

Hanukkah Lamps

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Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish holiday that commemorates the Maccabee family's rebellion against Greco-Syrian rule of ancient Israel and their liberation of the Jerusalem Temple in 164 BCE. In the northern hemisphere, the holiday is celebrated in early winter. Following ancient custom, a single flame is kindled on the first night. Every evening thereafter, the number of lights illuminated is increased by one, until on the last night, all eight are aglow. Since secular use of the Hanukkah lights is forbidden, a ninth—the *shamash*, or servitor—is used to ignite the flames of the other candles. The rabbinical requirements for such lamps are that the eight lights be positioned in a straight row, with the *shamash* set off from them. The form and decoration of Hanukkah lamps, however, are not defined, so over the centuries many styles and shapes have developed, often borrowing elements from other cultures.

TOP ROW, LEFT

Hanukkah lamp, 1712–49

Venice

Mold-pressed, repoussé, appliquéd, and cast silver, marked with the maker's initials G /

Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman (?), F 3579

TOP ROW, CENTER

Hanukkah lamp dedicated to the children of the Danzig Synagogue Congregation, eighteenth–early nineteenth century

Germany

Cast and punched copper alloy

Gift of the Danzig Jewish Community, D 211

Provenance: Simon Anker donated to the Danzig Synagogue, 1935; Jewish Community of Danzig transferred to the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, 1939; accessioned by the Jewish Museum, 1954

The lamp's stepped base bears the German inscription "To the children of the Danzig Synagogue Congregation / Simon Anker / Hanukkah 5696 [or, 1935]." Anker was a prominent grain merchant and a synagogue official. The Jewish community of Danzig, however, was only able to enjoy this Hanukkah lamp for four years. In 1939 the Germans overran Danzig, and the community members were coerced to leave; they sent their precious synagogue objects to the Jewish Museum.

TOP ROW, RIGHT

Orivit-Aktiengesellschaft

Founded in Cologne-Braunsfeld, Germany, 1898

Hanukkah lamp, 1905–14

Cologne-Braunsfeld, Germany

Cast and silver-plated white metal and mold-formed glass

Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman (?), F 3573

SECOND ROW FROM TOP, LEFT

Johann Valentin Schüler

German, born in 1650, died in 1720

Hanukkah lamp, late seventeenth century

Frankfurt am Main

Repoussé, engraved, parcel-gilt, and cast silver

Purchase: Norman S. Goetz, Mr. and Mrs. Henry A. Loeb, Mr. and Mrs. Henry L. Marx, Ira A. Schur, Lawrence A. Wien, Leonard Block, Gustave L. Levy, and Robert I. Wishnick Gifts, JM 19-64

The central scene on the backplate of this lamp depicts the biblical heroine Judith, who beheaded the enemy general Holofernes. Although the story originally had no connection to Hanukkah, medieval rabbinical reinterpretation associated her act with the ancient Jewish victory over Greco-Syrian rulers commemorated on that holiday. The tale was further seen by Western artists as an allegory of the triumph of virtue over evil. Judith is shown here with her maid servant, who holds a sack to carry away the enemy's head. The lamp's shape and early Baroque scrollwork were probably inspired by silver inkstands.

SECOND ROW FROM TOP, RIGHT

Hanukkah lamp, nineteenth or early twentieth century

Morocco, probably Essaouira

Traced, appliquéd, parcel-gilt, and cast silver

Purchase: Judaica Endowment Fund and the Nash Aussenberg Memorial Fund, 1996-46

This rare silver lamp from Morocco is decorated with incised and gilt appliquéd rosettes characteristic of the jewelry in silversmithing centers in the north of the country. The images of a fish and bird on the sidepieces may be symbols of fertility, since these are creatures capable of laying large quantities of eggs. Birds, especially in pairs, often represent love in Islamic art, suggesting that the artisan borrowed the ornamentation from Islamic designs. This lamp may have been intended as a wedding gift, incorporating good wishes for many children.

THIRD ROW FROM TOP, LEFT

David Heinz Gumbel

Israeli, born in Germany, 1896, died in 1992

Hanukkah lamp, early 1930s

Heilbronn, Germany

Hand-worked silver

Gift of Hannah and Walter Flegenheimer, 2002-9a-d

The silversmith David Gumbel was profoundly affected by the modernist aesthetic of the Bauhaus. This influential school of design, architecture, and applied arts, which existed in Germany between 1919 and 1933, aimed to bridge the gap between art and industrial design. The perfect geometric proportions, elemental form, and unadorned surfaces of this piece are hallmarks of its style. Gumbel continued to work in this medium when he immigrated to Israel in 1936. The lamp was purchased from the artist in the early 1930s and brought to the United States when the original owners fled the Nazis.

THIRD ROW FROM TOP, RIGHT

Karl Hagenauer

Austrian, born in 1898, died in 1956

Hanukkah lamp, designed 1919–28

Vienna

Cast copper alloy

Purchase: Gift in memory of Joseph B. Hornik and Elizabeth Cats, 2005-43

Karl Hagenauer studied with Josef Hoffmann, one of the founders of the Wiener Werkstätte, a key workshop in the Viennese modern design movement. The curved and fluted base and the stylized flower buds show modernist influence.

BOTTOM ROW, LEFT

Otto Natzler

American, born in Austria, 1908, died in 2007

Hanukkah lamp, 1956

Simi Valley, California

Slab-built earthenware with lava glaze

Purchase: Judaica Acquisitions Fund and Gift of Mimi R. T., Ruth I. and Lewis D. Surrey in honor of Albert W. Surrey, 1988-30

Otto and Gertrud Natzler helped redefine the craft of ceramics as an artistic medium, opening their workshop in Vienna in 1935. In 1938 they were married and fled Austria to escape the Nazis. Having little interest in ceremonial art, the couple were inspired nonetheless to create memorial and Hanukkah lamps while artists in residence at the Brandeis Camp Institute between 1956 and 1960. Gertrud threw elegant, spare vessels on the wheel; Otto created over a thousand different glazes, many of them highly textural, like the lava glaze seen here. This lamp by Otto takes a familiar form, but its rough surface texture evokes, in the artist's words, "what has been done by nature in the process of Earth's creation."

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BOTTOM ROW, RIGHT

Peter Shire

American, born in 1947

Menorah #7, 1986

Los Angeles

Painted steel, anodized aluminum, and chromium

Purchase: Judaica Acquisitions Endowment Fund, 1989-20

In the 1980s Judaica artists began to reexamine the form of the Hanukkah lamp, which according to rabbinical prescription should have eight lights in a straight row, with the *shamash*, or servitor, set off from them. Peter Shire typically takes familiar objects and reimagines their shapes, colors, and materials so that we barely recognize them. Here a mixture of pastel and neon colors, industrial metals, and a cantilevered, swirling arrangement of parts challenge the modernist aesthetic of simplicity that had dominated design for decades. This aesthetic of embracing complexity was a key principle of the postmodern Memphis design group, to which Shire belonged.

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