jewish folk traditions associated with fertility and childbirth. According to a ninth-century Babylonian tradition begun in *The Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, Lilith—the first Eve—left Eden following a dispute with Adam over sexual equality; Lilith was later transformed into the queen of demons, responsible for killing newborns and new mothers, answerable to three divinely deputized angels: Sanvi, Sanasanvi, and Smengelef.

Seyag b'Shoshanim (Hedge of Roses) derives from the *Song of Songs*. Rabbinic tradition drew on this phrase to explain the breadth of customary practice (*minhag*) that served as a *seyag l'Torah* (fence around Torah). As a metaphor, it points to the ways in which we can be tempted not only by the world outside of Jewish customs and values, but also how we can be seduced by Judaism itself to hide away from the world within the “fence” of Torah and *minhag*.

Kamia Lilit (Lilith Amulet)

2009

Knitted and fulled wool and mohair, china silk and silk organza,
silk cord and thread, red coral, copper wire
9 1/2" x 70"

Courtesy of the artist

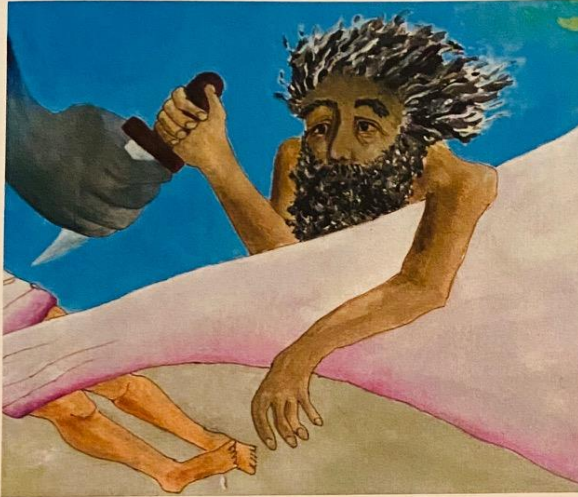
Seyag b'Shoshanim (Hedge of Roses)

2009

Knitted and fulled wool and mohair, silk fabrics and thread
10" x 75"

Courtesy of the artist

Jane Trigère



ARTIST STATEMENT

One cannot make a wimple for no one in particular. So, focusing on the function of a Torah binder and the act of binding, led me to the story of the Binding of Isaac. A binder (wimpel) honors someone's birth; therefore I chose Isaac and I 'invited' his mother Sarah to be the artist. She paints herself into the story twice: once when the messengers bless her with a child, and again when, according to a midrash, she gets to see the distant horrific act on Mt. Moriah. The Torah binder twists itself around Isaac and binds him to the altar. Catastrophe is averted when Avraham hears his name called out. It is Sarah's voice, as I imagine it. Listen to Sarah, Hashem has said. Sarah dies and I finish painting Isaac's wimple. Accompanying the traditional blessing, five Biblical scenes take us through Isaac's life: the birth announcement, carrying wood for the sacrifice, the Binding of Isaac, Rebecca's arrival, and finally, Isaac blessing his son Jacob. Blessings abound.

A Binder for Isaac
2009

Cotton fabric, watercolors, gouache, pastels,
magic markers, and ribbon
84" x 7" (approximately)
Courtesy of the artist

Estelle Kessler Yarinsky



ARTIST STATEMENT

Grandma, Estelle (Esther), with a composite wimpel for her ten grandchildren, none of whom had a wimpel at the time of her/his circumcision/naming ceremony. David Joseph, Michael Aaron, Julia Daniella, Alexander Lee, Nathan Talor, Henry Solomon, William Gus, Jacob, Gabriel, and Anna Lena. They are cousins and belong to three families. Their Hebrew names are stitched on the wimpel randomly, not in birth order. Embellishments reflect their current interests.

Dor L'Dor—From Generation to Generation
2009

Fiber—printed, stitched, appliquéd, and embellished
7' x 7"

Courtesy of the artist

Wimpel! Wrapped Wishes, Nearly Forgotten

An Historical Overview

A *wimpel* is a long, narrow sash—typically seven inches high and at least seven feet long—most often made in linen and used to bind the scrolls of the Torah. Traditionally, wimpels were made from the cloth used to swaddle a baby boy during the Jewish covenantal ceremony of circumcision (*brit milah* or *bris*). After the ceremony, the cloth was cleaned and cut into strips that were sewn together to make the sash, which then was then decorated with elaborate needlework or paint. This decoration included a Hebrew inscription based on the following formula: “May God bless this young boy [child’s name], son of [father’s name], born under the good star on the day of [day of the month] in [month] in [year]. May God raise him to a life of Torah, *chuppah* [wedding canopy], and good deeds. Amen.” Traditional decorative motifs for wimpels included birds and other animals, images of bride and groom, and the Torah scroll.

Wimpels originated as a German-Jewish ritual object, although Italian Jews developed a closely related form called a *mappa*. A boy’s wimpel was used to bind the Torah scroll during his *bar mitzvah* ceremony (which marks the coming of age in Jewish religious life) at age 13. The wimpel was also incorporated into the chuppah used during Jewish marriage ceremonies. In this way, the wimpel followed the individual for whom it was made through three life-cycle events: birth, coming of age, and marriage (with the implication that this marriage will produce children, and the cycle will begin anew). Wimpels were material representations of a family’s hopes and dreams for their child, the new life they have brought into the world, a life bound to the study of Torah, ethical behavior, and the continuation of the Jewish community.

Jewish ceremonial objects have been remarkable in their continuity and persistence. Menorahs; mezuzahs; Sabbath lamps and candlesticks; finials, crowns, and breastplates for the decoration of the Torah scroll—among numerous other ritual forms—have been constant and consistent elements of Jewish religious life for centuries, even millennia. The wimpel, however, fell out of common use beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. It remains a rather obscure form today, although the most recent decades have seen a tentative, slow-building revival of interest in the wimpel.

Why did the wimpel nearly disappear? Germany was the leading center for Jewish enlightenment and commitment to modernization and assimilation into the broader society from the late-eighteenth-century until the decimation of German Jewry in the Holocaust. German-Jewish efforts toward modernization produced and were embodied in Reform Judaism, which emphasized ethical behavior over ritual and whose rabbis applied contemporary modes of critical scholarship to the study of Torah. Some 250,000 German Jews immigrated to the United States in the nineteenth century; many brought the ideals and ideas of Reform with them. Among numerous innovations large and small, Reform Judaism rejected *kashrut* (ritual laws pertaining to food); promoted “vernacular” language (German or English) over Hebrew as the language of prayer; and understood and disseminated the idea of Judaism as a universal religion rather than the beliefs and practices of one specific people.

For these reasons, Reform became the predominant form of Judaism practiced by the United States’ German-dominated Jewish community in the nineteenth century. A small but vocal faction of Reform rabbis and lay leaders questioned the necessity and appropriateness of circumcision; individual *bar mitzvah* ceremonies for 13-year-old boys were replaced with group confirmations for boys and girls at the age of 15 or 16; and the chuppah no longer graced wedding ceremonies in many or most American Reform temples. These changes in the understanding and practice of ritual rendered the wimpel obsolete.

Philadelphia’s Reform Congregation Rodeph Shalom—which is home to the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art—holds the distinction of being the oldest Ashkenazi congregation in the Western hemisphere. Ashkenaz is the Hebrew name for Germany, and *Ashkenazim* are the Yiddish- and German-speaking Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. Rodeph Shalom dates its founding to the establishment of a *minyán* (prayer group, or more specifically, the quorum of ten men required by Orthodox Judaism for public prayer and chanting Torah) in 1795. The congregation was incorporated officially in 1802 as the “German Hebrew Society Rodeph Shalom.”

Despite its long history and German-Jewish heritage, there is no evidence that early members of Rodeph Shalom made wimpels. What Rodeph Shalom has, however, is several fine examples of nineteenth-century European wimpels in The Leon J. and Julia S. Obermayer Collection of Jewish Ceremonial Art, which was presented to the congregation in 1985. An extensive selection of highlights from the Obermayer collection is permanently installed in the synagogue’s richly decorated entry foyer.

With the successful assimilation of American Jews and the increased appreciation of pluralism and multiculturalism that's marked American society from the 1960s to the present, American Jews—including Reform Jews—have grown more comfortable with Jewish rituals and ritual objects. *The Jewish Catalog: A Do-It-Yourself Kit*, a seminal publication first issued in 1973, promoted—in keeping with the era's youthful, countercultural sensibilities—a hands-on and informal approach to Judaism and a crafty, make-it-yourself approach to Judaica (it must be noted, however, that wimpels were not among the ritual items given the DIY approach in *The Jewish Catalog*).

Although most American Jews remain unaware of the wimpel, amateur and professional craftspeople are exploring the form. Typically, contemporary wimpels are egalitarian—they are created for boys and girls, and include the names of both parents. Their inscriptions are not limited to the formulaic Hebrew prayer; their decoration ventures far beyond the bounds of traditional motifs; and they are created in celebration of a broad range of life-cycle events, from brit milah and baby-naming to bar and bat mitzvah, weddings, anniversaries, birthdays—any and all of life's milestone events.

The artists contributing to *Wimpel! Wrapped Wishes* were given the following creative and conceptual charge:

The purpose of this exhibition is to provide a forum for artists of diverse approaches and cultural backgrounds to explore the wimpel, interpret it, create metaphors, comment, celebrate, critique, cross cultures, imagine, translate—to make it yours.

The full import and impact of *Wimpel! Wrapped Wishes*—one chapter in the wimpel's unsteady history—remain unknown. We look to the future.

Matthew F. Singer
Curator, Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art, and exhibition co-organizer