

Sacred works

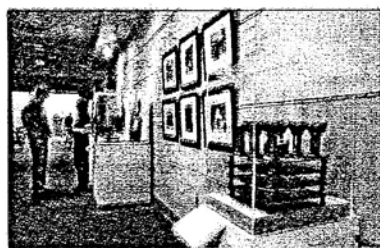
Ceremonial objects reflect 'personal love' of artist who embraces Judaism

By MARY M. BYRNE / For the Journal-Constitution

In the late 1970s, while studying art at Pratt Institute in New York, Tobi Kahn liked to hold post-Sabbath parties on Saturday night. All of his friends were artists, so he tried to make the occasions as beautiful as he could, using ceremonial Sabbath objects he'd made himself.

And even as his art career took off — his paintings and sculpture have been shown in more than 40 solo exhibitions and 60 museum and group shows — he never stopped making Jewish ceremonial art, privately, for his family and friends.

Now, Kahn's sacred work is on display in "Avoda: Objects of the Spirit," a touring exhibition at Emory University's Schatten Gallery.



KIMBERLY SMITH / Staff

A Seder plate (at right foreground) used in the Passover observance is among the works on display.

The exhibition's Atlanta stop coincides with the beginning of the High Holiday season of the Jewish liturgical calendar. Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, starts at sundown Wednesday.

Traditionally, it is a time for introspection, repentance, resolving to live better lives — and for wishing others a sweet year ahead by sharing apples and honey.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement that marks the high point of the holiday season, follows 10 days later. And from Sept. 29 until Oct. 6, Jews celebrate Sukkot, the annual festival named for the temporary huts that Moses and the Israelites inhabited in the desert after their exodus from Egypt.

Kahn, of course, made ceremonial objects for all the holidays, including Rosh Hashana. It bothered him that the secular New Year's character is a baby — as if we start out each year naked and shivering all over again, every year.

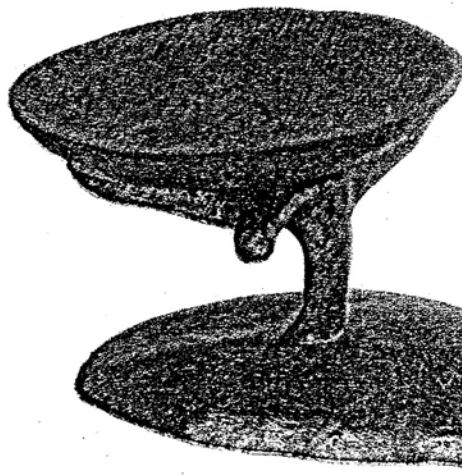
"I'm committed to the fact that, hopefully, we learned something from the past year. So I wanted to do something

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KIMBERLY SMITH / Staff

New York artist Tobi Kahn visits the Emory University campus, where his work is on display at the Schatten Gallery, and takes part in a workshop. His sacred objects are functional.



The "Rosh Hashanah Apple-and-Honey Set" by Tobi Kahn is one of the sacred works that make up "Avoda: Objects of the Spirit."

NICHOLAS WALSTER / Special

IF YOU GO

"Avoda: Objects of the Spirit"

What: An art exhibition of 34 Jewish ceremonial objects by Tobi Kahn, along with several paintings and works on paper.

When: Through Oct. 15.

Where: The Schatten Gallery, Emory University, located in the Robert W. Woodruff Library, 540 Asbury Circle, Atlanta.

Cost: Free.

Information: 404-727-6861.

Meditation for the "Rosh Hashanah Apple-and-Honey Set"

By Nessa Rapoport

Awaken to the year as it is born, the aleph bet beginning, writing our destiny. Sovereign of sweetness, refute severity, remember us as we return to You, word by word, assemble us, Scribe, let us hear Your call as we summon You into our lives.

Sacred objects: Artist's works embrace Judaism

► Continued from G1

that was joyous," he says.

The centerpiece of Kahn's "Rosh Hashanah Apple-and-Honey Set," which he made in honor of his wife, the writer Nessa Rapoport, is a golden dancer raising up a dish containing honey and a small baby figure. Below, a smooth, amphibious hand holds a dish for apples. Both dishes can be removed from the sculpture and passed around to guests.

The Rosh Hashana piece, along with 33 other ceremonial objects, several paintings and works on paper, constitutes the Schatten exhibition. Works also include a menorah, a bronze Elijah's Cup for use during Passover and a Seder plate.

Kahn's work suggests that the religious encounter can be a visual encounter — wordless and potent. And if ritual is a point of entry to religious experience, then Kahn's objects are the tools to get through. Many look primordial, molten, almost gooey.

They seem to have emerged from, and continue to dwell in, some thick, rich and eternal place, untouched by the frantic pace of human life around them.

Yet they also are functional and durable, meant for use by ordinary people.

Diverse community

Kahn, 52, further aims to

make objects that are acceptable to all Jews, not just a particular community. With a wide and sometimes conflicting diversity of practices within Judaism, making a ceremonial object that works for everyone is a serious undertaking.

"When I decide to do something, I spend at least as much time studying about the piece [as making it]. I try very hard not to do anything that any type of Jew could be offended by," said Kahn. "Somebody said to me, 'Doesn't that limit your creativity?'"

"[But] I find it very invigorating because I try and find as many nuances as I can make."

As a companion to the opening of the exhibition, which runs through Oct. 15, Kahn led a series of local art-making workshops. At Emory, the University of Georgia and Temple Emanuel, college and high school students made ceremonial objects using materials Kahn and his team supplied: paint, flea market items, nail polish, glasses, glue guns.

The hands-on workshops are a core part of the exhibition's tour. Kahn donates his time as facilitator.

"If that makes people of every faith more interested in their own worship process, I'm thrilled," says Kahn. "It's fascinating. We've worked with over 3,000 students already and they're never the same.

They make totally different pieces."

Arts and religion

In 1999, Kahn and the New York philanthropist Carol Brennglass Spinner co-founded the Avoda Institute, a nonprofit organization to promote the connection between the arts and religion. Avoda's programming took off in 2000 with the help of a grant from the Covenant Foundation.

"Avoda" is a Hebrew word that means "work and worship." The institute also has published "Objects of the Spirit: Ritual and the Art of Tobi Kahn" (Avoda and Hudson Hills Press, \$50). Along with illustrations and essays on Kahn's work, the book includes short reflections by Rapoport. Proceeds will be donated to charity.

Since 2000, the exhibit has made its way through nine cities and will visit two more before it's done.

It's easy to forget that the artist never intended for these works to be shown publicly. Kahn made them privately, for his family and friends to use and enjoy, and had to be persuaded to display them anywhere else.

Kahn was raised Orthodox in New York's Washington Heights neighborhood of German Jewish refugees, including his parents and grandparents.

"I come from a very traditional Jewish community, and when people heard I was going



KIMBERLY SMITH / Staff

Emory University student Erik Button created this painted glass when he stopped by an open art workshop on a patio of the Dobbs University Center. The hands-on workshops are a core part of the "Avoda: Objects of the Spirit" exhibition tour.

to become an artist, they immediately assumed I was going to make ceremonial objects," he says.

And Kahn loved to make sacred art, but until "Avoda," he considered it a personal practice — not the stuff of an art career.

In 1985, he was selected as one of nine artists for the Guggenheim Museum exhibition, "New Horizons in American Art," and for the past 18 years, he has taught at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. In 2000, Kahn won the Alumni Achievement Award from the Pratt Institute.

Over the years, friends

encouraged him to show his ceremonial art, in addition to the abstract landscape and science-inspired paintings and sculptures for which he'd become known. No, he would say, it's not for public display.

But as he looked closely at the multifaceted careers of the artists he admired the most, including Alexander Calder and Piet Mondrian, Kahn reconsidered. His life as an artist had always drawn from different passions, and it was time for his public career to reflect that variety.

"I love making ceremonial objects," Kahn says. "Why should I close off the world to pieces that I think are very

important?"

'Brings tradition alive'

Because the objects have now been on the road for so long, Kahn had to make a set of replacements for his family to use in the meantime. He says he never expected the exhibition to elicit such enthusiasm or to last more than a few months.

"What gets people excited about Tobi's work," said Deborah Lipstadt, professor and director of Emory's Rabbi Donald A. Tam Institute for Jewish Studies, "is the combination of artistic beauty, the deep knowledge base, and the veneration of the tradition."

"I'm just so touched by the personal love he has, the excitement," she says. "[His] son wanted a spice box that looked like a rocket ship. What could be more fun than that?"

Kahn's inches-tall Besamim container, normally filled with fragrant spices for the Havdalah ceremony that marks the end of the Sabbath, stands on thick petallike legs and sports a pointy lid. All at once, it manages to be comic, ancient and reminiscent of "The Jetsons."

"It's beautiful, it looks like a rocket ship, it has ritual significance. It brings the tradition alive," said Lipstadt, who has been friends with Kahn and his family since the 1980s.

Lipstadt notes that people from other traditions, particularly Catholics, are some of Kahn's strongest supporters. And for Jews, she says, Kahn's work is a reminder that the Hebrew scriptures encourage people to practice their ceremonies beautifully whenever possible.

"You can make the blessing of the wine in a paper cup," says Lipstadt. "But if you have the means to make something beautiful — silver, gold, papier-mâché, ceramics, whatever — it's a way of showing your love and your connection to the tradition."

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