Radical Roots
Meringolo, Denise D.

Published by Amherst College Press

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Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism.

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A potsherd, a piece of clay or stone, a crude design of primitive man . . .
become at once priceless treasures to the scholar. The potsherds or stones
are the plots for the future romances written by historians about ancient
peoples; their life, their culture and their art. . . . To the curator of a
museum, a piece of parchment with faded writing, a torn piece of material,
a chip of metal or stone are inspirations for minute study which inspire a
delving into the past. . . . The curator is able to clothe them with flesh, to
cover them with skin, and breathe life into them, though they have been
lying dead for centuries and millennia.

—Paul Romanoff, May 3, 1935

Our museum has become a medium for inter-racial tolerance and
understanding.

—Paul Romanoff, May 10, 1939

As curator of the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects in New York City
(now the Jewish Museum), Paul Romanoff made these two claims about the
significance of material culture in the interpretation of life, culture, and art,
and about the social value of the museum.¹ The largely overlooked Romanoff
was the first full-time curator appointed to one of the first culturally specific
museums in the United States. His relatively brief career (from 1931 until his
untimely death in 1943) has gone almost completely unnoticed in the annals
of the Jewish Museum.² Similarly, the history of smaller museums is often
absent from the grand narrative of museum history, including the “golden
age” of the American museum from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This chapter looks at Romanoff’s career and his ideas about objects, meaning, identity, and publics to ask, What are we missing when the history we tell about museums is focused on large national museums as sites of power and knowledge rooted in hierarchies of race and nation? What sites of resistance do we omit when we depict museums as the ultimate imperial project that helped constitute a citizenry imagined as White and Protestant? What of the early identity museum that by its nature acknowledged difference and asserted positionality? By their very nature and existence, museums like these called in some way for decentering the dominant culture. The example of the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects begins to lay out the possibility that when we broaden and deepen conventional museum history we discover places that we might label, if not radical, at least resistant to hegemony.

“Identity museums” (a shorthand I use here for museums dedicated to depicting the history and culture of a specific race, religion, ethnicity, or community, created by that identity group) are a crucial component of museum work that defies the dominant narrative. If we understand any radical efforts within the museum to be pushing back against the centering of the dominant culture not only as the objective norm, but even more problematically as the epitome of that which is significant, beautiful, and worthy of exhibition, then the identity museum surely presents an important alternative framework. As mainstream museums began to engage with the potential for civically engaged practice in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ellen Hirzy, in the landmark Mastering Civic Engagement (2002) by the American Association of Museums (AAM), urged museum staff to “learn from their colleagues at ethnic and community-based museums, which have set the standard by establishing deep and meaningful civic involvement as their founding principle.” Hirzy’s statement positions ethnic museums as exemplifying work that potentially supplants an interpretation of history and culture whose assumed audience is the general (White) public and whose relation to those visitors is objective and distant.

Yet identity museums have a longer history than is often acknowledged. Scholars who discuss the history of identity museums in the United States typically locate their origins in the victories of the civil rights moment, when ethnic groups established local museums in an effort to preserve their heritage and cultural knowledge. In one of the most concise presentations of
the relationship between “the museum” and “the public,” Stephen Weil denies even these postwar developments when, in the broadest of strokes, he contrasts the museum “in its earliest days” with “the museum of the near future.” The earlier model is “grand and imposing” in which, quoting Charles Callahan Perkins in 1870 regarding the plans for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, “There exists a modicum of capacity for improvement in all men, which can be greatly developed by familiarity with such acknowledged masterpieces as are found in all great collections of works of art.” From there, Weil shifts abruptly to “the museum of the near future” in which “it will be primarily the public, and not those inside museums” who will decide what is important and what “stance the museum may take.” In fact, there was clearly much more nuance occurring in the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century, developments that those who participated in the post–civil rights frenzy of identity-museum-making were aware. In her account of the early work of the international Afro-American museum movement, Andrea Burns describes how, as Margaret T. G. Burroughs began considering opening a museum devoted to African American history in Chicago in 1960, she visited “small ethnic museums,” including the Jewish Museum and the Polish Museum of America in Chicago. As Burns’s historical account indicates, the civil rights–era museum movement acknowledged earlier attempts, forays into doing identity work in the museum that have largely gone unstudied.

There is a certain irony in making claims for the counterhegemonic character of an identity museum given the reactionary tendency inspired by much ethnic heritage practice. In one of the only full-length studies of ethnic museums, Rosa Cabrera describes the function of these institutions as providing a space where adherents to a culture can “recall their homeland” and preserve a cultural identity, including passing cultural heritage on to a new generation. Such institutions might default to notions of essentialized ethnicity, ignore differences within that identity, and commit themselves to the celebration of a simplified past—or present. In this, heritage practices would almost in any case fail to look to the future. They would naturally, it may seem, celebrate a static, bounded culture rather than invest in theories of change. Yet late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century identity museums—the National Museum of the American Indian perhaps most notably—provide a sense of the much broader possibilities than the confines of such conservative frameworks allow. NMAI’s critics, however, might second the allegation of a celebratory inclination and a simplified notion of identity.
Presaging these negotiations regarding the exhibition of identity and the assertion of difference, the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects in the 1930s exhibited the material culture of a nonmajority culture in a way that provided an alternative “center.” These were “Jewish things” presented with honor and respect in an age of widely held anti-Semitism. This was an identity museum established by Jews in the era of the Immigration Act of 1924, when the wisdom and feasibility of assimilation were debated among Jews and in the wider intellectual world. These objects belonged to a global diasporic religion and culture in an age when nation was the most salient context in many museums and most international expositions.

Looking back at one of the earliest examples of identity museums might thus be useful in considering heritage work in an institutional setting. This investigation allows for the exploration of the relationship between the impulse to decenter the dominant culture and a tendency toward the celebration of heritage, as well as the possibility for doing socially instrumental work with cultural heritage. As I will explore, Paul Romanoff’s decade of museum work demonstrates that identity museum professionals struggled to make sense of a specific culture’s material evidence and to figure out how to make objects and their interpretation accessible to a wide audience. From his hiring in 1931, Romanoff advocated for and championed the collections, asserting the value of the museum in reaching various audiences. He was determined to create a museum that could communicate across communities and confront bigotry, work that received little support from his superiors. I argue that Romanoff’s belief in the value of sharing Jewish history and religion with Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike to forge understanding and improve relations was productive civic engagement. Romanoff’s ideas—clearly articulated in his views about outreach to the Jewish community and beyond—might provide a model for thinking about relationships among objects, identity, community, and communication that continue to perplex us today.

My aim is not to establish a genealogical through line of identity museums from the 1930s through today. Rather, I highlight a moment in which a museum presented a story driven neither by nationalism nor by the desire to assert white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian superiority (although, as we will see, not wholly divorced from claims for a shared Judeo-Christian tradition). Finally, this work suggests that it might be a radical act in the historiography of museums and public history to bring the story of the early decades of the
Jewish Museum out from the history of Jewish cultural practice and into the narrative of museums and public history. By doing so, we can decenter the story of museums, shifting focus away from White Protestant curators at the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This is a narrative of a Jewish immigrant exhibiting the material culture of his heritage to his New York neighbors—Jew and gentile, young and old, native-born and immigrant.

“A More or Less Fixed Thing”: The Possibilities and Limitations of a Collection

The roots of the Jewish Museum date to 1904, although it would be decades before the establishment of a museum space, and nearly a half century before the creation of the Jewish Museum in its current form. That year, book collector and Philadelphia judge Mayer Sulzberger gifted a book and manuscript collection to the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York City. Sulzberger’s donation was predominantly paper materials (7,500 Hebrew books and books related to Judaism and 750 manuscripts) and a small collection of twenty-six ceremonial objects. The inclusion of threedimensional objects along with the research materials served as a “suggestion” by Sulzberger about the future “establishment of a Jewish museum in connection with the library.”

At the National Museum (Smithsonian Institution), another collecting initiative was already in process under the guidance of Cyrus Adler, who would later become Romanoff’s boss. Adler, the first person to earn a PhD in Semitic studies from a US university (Johns Hopkins University, 1887), advised the Smithsonian on its collection of Near Eastern antiquities and encouraged the National Museum to add to its assemblage of biblical artifacts and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ceremonial objects related to Judaism. As early as 1902, Adler was already involved in the administration of the Seminary, splitting time between the school and the Smithsonian.

There was also international precedent for collections of Judaica and written materials related to the ancient and modern tradition. Jewish museums (and exhibits of Jewish materials within larger international exhibitions) had been founded in large European cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century within the context of the wider culture’s desire to preserve the past and develop sanctioned narratives of place (bounded by nation-state and city) in the face of modernization and urbanization.
a “Jewish museum” would collect was likely not much debated, but in hindsight, it is clear they collected and exhibited that “elusive entity that can be best encapsulated by a general definition as that ‘that which reflects Jewish experience.’”

At the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the efforts first concentrated in the realm of rare books and manuscripts in the original library setting. The realization of Sulzberger’s “suggested” museum was limited, with no dedicated curator for more than two decades after the original donation. A single case for objects stood in the library, and one of the star artifacts—an ark for storing Torah scrolls from Urbino, Italy—was displayed in the library’s manuscript room.

Seminary chancellor Solomon Schechter did support the substantial growth of the books and manuscripts collection. Librarian Alexander Marx produced exhibitions, although they were not well-developed installations. Marx referred to the first of these, a commemoration of the biblical commentator Moses Maimonides on the seven hundredth anniversary of his death in 1905, as “a small number of rare books and Mss . . . arranged on a few tables in the Lecture Hall of the old Seminary building.” By 1914, the research library included 44,000 printed volumes and 1,700 manuscripts. The
collection came to include an extensive catalog of biblical editions in Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Spanish, and Italian, among other languages; Torah scrolls from around the world from China to the Middle East; illuminated manuscripts; prayer books; and works of Hebrew grammar. The book- and paper-based exhibitions at the library in the 1910s and 1920s included a show of biblical manuscripts (1913), an exhibition of multiple editions of the Hebrew Bible (1914), and one on Hebrew printing in Asia and Africa (1924).

After Schechter’s death in 1915, Cyrus Adler became chancellor. Adler initially provided more support for the museum concept for professional—and likely personal—reasons. Adler was a second cousin of Sulzberger, the original donor. More significantly, as noted previously, beginning in the late 1880s, Adler had consulted for the collection and organized exhibitions on biblical and “Oriental” content at the National Museum (as honorary assistant curator of the “Section of Oriental Antiquities” and then as curator of historic archaeology and historic religions) and published on biblical antiquities and
Jewish ceremonial objects. His Smithsonian association positioned him to lead the development of the ethnography exhibits at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, with an eye to those assembled collections ending up at the Smithsonian at the fair’s conclusion.21

Despite Adler’s experience exhibiting objects related to Jewish culture and the history of ancient Israel, it was not until 1930, when the Seminary moved around the corner to Broadway and West 122nd Street (from its original building on West 123rd Street), that a separate space was allocated for the newly named Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects. The new museum was dedicated in November 1931. Soon after, Adler hired Paul Romanoff as curator.22 Romanoff had emigrated from Poland and received a PhD in Palestinian topography at Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning in Philadelphia, where he met Adler, the school’s first president.23 In 1931, at the time of his hire, Romanoff had most recently been associated with Yale University as a research fellow in biblical and Semitic languages.24

Newly arrived in New York, Romanoff knew no one except Adler, but in his new boss, he failed to find a kindred spirit.25 From the time of his hire, Romanoff frequently wrote to Adler (and eventually to Louis Finkelstein, who succeeded Adler as president of JTS in 1940). His written correspondences evidence the formality of the working relationship between curator and seminary president and clearly document Adler’s frequent refusal to support Romanoff or even directly communicate with him face-to-face. Romanoff’s letters make two consistent appeals: more support for the museum and more dependable income. He requested to keep the museum open in the summer, for financial support for outreach activities, and for moral support by his superiors by way of acknowledgment of the museum’s positive impacts. His letters also include increasingly desperate pleas for a raise.

Between 1931 and 1940, Romanoff was finding it nearly impossible to support himself (and later his wife, Bertha Blum, whom he married in 1937). In one particularly compelling letter, dated May 19, 1932, as his first summer in New York approached with no promise of salary or lodging if the museum were to be shuttered seasonally as Adler intended, Romanoff wrote to Adler from Brush Dormitory, where he was living at Broadway and 122nd Street. The letter, written at the end of May, establishes what would become a pattern in his correspondence: the linkage of his fate to that of the museum:

As far as I am personally concerned, the closing of the Museum will leave me destitute and homeless. While I was employed here I lived at the
Dormitory. After the end of this month I have practically nowhere to go and nothing to do. I could not very well save anything out of my meagre salary, having had to spend two-thirds of it for my room and meals in the Dormitory and to use the remainder to send to my close relatives abroad to save them from actual starvation. I am now confronting a very desperate situation indeed, and very much against my will, turn again to you for advice in my hour of need.26

Along with that letter, Romanoff sent a report of visitors to the museum. Adler never encouraged Romanoff, and in only a few instances granted him a raise.

When Romanoff grew ill in the late 1930s, Adler increased his pay by ten dollars per month, but it was never clear how long that support would last. A particularly harsh response to yet another request came during the summer of 1938 from Adler’s summer vacation in Woods Hole on Cape Cod:

I told you on several occasions, and rather emphatically, I thought, this winter in a talk that was interrupted that there was no real place at the Seminary for you. I told you that I regarded the little museum as a more or less fixed thing. I have no desire to build up a great museum nor have we the means. The post there is that of caretaker and whatever your merits, does not justify in the present condition of the Seminary, a salary for a man with a family. . . . At all events, I think the kindest thing I can say to you is that you ought not look to the Seminary for any real position for your future.27

Romanoff’s understandably pained response came eleven days later: “Both the content and your indifferent attitude surprised and shocked me.”28

It is difficult to account for Adler’s dismissal of the promise and future of “the little museum.” In her study of Adler’s role in the Smithsonian Judaica collections, Grace Cohen Grossman briefly attempts to account for Adler’s lack of support for him or the museum. “Although it is possible that the visionary who pioneered the use of exhibitions of Judaica for education had a change of heart in his final years, it is more likely that the financial constraints brought about by the Depression of the 1930s shaped his response.”29 By exploring Romanoff’s museum activities in more detail, the variances between his viewpoint and Adler’s priorities come into clearer relief, suggesting more than budgetary concerns. Despite Adler and Romanoff’s shared
interest in ancient languages and ceremonial objects, the break may have been between their philosophies of the museum. In the only full-length exploration of the early history of the Jewish Museum, Julie Miller and Richard Cohen assert that Romanoff was “the first to define what the museum’s public mission should be.” What that public mission was, and Adler’s repeated dismissal of Romanoff’s advocacy for it, is the subject of the rest of this paper.

**Jewish Archaeology and Cultural Pluralism**

The building of a Jewish museum was, by its very nature, a political act. Collections assembled in Europe in the late nineteenth century promoted Jewish consciousness and pride. Artistic production was increasingly understood as a basic element of a modern nation, an idea reflected in what sociologist Tony Bennett has termed the “exhibitionary complex” of museums, expositions, and other nineteenth-century displays. In visual extravaganzas—including “museums, panoramas, Mechanics’ Institute exhibitions, art galleries, and arcades”—curators and exhibitors put hierarchies of nation on display for the edification and civilization of the citizenry. These exhibitions and expositions became “annexed to national histories as, within the rhetorics of each national museum complex, collections of national materials were represented as the outcome and culmination of the universal story of civilization’s development.” In this scenario, “museums became one of the institutions and practices associated with modernity, part of the checklist for being a nation.”

This assertion of a kind of Jewish nationalism spoke back to the potentially anti-Semiticly tinged denotation of the “Jewish race.” Indeed, examples abound of the New York collection as a point of pride for Jewish visitors. Romanoff’s records allow a glimpse into the reaction of the majority-Jewish audience (Jews made up roughly 80–85 percent of museum visitors in the years for which statistics are available). The Hebrew Tabernacle Sisterhood, for example, noted after a visit, “We can well be proud of our Jewish history and I feel the future ever holds glorious things for us Jews,” an oddly optimistic reaction given the approximate date in the late 1930s. For the visitors from Temple Israel in New York, the museum “opened their eyes to the antiquity and beauty of the various collections, and that [they] have an art to be proud of,” and the National Council of Jewish Women reported being already “familiar with every-day Jewish life” but unaware of the “wonderful works of art.”
Uncovering and acknowledging a Jewish visual heritage through the act of collecting and interpreting thus asserted legitimacy and value on its own terms. The museum stood in contrast to a trope of difference and exoticism that would have framed exhibitions of Jewish culture in mainstream institutions or in the Hebraic sections of international exhibitions. This claim for a relevant and admirable material past, although cast in the terms of the Jewish “nation” and appealing in some sense to such conventions, also flew in the face of the national imaginary associated with the modern state. In an identity museum like the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects, the parameters of engagement and inclusion were, by contrast, global and diasporic. They presented an alternative narrative to national identity and perhaps to nationalism, one that opened the possibility of an affinity with—and roots in—an ancient culture rather than identification with the more arbitrary modern nation.

Integrally related to the founding of Jewish museums was the developing field of Jewish archaeology—the scholarly pursuit of the ancient remains of the Greco-Roman period. Romanoff was an avowed participant in the field, reviewing notable books, doing research, and publishing books and articles. He and Adler shared this interest. Romanoff’s 1937 book on ancient Jewish topography and his articles based on archaeological material published between 1931 and 1944 (the last published posthumously) all documented and interpreted the visual, artistic, and iconographic record of ancient Jewish culture. Jewish archaeology, including Romanoff’s research, was concerned with the “placement of Jewish artifacts in dialogue with ancient Jewish literature, in the hopes of understanding more about Jewish culture than either the extant literary texts or excavated artifacts could yield on their own.”

This scholarly inquiry put material culture on a playing field with text, a somewhat revolutionary act given the reputation of Jewish culture, fostered by both some Jewish scholars and others as well, as an “aniconic” religion, devoid of a history of artistic production. Given that the existence of a national art was an essential feature of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism, Jews committed to the maintenance of Jewish peoplehood looked to provide evidence of the existence of a strong and vital “Jewish art.” Romanoff’s “The Discovery of Jewish Art,” for example, one of two articles in a 1935 issue of the journal the Reconstructionist dedicated to the arts in the Jewish tradition, discussed the human figures in frescos in the third-century synagogue of Dura-Europos (a Hellenistic, Parthian, and Roman border city built on
the bank of the Euphrates river in today’s Syria). These scholarly efforts thus mirrored the intent of the founders of Jewish museums to show that “Jews, like all other nations, created beautiful and exciting art throughout their long history” and to create a “positive national Jewish identity.”

In the popularization of this intellectual thread linking contemporary Judaism with biblical Hebrews, public intellectuals like Adler and Romanoff relied on historically specious claims. Adler wrote about the contemporary practices of the inhabitants of Palestine as “living archaeology,” “as if the way of life in those areas had survived without change since antiquity and therefore could be treated as if it were directly linked to ancient times.” Similarly, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jewish ceremonial objects on display at the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects were exhibited as links in an unbroken chain between the practices of biblical Hebrews and contemporary Jewish people. While contemporary Jews may descend from ancient Hebrews, the Jewish religion is based on scriptural and textual rabbinic tradition that postdates the biblical era. As Grossman points out about Adler’s interpretation, his “rather unscientific link between those who lived in the ‘Bible lands’ in his own time and their ancient Semitic ancestors” was an ahistorical, if enticing, interpretive hook. The same could be said of Romanoff’s work. To combat anti-Semitism in the modern age, one could prompt non-Jewish audiences about the endurance between Judaism and the world of the Old Testament they venerated. As Grossman writes, “The concept of this unbroken continuity of practice would subsequently become Adler’s rationale for using Jewish ceremonial objects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in an exhibition of Biblical archaeology.”

In addition to establishing an ancient past as a viable and legitimate source of identity formation, Romanoff also used the collection to assert Jewish influence in the Americas and thus the possibility of the Jewish American or American Jewish identity. A 1937 exhibition in honor of Columbus Day included the almanac by Jewish astronomer Abraham ben Samuel Zacuto that had been used by Columbus on his voyage. Romanoff also showcased the first Hebrew grammar books published in the United States. These objects suggested the potential of a lasting religious and cultural Jewishness alongside national citizenship. By 1939, there was a gallery devoted to such objects, the “American Room.” Some historians have suggested that these themes were intended to Americanize the seminary’s (mainly foreign-born) rabbinical students and, through them, their immigrant congregations. However,
the hyphenated nature of American Jewish identity can go both ways. Jews could become American, but also “America” could be, in part, Jewish. Although surely never expressly spoken in an exhibition label, this narrative implicitly decentered Protestantism as the unnamed “default” American religion and resisted the narrative of the United States as a Christian nation.

The museum might be seen within the early to mid-twentieth century debate about assimilation. Over the course of the 1910s, Jewish scholar Horace Kallen published a series of articles proposing a vision for American democracy and identity in the face of massive immigration. Kallen challenged the idea of “Americanization” as necessitating the “ adoption of English speech, of American clothes and manners, of the American attitude in politics” and the “fusion of the various bloods, and a transmutation by ‘the miracle of assimilation’ of Jews, Slavs, Poles, Frenchmen, Germans, Hindus, Scandinavians into beings similar in background, tradition, outlook, and spirit to the descendants of the British colonists, the Anglo-Saxon stock.” This, Kallen asserted, was antithetical to the spirit of democracy. We might thus imagine the Jewish Museum as an instantiation of melting-pot-defying “cultural pluralism.” Romanoff was a one-man show, curating exhibitions, writing interpretive materials, cultivating collegial relationships in the collecting community, giving public talks, pursuing research and publishing articles, and cultivating a far wider audience than was of interest to his bosses, as we shall see.

**Audience and Publics**

Romanoff’s efforts resulted in a steady rise in yearly attendance from December 1931 (shortly after his hire) through the first half of 1941. The outlier of a huge spike in late 1934 / early 1935 coincided with the opening and run of a very popular Maimonides exhibition about the twelfth-century biblical commentator. During that exhibition, the museum was open extra evenings to accommodate the large crowds. Likely out of a sense of self-preservation, Romanoff felt compelled to explain to his superiors that the museum was doing good work both within and beyond the Jewish community—and could do more if properly supported. He sent reports about his attempts to cultivate and broaden his audience, visitor statistics, and hand-drawn infographics with a breakdown of the audience by religion, sex, and type of group (including women’s groups, refugee organizations, Hebrew schools, church groups, labor unions, and educators). Romanoff compiled
excerpts from the many visitor letters that attested to the power of the objects in the collection to tell the story of Jewish culture and history and touted the curator’s skills as a teacher, lecturer, and guide. The record of Romanoff’s work surely suggests that the curator was far more committed than his superiors—whose attention and respect seem to have been impossible to earn—to addressing the question of who comes to a museum and what might be accomplished there.

The number and nature of the groups who visited—Jewish and non-Jewish, adults and children, residents of the New York area as well as visitors to the city—was a source of pride. In 1932, less than a year after his arrival, the curator noted attendance by not only members of the local Jewish community but “visitors from other cities.” He reported with interest changes in the percentage of Christians among total visitors. (In 1940, 20 percent of visitors were Christian, including six church groups, but only 15 percent the following year.) He commented on the various types of visitors—students,
ministers, co-religionists, artists—and their different reasons for visiting, from doing research to seeking inspiration, including “themes for artistic pursuit and advice about how to beautify and prepare for the holidays and festivals.”

Romanoff thought carefully about how to increase attendance by appealing to a variety of inclinations, including attracting those with a casual interest in Jewish culture. He noted to librarian Alexander Marx, “Our Museum differs somewhat from other museums in the city in that it has its own seasons during our [Jewish] holidays. . . . But the attendance is also dependent on the communal life of the city,” including American holidays and festivals that brought people to the city and granted New Yorkers more leisure time. Preeminent among the events was the New York World’s Fair. Romanoff advocated placing advertisements in guide books for the 1939 event “if we wish that our Museum and Institution should become known to the millions of visitors which the Fair will bring to New York.” In May 1939, at the start of the fair (which ran from April 30, 1939, through October 27, 1940), the curator noted an increase in attendance by individuals and groups. That report also indicated an increase in foreign visitors likely with no connection to the fair, including German refugees and visitors from Palestine, suggesting the role of New York and the museum in formulating a diasporic Judaism.

Communication skills were clearly important to Romanoff, who made great effort to bring the seemingly esoteric within reach of his audience. In 1937, he completed a glossary to acquaint visitors with the terminology on the labels, a project that must have gone through a series of revisions. Eighteen months later, he was again requesting permission to complete a “dictionary-list of the Hebrew names and titles that appear on the cards and a brief description of their meaning and usage” as an aid to improving visitor experience. One of Romanoff’s most accessible published contributions to Jewish archaeology was his “The Discovery of Jewish Art” in the journal the Reconstructionist. This article about the decoration in a third-century synagogue is notable for its placement in a publication meant for a general audience. The readership for the Reconstructionist were not archaeologists and historians, and the accessible tone presumes no expert knowledge. Romanoff authored at least one article in Yiddish, “Formen un simboln in der arkhitektur funm Beyšamidgdeš” (Architectural forms and symbols of the Temple), widening the readership for his scholarship among immigrants. The same accessibility was evident in a syndicated series Romanoff wrote for the national Jewish
press. An article from 1935 about Maimonides, corresponding with the exhibition at the museum, began with an invitation to consider “the human side” of texts. “I shall,” he wrote, “therefore, take you with me on a trip to look into a manuscript and to search for the story behind it.”

As another way to broaden the audience to people who for reasons of geography or interest would not have visited, Romanoff inaugurated and administered a loan program. He lent objects to the Temple of Religion at the 1940 Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco; Bamberger’s department store; the Reformed Church of Bronxville, New York; branches of the New York Public Library; and other institutions and events. This type of outreach suggests, if not firsthand knowledge of similar practices premiered by museums like the Newark Museum, at least a similar inclination toward outreach and audience expansion.

Romanoff understood and embraced the potential of personal as well as written communication and acted as docent as well as curator, giving hundreds of tours of the collections, noting these efforts in his memos to his supervisors. Visitors noted the power of his tours and wrote to thank him and elaborated on their museum experience. One correspondent wrote that he had studied theology previously but stated, “Your [Romanoff’s] interpretation of the various exhibits in your Museum cases helped to throw light on things which I know only in part.” An excerpt from a letter from the Seward Park Branch of the New York Public Library read, “I want to tell you how much the Seward Park Mothers’ Club enjoyed their visit to the Museum. It was a great day in their lives and there were full of enthusiasm and appreciation. . . . You gave them a most enjoyable afternoon and they came away with many things to think about.” Given the location of this branch library on the Lower East Side, most of these visitors were likely immigrants. Good reviews, dispersed by word of mouth among educators, spread Romanoff’s positive reputation around the city. An undated compilation of comments received by Romanoff after his tours includes that of the director of the field laboratory of the Child Education Foundation, who reported that his class considered Romanoff’s lecture on the history of prejudice “of great value to them,” noting, “We are glad our students will have the opportunity to hear you.”

In addition to teaching the teachers, Romanoff also considered tours for children an important part of his practice. Roughly 16 percent of the visitors to the museum in 1940 were children and 28 percent were in the first half of 1941. He taught many Hebrew School and Yeshiva groups (117 Hebrew
school groups and 2 Yeshiva groups in 1940; 74 Hebrew school groups and 3 Yeshiva groups, from January to May, in 1941). He had a good rapport with children despite what, in the hands of others, might have been an inaccessible topic. A teacher who had visited with students from a Brooklyn synagogue commented on his “pleasant demeanor toward the children.” In the winter of 1939–40, Anna Wright, a teacher from St. James Church School in Montclair, New Jersey, wrote with her appreciation of the curator’s ability to communicate with her high school students. She describes her students as “entranced” by Romanoff’s two-hour tour. Considering how difficult it is to “hold the attention of a class of that restless age” for even a half hour, she noted that Romanoff’s “gift” in being able to present a subject in a manner suitable to various ages “borders on true genius!” In the first few months of 1935, Romanoff did three radio talks in Yiddish and Hebrew. His outreach to the wider community paid off. In a November 12, 1936, memo to Adler, Romanoff reported his invitation to deliver an illustrated lecture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on “The Symbols in the Synagogue and Christian Art.” In one of his 1937 memos to Adler, Romanoff described his interest in starting a regular series of public lectures every second Sunday, explaining that such offerings were successful in other museums in the city. The answer came from Adler three days later: a curt no.

Why would Adler have been so dismissive? Adler had worked steadfastly on public exhibitions of biblical archaeology and Jewish ceremonial objects in the 1880s and 1890s. A report on a March 1890 exhibition at the National Museum, which included objects lent and donated by Adler’s extended family (including Mayer Sulzberger, whose donation was the first to the Jewish Theological Seminary), described the “collection of objects used in connection with the public and private ceremonies of the Jews” as “intended to illustrate Jewish ceremonial and worship.”

Yet the extent of the public-facing element of Romanoff’s work and his active outreach likely tipped the scales for Adler. Adler gave voice to the dual role of the museum in his address to the Congress of Anthropology in Chicago in 1893, but his efforts were more solidly devoted to historical and scientific study of religion than to popular education. The mandate of the Section of Oriental Antiquities (also, the Department of Biblical Archaeology) that Adler curated was to build a scholarly audience. In the 1889 annual report, Adler wrote about the potential of the collection to broaden scholarly interest in the museum—in his words “to interest a large number of scholars
not hitherto specially attached to the institution.” Adler made a point of inviting “accredited Orientalists” to visit the museum.67

In addition, Romanoff’s outreach efforts would have had little application to Adler’s commitment to a “scientific” approach to the classification of religion. The questions Adler asked of objects were more about whether and how material culture could support theories of civilization rather than about how they might serve as popular educators about world religion.68

In this, Adler was a man of his (museum) times. He was a curator of religion in the way that others were curators of anthropology, applying concepts developed in the natural sciences to create taxonomies of peoples, progress, and civilization. His comparative methods would have had no place in the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects. Adler was committed to a scientific approach and the establishment of a historical context for religion, locating the academic possibilities of objects in a category apart from their theological or doctrinal meaning. Despite his own traditional religious beliefs, in this work, Adler operated as a scholar, not a Jew. In an intellectual move that was broad-minded in its embrace of material culture for the study of religious history, and in his insistence on a historical, scientific approach to religious history, Adler appeared to have little interest in reaching across religious groups to build relationships as religiously affiliated people in the way Romanoff sought to do at his “little museum.”

“A Medium for Interracial Tolerance and Understanding”

As we have seen, Romanoff was interested in using the museum to cultivate a sense of pride in “the Jewish race,” but this inclination coexisted with another impulse to use the museum and its collections as a way to model a better future. Romanoff consciously made connections between the past and the contemporary moment. Unlike the first book exhibit at the Seminary in 1913, his blockbuster 1935 installation celebrating the birth of Maimonides was a monthlong celebration that emphasized the relevance of the medieval scholar to contemporary issues.69 Romanoff wrote enticingly about the artifacts for the press, and the museum produced supporting printed materials. One pamphlet noted, “During these days when Jewry is especially conscious of the oppressive measures directed against it in many lands, the observance will serve to emphasize the spiritual and cultural achievements of the great Jewish minds, in spite of the persecution they have always been forced to face.”70

Romanoff’s interest in an expanded role for the museum was very much a part of professional discourse on museums, adult education, and audience
in the 1930s. Indeed, as Clarissa J. Ceglio found during her research for the article in this collection, from 1932 to 1942 (almost the exact years of Romanoff’s tenure at the Jewish Museum), “eleven new books dealt in some way with the past, present, and prospects of museums with the goal that they become better equipped to play a more dynamic role in contemporary civic life.” In its newsletters, the American Association of Museums engaged questions about the responsibility of museums as democratic institutions in preparing the public to confront rifts in the “social and political fabric.” In his 1939 *Critical Study of Museums in America*, Laurence Vail Coleman recounted how museums had “gained a recognizable place in communities” and assumed “a more important part in the daily life of the people.” While evidence of the import of museum visits on people’s lives is hard to discern, the aspirational norm among museum thinkers was shifting away from a satisfaction with the status quo of museums as elite institutions “unsullied” by and untethered to contemporary issues.

Romanoff appears to have been in tune with this broadening sense of the purpose of a museum. As the decade advanced and the situation in Europe grew ever more urgent, Romanoff described his vision to use the museum and its collections to “help bridge the gap of ignorance that lies between Jew and Christian. I am sure you will see the need to do all in our power toward such an end.” He explained his efforts to bring “Christian children knowledge of the beauty, moral and cultural value of the Jewish religion and history.” “Our museum,” Romanoff wrote in 1939, “has become a medium for inter-racial tolerance and understanding.” Late in 1939, Romanoff made what was likely his most desperate plea to connect the museum to the European crisis in the utopian language of the New York World’s Fair: “We serve as a medium for better understanding and have become the place where one can learn of the beauty of our rituals and holidays, and of the common background of all faiths. . . . The Christian children of today are the Christian men and women of tomorrow. We owe to posterity every effort toward making the World of Tomorrow a better place to live in. We can do this by encouraging more Christian groups to visit us.” That same year, a local teacher requested a museum visit with the same purpose in mind. Dorothy Wright wrote to Romanoff, explaining that she was an instructor for eight- and nine-year-olds in Garden City, New Jersey. She was looking for, she said, “the kind of information about the Jewish people that I can give these children to help in creating attitudes of appreciation and understanding” for her students “who know nothing whatever of the Jewish people or their religion.” The materials “would aim to
produce in these children the feeling that they hold much in common with those of the Jewish faith, to stress likenesses in people rather than differences, and to give them an admiration for those things which are beautiful and of moral and cultural value in the religion and history of the Jewish race.” Wright was well aware of the climate: “Children hear so much that is negative today, and I’m sure there are many teachers like myself who wish they could help in combating ignorance and intolerance with more positive constructive material than we have found available.” She hoped to bring her students to see the museum one Sunday morning and asked if someone would be available to answer questions “about the things in [the] Museum and explain them to the children.”

Two incidents of other children visiting the museum make clear that Romanoff was able to provide the kind of experience Wright sought. The first incident occurred among literal neighbors. In 1939, Romanoff entertained a prolonged series of visits with the nuns who taught at the school associated with neighboring Corpus Christi Church located around the corner from JTS. Prior to this extended engagement, the seminary building had been “continually annoyed by the children of the neighborhood, the Museum especially, by the throwing of pebbles at the windows, sometimes breaking panes of glass, or while visiting the Museum the children would mutilate the labels on the objects or carry them away or leave the place untidy, particularly the American room.” As Romanoff reasoned to Finkelstein, “The children are not bad,” but rather “social conditions and their ignorance of our Institution are to blame. In view of the fact that [Father Charles E.] Coughlin meetings are constantly being held on the street corners near the Seminary, all this feeling has been intensified.” Romanoff hosted the nuns for multiple visits and “lectured for several hours” about the objects and Jewish customs. Following this elaborate tour for the educators, several groups of children visited. They were reportedly, Romanoff said, “interested in the meaning of the objects as never before, asking proper questions, as I explain the beauty and symbols of the collection.” The vandalism stopped.

Around the same time, Anna Wright, the previously mentioned teacher from St. James Church School, wrote to Romanoff to extol the combination of the objects and context provided in Romanoff’s talk. She explained that they were so moved by his presentation that they had gathered money to send to the museum: “They suggest that if it is not feasible for you to use the money in some way toward the museum itself, you pass it on, if that seems best, toward Jewish Refugee relief or anything else according to your judgment
for your people,—not that the money in itself is much but the feeling which prompted offering it was truly heartfelt.”

Although it is difficult to parse the longer-term outcome from museum visits, their interest in sending support suggests that an empathy-building experience had occurred. The connections Romanoff’s talk helped them make between objects in a museum and the humanity of a people compelled the students to action, as seen in their desire to dedicate funds for refugee relief.

Museum educator Theodore Low also proposed an expanded role for museums. *The Museum as a Social Instrument*, written for the American Association of Museums and published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1942, described the potential for museums to “become social instruments and communicate values.”

Now celebrated for his “forward thinking ideas” and populist approach to museum accessibility, Low, like many museum critics in this period, was also a product of the Progressive Era, including its racial politics. As Ceglio’s work for this volume makes clear, the broader public imagined for museums was tacitly understood as racially white and could be limited in terms of class. Low described the role of museums in “strengthening that thing which we like to call ‘the American Way of Life.’”

To “American,” we might add “Christian.” If museums were expected to help constitute a democratic citizenry, perhaps one of the more radical notions of the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects in the 1930s was to constitute a politically or socially engaged citizenry in a way that made fewer assumptions about a citizen’s ethnic and racial identity. The public Romanoff imagined was less homogenous, less nationalist, and distinctly less Protestant than Low might have fantasized.

One limitation to this broad engagement with audience is detectable in the particular ways that Romanoff understood the educational value of the collection for Christian scholars and laypeople. When recounting his work with Corpus Christi Church, Romanoff explained that he was compelled not only to explain Jewish objects and customs but also to explore, as he put it, “the origins of many of their ceremonies . . . in our ritual, and that the Bible, New Testament and many of their customs could be visually illustrated by the objects in our Museum.”

After a visit to the museum, a Christian theology student reported, “I was wishing that I had been able to benefit by a course on Jewish customs and beliefs at the hand of a Hebrew Scholar in advance rather than to have been dependent solely on what I had gained through a study of Old and New Testament teaching at the hand of one of our teachers. If this had been the case I could have then interpreted the New Testament more
The historic roots of Christianity in Judaism, as Romanoff must have experienced while studying religion at Yale, were of great interest to practicing Christians and to theologians and historians. In using Jewish ceremonial objects and texts to illuminate Christianity, Romanoff responded to a desire from Christian visitors and correspondents for a deeper understanding of the roots of their faith. However, he was also taking advantage of this angle to align his institution with the powerful majority. In this interpretive approach, the understanding sought by Christian visitors was linked to a shared Judeo-Christian history rather than an appreciation and respect for difference. In making Judaism available in the service of Christianity, Romanoff might have participated in the process of claiming “Whiteness” for the Jewish “race” by establishing a commonality with the dominant, White, Christian culture. While a reasonable intellectual approach to the material due to historical connections, and a smart strategy for outreach given the population of a country (if not a city) with such a small percentage of Jews, the forming of bonds over a shared history, by intent or not, would exclude adherents to religions other than Judaism and Christianity. It normalized a shared Judeo-Christian core to the exclusion of other faith traditions. As Eric Goldstein recounts in his book-length study of Jews becoming White (after long being considered an unassimilable other, including being ascribed a physical and cultural likeness to African Americans at the turn of the century and beyond), “Claiming the status of ‘whites’ in America was far from simple for Jews. It involved a complex emotional process in which conflicting desires for acceptance and distinctiveness often found no easy balance.”

“A More or Less Fixed Thing”

Given their lack of support for Romanoff’s work, it appears that the curator’s superiors were either unaware of or unconvinced by the arguments about the productive nature of interfaith dialogue based in museum collections. Adler’s, and later Finkelstein’s, reluctance requires additional explanation because the Seminary did not shy away from the connections between an ancient religion, contemporary practice, and modern life. A declaration of the rationale for the JTS Social Justice Committee, launched in 1933, read,

These are times when social and economic problems force themselves with greater compulsion than ever upon the attention of spiritual leaders. We do not have to go out to look for them. They are right at our doorstep. . . .
Not only are the questions of world peace, social and economic justice, and the relationships between religious and racial groups within our land, so pressing and circumambient, that only those can remain aloof who are deliberately and willfully neglectful, but the determination of many of these questions is actually in the balance.88

In his extramuseum activities, Adler was an activist on behalf of Jewish causes, and Seminary initiatives instituted by Finkelstein sought to establish intercultural dialogue.89 So what, in addition to the explanations previously explored, might account for Adler and Finkelstein’s resistance to the curator’s ideas? Miller and Cohen suggest that Adler never imagined this would be Romanoff’s lifelong career, assuming he would move on after finding his footing in the United States. They write that Adler understood himself to be helping “a poor scholar by offering him a temporary job.”90 Like Grossman, they saw the stresses of the Depression as an influence on Adler’s resistance to investing in the museum.91 A 1938 letter from Arthur Oppenheimer to Adler supports this understanding of the museum as a distraction to the underlying mission: “The salary which we pay him was all that the position was worth to us.”92 There may also have been a personal disconnect for which it is difficult to uncover direct evidence in the historical record. The Romanoffs may have been too solicitous or seemed too uncouth to Adler and Finkelstein, who were more socially established—evidence of the cultural divide between the immigrant Paul Romanoff and the American-born chancellors.

A more broad-reaching explanation might well be a difference of opinion about the mission of a museum. Wedded to an older object-driven model of collection and preservation, neither Adler nor Finkelstein was concerned with reaching new audiences, building relationships between museum and community, or engaging with the role of the museum that Romanoff proposed and enacted. They were either not able or not willing to imagine how the interpretation of material culture could actively inform a social agenda, even one advanced by the Seminary in other programs. That they did not see a role for the museum, or its object lessons, in the Seminary’s work is what Adler likely meant in his dismissive and cruel letter to Romanoff: “I told you that I regarded the little museum as a more or less fixed thing.” While Adler, unlike Schechter before him, might have appreciated the idea put forward by the field of Jewish archaeology that objects have something to add to the textual record, what to do with that heritage and how it might be useful on
the front lines of building relationships across community seems to have held little interest for Adler. It was Paul Romanoff alone at the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects—scholar, published author, docent, lecturer, marketing facilitator, and outreach coordinator—who was in tune with the idea of the museum as a “social instrument.”

The back-and-forth between Romanoff and his superiors took on a heart-breaking urgency midway through 1939 as his health diminished (according to his account in his letters) due to malnourishment from a diet too reliant on starchy (we can assume inexpensive) foods. In March the following year, he wrote to Finkelstein, after the chancellor granted a small raise:

Since you were kind enough to evince a material interest in my welfare, I am sure you will be pleased to know that the temporary interest you allowed me has really started me on the road to good health. Obviously, if this increase is withdrawn, I would soon find myself in perhaps a worse condition than heretofore. My physician tells me that my illness is the result of malnutrition and complete lack of vitamins. Returning to those conditions responsible for my illness may prove fatal.

In December 1943, Bertha Romanoff buried her husband, who had died at the age of forty-five, in Congregation Mishkan Israel Cemetery in New Haven, her hometown.

Shortly after, in January 1944, philanthropist Frieda Schiff Warburg made what was most likely an unsolicited donation of her mansion on Fifth Avenue and Ninety-Second Street to the Seminary as a new home for the museum. Romanoff had died less than a month before, but it is unlikely that Finkelstein would have considered him an appropriate curator for the new museum. In fact, at the opening of the museum in 1947, the press coverage mentioned only the newly appointed curator, art historian Stephen Keyser, and librarian Alexander Marx as the keepers of the collection until that point, deleting any record of Romanoff’s years of dedicated service. The hiring of Keyser signaled a new direction for what would henceforth be called the Jewish Museum. The new location provided the opportunity to more easily draw an audience from the non-Jewish world. To do so, the museum would turn its attention to collecting and exhibiting contemporary art (mostly but not exclusively by Jewish artists) to establish itself as a “museum among museums, rather than a Jewish institution among other Jewish institutions”
(although it would retain and still holds an outstanding collection of ceremonial objects to this day). Now the answer to the question of what this Jewish Museum would and should exhibit became more complicated; mission statements made claims about universal aesthetic standards. By its second anniversary, the Jewish Museum had attracted 175,000 visitors.

The editors of the aptly named anthology *Museum Frictions* describe the tensions that still exist within museums and thus the faulty logic that approaches any particular institution as a single text. Similarly, in her article about Historic Weeksville—the African American site in Brooklyn, New York—Jennifer Scott documents the loss of momentum for particular agendas with staff changes. These two examples suggest that perhaps institutions themselves are never radical, but rather supply a shifting ground on which forces so inclined may or may not activate their radicalism. Institutions, it seems, if we understand Adler’s phrase somewhat more optimistically, are either a more or a less fixed thing. With that in mind, we might consider how to revise the history of museums by looking not only at the interpretation and practices that have won out but also at individuals who have seen the potential to use a museum space to advance visitors toward a more peaceful, respectful, or multivalent world view. Paul Romanoff’s tenure of thirteen years at the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects provides us with one such case study.

Notes

1. In 1947, the trustees of the museum’s parent organization, the Jewish Theological Seminary, shifted the focus to contemporary art and moved to new, grander quarters in the Fifth Avenue mansion where the Jewish Museum exists to this day.

2. The significant exception to this erasure is the only full-length article on the history of the Jewish Museum, Julie Miller and Richard I. Cohen, “A Collision of Cultures: The Jewish Museum and the Jewish Theological Seminary, 1904–1971,” in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America*, ed. Jack Wertheimer, 2 vols. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), 2:311–61. I draw largely on Miller and Cohen’s work in this article. However, because Miller and Cohen’s article treats a longer span of time, only nine of its fifty pages are dedicated to the 1930s. The article situates the Jewish Museum in the context of its parent organization, the Jewish Theological Seminary, not the history of American museums. Other treatments of the museum’s early decades exclude Romanoff entirely. See Brett Drucker’s unpublished thesis, “Two Visions, Two Publics: The Jewish Museum and the Skirball Jewish Center” (master’s thesis, University of Southern
California, 2008). Drucker only discusses Cyrus Adler, Seminary chancellor and Romanoff’s boss.


7 Weil, 199. Weil’s reading is based on the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Metropolitan Museum of Art, South Kensington Museum, British Museum, and in a nod to historic sites in the United States, Mount Vernon.


9 Cabrera, “Beyond Dust,” 47.


11 The Jewish Theological Seminary, founded in 1886, ordained Conservative rabbis in order to preserve the knowledge and practice of traditional Judaism outside the confines of the Orthodox movement. See Wertheimer, *Tradition Renewed*.


20 On the development of the collection, see Miller and Cohen, “Collision of Cultures,” 312–19.

21 For a treatment of Adler’s approach to ethnographic and religious objects, and his articles on the topic, see Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, “Exhibiting Jews,” in *Destination Culture*, 78–128. The discussion of Adler’s work for the Smithsonian is on
On Adler’s recommendation of Romanoff, see Paul Romanoff, letter to Cyrus Adler, December 22, 1931, Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.

23 The 1940 US census reports Romanoff’s place of birth as Poland, although Miller and Cohen identify his country of origin as Russia (Miller and Cohen, “Collision of Cultures,” 319). This may be due to the annexation of the territories of Poland by Germany and the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, perhaps suggesting that Romanoff’s hometown (which I have not been able to discover) was in the eastern area of Poland annexed by Russia.

24 In New Haven, he likely met his future wife, Bertha Blum, who was living there with her mother. In 1930, Blum (variously recorded as being born in New York and Connecticut) was the sole support for her widowed mother, Sophia, with whom she lived at 47 Orange Street. She was thirty years old and working at a finance company. “1930 United States Federal Census. Connecticut. New Haven District 0050,” US Census Bureau, 1930, accessed through Ancestry.com, March 8, 2021, https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/6224/images/4531880_00338?ssrc=&backlabel=Return.


26 Paul Romanoff, letter to Cyrus Adler, May 19, 1932, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39. According to census records, in April 1935, the bachelor Romanoff was living at 502 W. 122nd Street, apartment 298, down the street from the Seminary. Five years later, Paul and Bertha were married, living in the same apartment, paying $45 in rent per month. The $540 annual expense for housing would have eaten up 32% of the $1,700 annual salary that Romanoff reported making as a curator. He also reported having some additional sources of income, but they must have been minimal. “1940 United States Federal Census for Paul Romanoff. New York. New York 31–1170 (Enumeration District) (Image 30 of 40),” US Census Bureau, 1940, accessed through Ancestry.com, March 8, 2021, https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2442/images/m-t0627-02652-00295?usePUB=true&_phsrc=tLT1&_phstart=succesSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=5875891.

27 Cyrus Adler, letter to Paul Romanoff, July 6, 1938, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.

28 Paul Romanoff, letter to Cyrus Adler, July 17, 1938, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.

29 Grossman, Judaica, 55.


32 Ivan Karp et al., eds., Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 3. For an elaboration of this argument, see Bennett, Birth of the Museum.


Fine, Art and Judaism, 1.


Grossman, Judaica, 38.

Grossman, 37.


Miller and Cohen, 316.

Romanoff references the “American Room” in Paul Romanoff, letter to Louis Finkelstein, November 24, 1939, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.

I am grateful to Rachel Donaldson for suggesting this context for Romanoff’s curatorial work.


Attendance in 1932 was 10,673, with annual totals for the following years recorded at 12,375 (1933), 14,026 (1934), 22,345 (1935), 13,727 (1936), 14,243 (1937), 20,180 (1938), 13,840 (1940), and 6,700 (January–May 1941). “Museum, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Attendance, December 1931–April 1939” and
“Museum, Jewish Theological Seminary, Attendance, 1940/1941,” JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.


Paul Romanoff, letter to Alexander Marx, May 18, 1939, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.

Romanoff.

The glossary is described first in a memo from Romanoff to Adler dated November 2, 1937, and then again on May 18, 1939. JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.


The article was published in a Yiddish periodical in 1936. Information on this article is included in the Center for Jewish History database of publications.


On the Newark Museum and lending, see John Cotton Dana, The New Museum (Woodstock, VT: Elm Tree, 1917), 16.

Comment from J. L. Moulton, Club Executive Committee, New Haven, CT, in “Comments on Dr. Romanoff’s Lectures.”

Comment from Child Education Foundation, NY, in “Comments on Dr. Romanoff’s Lectures.”


“Museum, Attendance, 1940/1941.”

Comment from Cong Shaari Israel of Brooklyn, NY, in “Comments on Dr. Romanoff’s Lectures.”

Anna Wright, letter to Paul Romanoff, December 5, 1939, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.

Paul Romanoff, letter to Cyrus Adler, November 12, 1936, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.


Grossman, Judaica, 37.

Years after the Columbia Exposition, Adler considered how the Section of Historic Religious Ceremonials was developed for the fair. He explained, “There was doubt, however, in the minds of many as to whether the abstract ideas which group themselves about the word ‘religion’ could be adequately or even fairly portrayed through


71 Clarissa J. Ceglio, from an earlier draft of “Imperfectly Progressive: The Social Mission of Museums in the 1930s,” in this volume. My discussion of the museum literature of the 1930s and 1940s is indebted to Ceglio’s synthesis of interwar professional museum publications.


73 Paul Romanoff, letter to Cyrus Adler, March 22, 1939, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.

74 Paul Romanoff, letter to Cyrus Adler, May 10, 1939, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.

75 Romanoff, letter to Adler, March 22, 1939 (reference to the New York World’s Fair); Romanoff, letter to Marx.

76 Dorothy Wright, letter to Paul Romanoff, March 14, 1939, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.

77 The stationary lists the church’s address as 529 West 121st Street.

78 Paul Romanoff, letter to Cyrus Adler, November 24, 1939, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.

79 Adler references the right-wing, anticommunist Father Charles E. Coughlin who hosted a popular radio program in the 1930s. Coughlin used his magazine, *Social Justice*, to spread support for fascism and defame a host of perceived threats to American liberty. Among his targets were individual Jewish leaders and Jewish institutions, which would explain why his followers congregated on the corner outside JTS. By 1938, Coughlin had developed the Christian Front, a mouthpiece for anti-Semitic propaganda and a philosophy of isolationism.

80 Romanoff, letter to Finkelstein, November 24, 1939.

81 Wright, letter to Romanoff, December 5, 1939.

82 Quoted in Shapiro, “Public and Museum,” 36, 248.

83 On the connection to the Progressive Era museum, see Ceglio, “Imperfectly Progressive,” in this volume.

published in 1942 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the American Association of Museums.

85 Romanoff, letter to Adler, November 24, 1939.
86 “Comments on Dr. Romanoff’s Lectures.”
89 On Adler, see Grossman, Judaica, 29. For Finkelstein’s era, see Miller and Cohen, “Collision of Cultures,” 325–27. See also Jeffrey Shandler and Elihu Katz, “Broadcasting American Judaism: The Radio and Television Department at the Jewish Theological Seminary,” in Tradition Renewed, 2:365–401. The Institute for Religious and Social Studies (IRSS), open to clergy of all faiths, used culture to bridge religious as well as cultural divides. The Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion ran meetings for scholars in the sciences and humanities. By 1944, the IRSS had also established a weekly radio show, The Eternal Light, produced by the Seminary and broadcast over NBC, which aimed to increase “understanding among people, knowing that tolerance, understanding, and peace go hand in hand.”
92 A[rther] O[ppenheimer], letter to Cyrus Adler, August 24, 1938, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39, and also in Miller and Cohen, 320n35.
93 Romanoff, letter to Adler, May 10, 1939, JTS, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39, RG 1, series A, box 22, folder 39.
96 Miller and Cohen, “Collision of Cultures,” 327.
98 Karp et al., Museum Frictions, 1–3.