

Tiered Seder Set

18th–19th Century

Poland

This is a unique example of an exuberant, folk-inspired three-tiered seder set. Many examples of nineteenth-century seder sets featuring three tiers of plates to hold the matzahs and containers for ceremonial foods are known. Most other seder sets were crafted of silver in Germany or Austria or were made of pewter or other base metals. The combination of brass and wood in this example from Poland is unusual.

The set features many elements typical of the energetic nature of Polish Jewish folk art. The frequent use of animal motifs (birds, stags, or most often lions, the symbol of the tribe of Judah) is a characteristic trait of Polish Jewish folk art. Although the combination of brass and wood is unusual, both materials are typical of folk Judaica from this region.

Polish Jewish woodcarvers were famed for their elaborate and often eccentric creations. Torah arks featured complex carvings of twisted columns and floral or animal motifs and were often crowned by a decalogue with flanking lions. The arrangement of the lions flanking cartouches in this seder set, with mouths agape, arched backs, and sinuously curved tails, is reminiscent of these carved Torah arks. Smaller ceremonial objects, usually Torah pointers, were also carved from wood. In Poland woodcarvers also created wooden grave markers featuring elaborate interlace and animal motifs. Exuberant brass Hanukkah lamps were frequently used in Poland and typically featured animal motifs and grillwork, elements also found here. The notched motif seen in the apertures of the grillwork in this set is echoed in the detailed paws of the lions.

This seder set formerly belonged to the Jewish Community of Danzig (now Gdansk, Poland). In 1939 leaders of the Jewish community of Danzig, recognizing the increased threat posed by the Nazis, shipped this and more than 250 other ceremonial objects to New York. The Danzig community specified that if after fifteen years there were no Jews remaining in Danzig, the collection would remain in America to educate and inspire the rest of the world. The shipment from Danzig's Jewish community arrived in New York on July 26, 1939; on August 31st, 1939, the German army marched into Danzig.

Brass, cast, cut out, engraved; wood, painted and stained;
ink on paper; silk, embroidered; linen; cotton.
13 ¾ × 14 in. (35 × 35.5 cm).
The Jewish Museum, New York.
Gift of the Danzig Jewish Community.

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