

*Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink: Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. Marc Michael Epstein, with contributions by Eva Frojmovic, Jenna Siman Jacobs, Hartley Lachter, Shalom Sabar, Raymond P. Scheindlin, Ágnes Vető, Susan Vick, Barbara Wolf, and Diane Wolfthal (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015). Hardcover. X + 276 pp., 287 colour illustrations. ISBN-13: 9780691165240. \$ 60.00 | £ 44.95.

‘Let your bookshelves be your gardens’—with these words the medieval scholar Rabbi Judah ibn Tibbon expressed the general attitude of the Jews towards their books. Covering nearly a millennium of Jewish book production from the Middle Ages to the present day, Marc Michael Epstein’s edited volume focuses on the finest specimens from these ‘gardens’—the illuminated manuscripts. The volume marks a new departure in representing Jewish manuscript illumination. Unlike the majority of studies in this field structuralized chronologically, geographically, or according to the subject matter of the texts and literary genres, the work is arranged thematically. It is divided into thirteen thematic chapters which touch upon many aspects of the illuminated codices from their production to reception in the Jewish communities. Each chapter engages in a survey of iconography, its distinctive features, and differences between East and West and Jewish and non-Jewish elements. Together they treat a wide range of topics and ongoing discussions related to the interaction of the Jews with their non-Jewish neighbors, Jewish beliefs and religious rites, education, and everyday life. Many of the chapters are supplemented with ‘focus’ essays that offer an in-depth single-topic discussion or a relevant case study. The book is written ‘in the most engaging and colorful manner’ (vii) which best serves Epstein’s purpose of telling the story of manuscript illumination to non-experts. Successfully balancing between scientific content and plain style of writing, the book is accessible to a broad audience.

First, a word about the book’s title. Previously avoided by the manuscript scholars, the designation of the manuscripts as ‘Jewish’ best suits to Epstein’s goals. As he explains in his *Introduction* (Chapter 1), in contrast to the somewhat technical term ‘Hebrew illuminated manuscripts’ which is routinely used in the scholarly literature on the basis of the manuscripts’ linguistic component, the term ‘Jewish illuminated manuscripts’ better describes the function of the manuscripts among the Jews. By choosing to use the ‘J word’ (4), Epstein signals the reader that this book is not only about texts written in Hebrew and their illustrations, but about the manuscripts as a product of Jewish culture, commissioned by Jewish patrons for Jewish audience. In all sections of the book Epstein underlies the centrality of patronage, function, and audience of the illuminated manuscripts and addresses historical and

socio-cultural context of their production and use. A result of the high costs, lavishly decorated and illustrated codices were a domain of wealthy, urban, and educated elite. The world depicted in their illuminations reflects therefore the perspective of this narrow socioeconomic stratum.

In the *Introduction* Epstein takes the reader by the hand through basic terms of the discipline, providing him with a necessary means for understanding manuscript illumination. On the basis of the reconstruction of medieval Jewish bookshelves in Chapter 2, Epstein examines the range of illuminated Jewish texts from the Bible to scientific literature and elucidates their role in private and communal life of the Jewish communities. Chapter 3 is devoted to the parties involved in the production of such manuscripts—scribes, illuminators, and patrons—as well as to the techniques and methods of illuminating. Chapter 4 sets the stage for two notional directions of Epstein's book: the world as seen by pre-modern Jews and their world as conceptualized by us via its representation in the illuminated manuscripts. The first direction elaborates on a Jewish vision of material reality and spiritual spheres, as they are shown in the illuminations of the East and West. It includes Jewish conceptions of geography and the key role played by Jerusalem, Temple, and Tabernacle—the center of Jewish earthly history and messianic times, further treated in Chapter 10 by Shalom Sabar. Both the mundane level (Jewish way of life, life cycle, and liturgical year) and divine mysteries of non-material world were closely connected in Jewish consciousness and constituted an important part of Jewish imagination, as demonstrated in Chapters 8 and 9. The second direction taken by Epstein relates to Jewish approaches to the visual culture in different areas of Jewish diaspora. On the basis of the illustrations to the biblical narrative, Chapter 6 concentrates on iconographical distinctions between Ashkenaz, Sepharad, and 'Arav. Given the diversity of styles and visual traditions, Chapter 4 deals with the question of Jewish 'National style'. Eva Frojmovic and Epstein offer multifaceted analysis of the issue and the history of its development, summarizing that styles can mean different things: 'participation and resistance to the local cultures, imitation and appropriation', but they are not owned by a nation or a state (87). This question is further elaborated in Chapter 7 which discusses various visual motifs appropriated from the surrounding cultures and adapted by Jews to serve their own purposes. The dynamics between Jewish visual traditions and those of the surrounding cultures, and the related question of Jewish aniconism represent a focus of Chapter 5. The 'focus' essay at the end of this chapter treats an intriguing phenomenon of deliberate distortion of human figures in the thirteenth and fourteenth-century Ashkenazi manuscripts, long discussed by art historians. The last chapters of the book (Chapters 11–12) are devoted to the manuscripts

produced in the age of print and modern world. The authors of this section emphasize the continuity of visual traditions and the role of patronage and audience in forming new trends in manuscript illumination. The book ends with an extensive annotated bibliography that aids the reader to broaden his knowledge in the field of Jewish illuminated manuscripts.

The book is written from an art historian's perspective that forms its conceptual framework. Hundreds of high-quality reproductions, many published for the first time, are integrated within the discussion. Not only the figures are accompanied by captions, many are also explained verbally. The book is a valuable addition to any library, both as a repository of knowledge and as a beautiful material object in its own right.

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