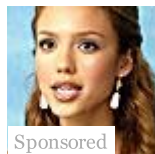




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Lost diary of tortured Mexican 'converso' features in early-American Jewish exhibit

Manuscript by Luis de Carvajal was missing for 75 years until spotted by a keen-eyed collector. Now it joins others on display at the New-York Historical Society

BY PENNY SCHWARTZ | December 18, 2016, 11:42 pm |

NEW YORK — In the closing years of the 16th century, as the Holy Inquisition reached across the ocean to Spanish and Portuguese territories, Luis de Carvajal the Younger was put on trial by the Mexican Inquisition, suspected of being a Jew. The Spanish-born de Carvajal (1567–1596) was from a family of “converso” Jews who had converted to Catholicism. He was living in Mexico, where his uncle served as the governor of Leon.

Under torture, de Carvajal betrayed more than 120 people who continued to practice their faith in secret. He and many of his family were burned at the stake.

Long a familiar name to scholars, de Carvajal kept a meticulously written diary, penned under the pseudonym Joseph Lumbroso. While there were some transcriptions, the original diary disappeared in 1939 from the National Archives of Mexico.

Earlier this year, though, a keen-eyed collector spotted the de Carvajal diary at auction and helped orchestrate its return.

Now, for the first time in more than 75 years, the newly recovered memoir — measuring only four inches by three inches — along with other de Carvajal religious manuscripts, are on view as part of “[The First Jewish Americans: Freedom and Culture in the New World](#),” a stunning and eye-opening exhibit that runs through February 26, 2017, at the [New-York Historical Society](#).

The exhibit, which boasts more than 170 objects including rare early portraits, drawings, paintings, maps, books, documents and ritual objects, traces the arrival of Jews in the New World and sheds light on the ways in which Jews were influenced by and left an enduring mark on the

emerging nation. A trio of de Carvajal's handwritten books are believed to be the earliest extant Jewish manuscripts from the Americas.

There's a common misconception that American Jewish history is a story of the middle-to-late 19th and early-20th centuries, says Debra Schmidt Bach, the historical society's curator of decorative arts.

"But there's a very rich history of American settlement and Jewish community in the Colonial period. They made very important inroads that paved the way," for later generations, Bach told The Times of Israel.

Much of the exhibit's material is from the collection of Leonard L. Milberg, a 1953 alumnus of Princeton University. Today, Milberg's alma mater houses a large portion of his collection. Last spring, the Princeton University Art Museum mounted a similar exhibit and published "By Dawn's Early Light," the essay-rich catalog with 75 full-color illustrations that accompanies the current show.

By drawing on its own extensive collection along with other sources, the New York Historical Society presents a fascinating visual historical narrative for this little-known but influential period in the emergence of Jewish life in America.

Milberg's 'amazing find'

It was just a few months before the exhibit opened in late October when Milberg, a learned and savvy New York City collector, noticed the de Carvajal items listed in a catalog from Swann Auction Galleries.

"It was too good to be true. They must be either copies or forgeries," he recalled thinking at the time. He headed over to the gallery to get an up-close look at the manuscripts. "I thought they were extraordinary," he recalled in a phone conversation with The Times of Israel.

The gallery removed the items from its auction and over the next few days and weeks scholars examined the manuscripts and authenticated them as the originals that had disappeared. Through diplomatic channels, Milberg arranged the repatriation of de Carvajal's diary to the Mexican National Archives, which agreed to loan the manuscripts to the NYHS for the exhibit.

Milberg's recovery of the diary was remarkable, noted Bach. "It was an amazing find," she said.

The museum's conservation department digitized the fragile documents and donated copies of the folio to the Mexican government, Princeton University and to Brown University.

Jewish life from the Caribbean to New Amsterdam

The first section of the exhibit opens with the world of Jewish life in the Caribbean colonies. Even as late as the mid-18th century, there were more Jews in [Curacao](#), [Suriname](#) and [Jamaica](#) than in all of North America, according to accompanying wall texts. A 1718 map shows the Jewish settlement of Suriname, founded in 1667. A rabbinical letter from 1767 certifies as kosher a shipment of food from Philadelphia to Barbados.

Several documents reveal the ways in which Jews found themselves on both sides of the issue of slavery, from Barbados to New York.

In the section on North America, the exhibit focuses on Jewish colonial life in New York, Philadelphia and Charleston, home to the largest Jewish community in North America until the 1830s.

Several items relate to New York's Congregation Shearith Israel, the first Jewish congregation in colonial North America, including a large Torah scroll, one of two burned by British soldiers during the Revolutionary War, and a beautifully illustrated ketubah, a Jewish wedding contract. A delicately crafted set of silver Torah finials (1775-1776) were made for the synagogue by Myer Myers, one of the top silversmiths of colonial America, who served as the congregation's president.

The Levy-Franks family, among early New York's most prominent Jewish families, is captured in a stunning series of six portraits by New York artist Gerardus Duyckinck I.

In the section on Philadelphia, there's an exquisite Thomas Sully portrait of Rebecca Gratz (1831), that calls attention to this influential Philadelphia-born Jewish woman, a forward-thinking innovator who initiated the creation of Jewish Sunday schools and the benevolent society for Jewish women.

Women, including Penina Moise (1797-1880), a Charleston poet who left her mark in both secular and Jewish circles, played a significant role in reforming religious practice tailored for American-born Jews. Her book of hymns for Charleston's Beth Elohim is on display, as is her portrait by Theodore Sidney Moise (1808-1885), her nephew.

An oil painting of the interior of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim by Moise's contemporary, Solomon Nunes Carvalho (1815-1897), was made by the artist based entirely on memory of his childhood synagogue after it burned in 1838 in the city's devastating fire.

Carvalho was a pioneering daguerreotype photographer who accompanied explorer John Fremont on his 1853 fifth westward expedition across the Rockies. His bestselling chronicle about the expedition is on view along with other paintings related to the trip.

A new documentary, "[Carvalho's Journey](#)," by Steven Rivo, chronicles the little known story. A later painting, "[Abraham Lincoln and Diogenes](#)" (1865), owned by the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, makes a rare appearance.

The closing section describes an age of experimentation in intellectual and artistic expression by Jewish Americans that includes a wealth of plays, poetry, religious texts and musical compositions, many part of Milberg's collection. There's also a large portrait of Uriah Phillips Levy, who rose to the rank of Commodore in the US Navy, along with his sword and scabbard. Levy is credited with persuading Congress to end the practice of flogging in the Navy.

There are two paintings by the renowned 19th century artist Camille Pissarro. The impressionist artist, whose mother was Jewish, was born on St. Thomas. Both paintings depict scenes from his native Caribbean island.

For his part, Milberg said that he hopes the exhibit brings to light the ways in which Jews were part of America from its beginnings.

“I wanted to show that Jews were an important part of the fabric of America,” he said.

Two related programs are scheduled at The New-York Historical Society. Monday, January 30: Jews in America: From the Colonial Period to the Civil War, with Dale Rosengarten, Rabbi Meir Y. Soloveichik, and Louis Mirrer. Wednesday, February 15: Jews and the Making of Modern America, with Abraham Foxman

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