

Letter Arts Review



\$14.50

REVIEWS

BOOKS

Megillat Esther

A limited facsimile edition
of 295 numbered copies

ISBN 0 948223 251

Published by Facsimile Editions Ltd

www.facsimile-editions.com

Scroll: 10.8cm x 168cm

Scroll Case: 27cm x 3.7 cm diameter

Weight: approximately 262 grams

Commentary Volume 64 pages (ed. Jeremy
Schonfield, Mason Lecturer, Oxford Centre
for Hebrew and Jewish Studies)

Michael and Linda Falter of Facsimile Editions have been producing fine facsimiles of rare Hebrew illuminated manuscripts for twenty-five years and this exciting project celebrates that fact.

Facsimile Editions have collaborated with silversmiths in the past but this is their first silver *objet d'art*. The result is a replica of extraordinary accuracy.

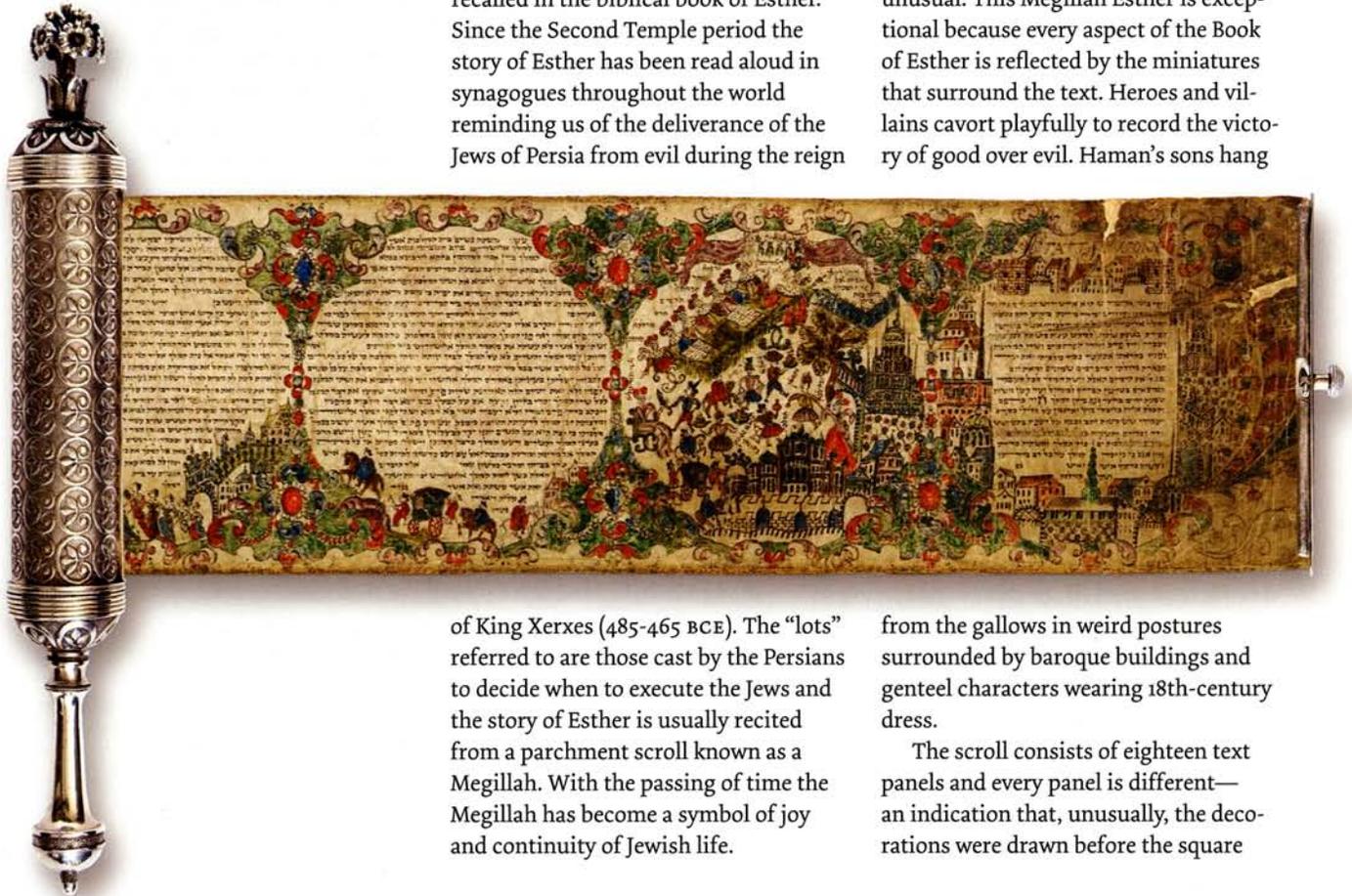
THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Purim is the Jewish festival of “Lots,” i.e., the casting of lots. This joyful festival usually falls during the month of March and commemorates the events recalled in the biblical book of Esther. Since the Second Temple period the story of Esther has been read aloud in synagogues throughout the world reminding us of the deliverance of the Jews of Persia from evil during the reign

This particular illustrated Megillah Esther is a most exquisite and unusual replica of a piece in the Gross Family Collection (located in Israel). Bill Gross started his formidable collection at the age of six encompassing every aspect of Judaica from postage stamps to rare manuscripts. They form part of what he calls his ‘window theory of Judaica’ through which we can view and learn about Jewish life of the past.

ABOUT THE SCROLL

Esther scrolls are not all that rare but illuminated Esther scrolls are very unusual. This Megillah Esther is exceptional because every aspect of the Book of Esther is reflected by the miniatures that surround the text. Heroes and villains cavort playfully to record the victory of good over evil. Haman’s sons hang



of King Xerxes (485-465 BCE). The “lots” referred to are those cast by the Persians to decide when to execute the Jews and the story of Esther is usually recited from a parchment scroll known as a Megillah. With the passing of time the Megillah has become a symbol of joy and continuity of Jewish life.

from the gallows in weird postures surrounded by baroque buildings and genteel characters wearing 18th-century dress.

The scroll consists of eighteen text panels and every panel is different—an indication that, unusually, the decorations were drawn before the square



Hebrew text was written. (Eighteen is the numeric value of the Hebrew word Chai, meaning life.)

THE MAKING OF THE FACSIMILE

The project has been an international collaboration with English, Israeli and Italian craftsmen working together to combine the latest digital technologies with the age-old processes of parchment-making and lost-wax casting. According to Bill Gross, owner of the original manuscript, the replica is virtually indistinguishable from the original. The key to accurate reproduction is good photography and for this the *Falters* commissioned photographer David Harris who lives and works in Jerusalem. The manuscript was photographed with meticulous precision to capture all the minute detail of the original. Great care was taken to ensure the accurate reproduction of the delicate colors and even the stains on the parchment. This gives the facsimile the character of the original and contributes to the unique quality for which the publishers have gained world renown.

The parchment for this project is hand-made in England by William Cowley, one of the world's finest and long-established traditional parchment makers. It takes approximately two months to prepare each skin which,

when ready for use, matches the quality and texture of the original.

Each new project comes with its own daunting problems and challenges. The creation of this facsimile required the development of several innovative processes to overcome problems encountered when wet ink meets parchment. Parchment, as a natural substance, is extremely sensitive to even the smallest change in humidity. The printed sheet reacts to the wetness of the ink and differences in humidity between the warmer air inside the printing press and the cooler air outside. The work of Facsimile Editions in overcoming these problems will lead the way to new facsimile reproductions on parchment. When the printing is complete the sections are glued together making one long parchment scroll containing the entire text. The completed parchment is fixed to the central winding spindle and wound back into the silver case. The scroll is reproduced at 1.17 times original size.

THE SCROLL CASE

The case for this Megillah is a hand-made sterling silver replica of a case in the Gross collection. The original case was created in 1824 by Lorenz Pfalzer in Vienna. This has been copied by a Russian silversmith living in Israel,

known as Leonid. Every case has been individually cast, finished and polished by hand. After completion, the silver cases were submitted to the Standards Institute of Israel where they were tested, issued with a Certificate of purity and hallmarked. The cases are individually numbered, and accompanied by a signed and numbered certificate. After completion of the entire project the printing plates and moulds were destroyed, thus protecting the investment value of each copy. The scroll is presented in a high quality acrylic display case.

COMMENTARY VOLUME

In the Commentary Volume Emile Schrijver¹ and Falk Wiesemann² unravel the intricacies of the scroll and its illustrations which can only be really understood and appreciated when simultaneously compared with the text. They discuss the origins and dating of the scroll, the type of Hebrew script used and whether the text or the images came first. The authors also explore the materials used in the production of the scroll and its silver case. The commentary volume will provide an understanding and appreciation of the artistic quality and cultural background of the megillah and its delicate silver case. The result is an exquisite work of art which will be treasured for generations to come.

Frances Spiegel

Frances Spiegel is a freelance writer based in London, England. She researches and writes on subjects related to calligraphy, art history and travel. She would like to thank Linda and Michael at Facsimile Editions, London, for their help and advice in writing this article. The image of the Facsimile of Megillat Esther, with permission of Facsimile Editions, London. See more at www.facsimile-editions.com.

¹ Emile Schrijver is an expert in eighteenth-century Hebrew printed books and manuscripts. Schrijver is Curator of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana (Amsterdam).

² Falk Wiesemann is Professor of Modern History at the Heinrich Heine University (Germany) and a specialist in German Jewish history and folk art.



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