

The Portuguese Synagogue

The theme of our Amsterdam visit emerged as the never-ending movement of objects and ideas around the world. Some of us had already visited the Silk Road exhibition at the Hermitage, Amsterdam and the last object we viewed at the Rijksmuseum was the 17th-century Japanese chest which had come to Amsterdam via France and Scotland (item 1165 in the 1882 Hamilton Palace sale).

The founders of the Amsterdam synagogue were the Portuguese and Spanish immigrants of Jewish descent who settled in Amsterdam from the end of the 16th century. In 1492 the Catholic monarchs of Spain forced Jews either to convert to Christianity or to leave the country and in 1497 Portugal did the same. The builders of Amsterdam's synagogue, or *esnoga* in the 1670s were the descendants of these Spanish and Portuguese immigrants who wished to live and worship once again as Jews.

Its interior and furniture are virtually completely unchanged from its opening in 1675 (Fig. 1) and some furniture, the readers' desk and the benches in the winter

synagogue, are even older. It is still without electricity, still lit and heated by hundreds of candles mounted in large chandeliers, wall sconces and candlesticks on the pews (Fig. 2 and see the piece by Keith and Gill Pinn on the metalwork). A number of members of our group immediately noticed its influence on the Bevis Marks Synagogue completed in London in 1701, a foundation that actually has close links to Amsterdam. Our knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide Mirjam Knotter displayed and explained all the various ritual objects including the two chatanim sofas covered in 18th-century tapestry (Fig. 3) that sit in front of the hechal. These walnut-framed sofas were donated on 30 September 1741 and were used once a year in a celebration to mark the end of the annual cycle of reading the Torah. The sofas were made to be disassembled and were kept in their original packing cases until recently; it is this that accounts for their astonishing condition and the vibrancy of the coloured Aubusson tapestry upholstery.

The synagogue also contains the interior of the world's oldest functioning Jewish library, Ets Haim, literally 'tree of life'. The collection contains over 560 manuscripts and 30,000 printed items and represent the knowledge and culture of Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam. Its fascinating contents can be studied at www.etsheim.nl/engl.

The synagogue has room for 1200 men and 440 women, who were seated separately in the galleries, and a courtyard where children could play safely. It now perhaps seems a rather empty place but an empty place for a reason. In 1940 4,300 Portuguese Jews lived in Amsterdam, only about 800 survived by 1945. The



Fig. 1 (above) The Portuguese Synagogue looking east towards the hechal, in which the Ark is kept. Note the sanded floorboards.

Fig. 2 (right) The Teba at the west end, from where the cantor leads the service. The Teba is early 17th century, that is older than the synagogue, in keeping with the tradition of venerating ancient religious objects.





Fig. 3 (top) One of the pair of *chatanim* sofas placed on the *hechal*. It is just possible to make out in the picture two of the hooks and eyes that hold the upholstery in place and the small brass studs that allow the sofa frames to be dismantled.

Fig. 4 (bottom left) Our knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide Mirjam Knotter explaining the sofas and their history

Fig. 5 (bottom right) A detail of the Aubusson upholstery showing the vibrancy of the original colours



Fig. 6 Detail of brass hook and eye and at the top the end of one of the brass rods that holds the sofa together

synagogue survived the war intact because the occupying Nazi's discovered that two Dutch gentiles had designed the building and so it was left alone; the corresponding Ashkenazi Synagogue, across the road, was completely vandalised and stripped.

The people did not return but their books, treasures, the furniture the Nazis had confiscated, have returned and of course their ideas survive. Mirjam left us to go to a meeting to raise more money for the refurbishment of the synagogue and its precious contents, we can only thank her and wish her every success. Amsterdam does illustrate very well Sir Barry Cunliffe's proposition, we are indeed restless, acquisitive mongrels.

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