



Chasing Down An Unknown History: The Story of A Ketubah

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Methodology

- Examining the document and focusing on what I could physically see in the text and the illustration
- Researching the history of ketubahs, their artistic symbols, and how they were made
- Researching the names of the married couple on this document through genealogical databases - still in progress

Findings

- A ketubah is a formal Jewish marriage contract that defines the duties and responsibilities of husband and wife towards each other and establishes the financial responsibilities that the husband has towards his wife in the event of his death or a divorce. The ketubah along with a summary of additional conditions not specifically outlined in the document are usually read together right before or during the marriage ceremony. The additional conditions would include details like the specific amount of money that would be paid to a bride or any property that would be transferred.
- Ketubahs are not only legal documents, but also prized wedding mementos. They were typically framed and hung in a prominent place in the couple's home as a reminder of what they had promised to each other in their marriage.
- The artwork of a ketubah traditionally incorporated symbols and motifs that were important to the couple or important to the marriage they wanted to have. For example, the plant motifs in this ketubah likely represented the life cycle. The lion faces are emblems of strength and courage, as well as a symbol for Judah. Architectural motifs were also commonly used to symbolize the building of a Jewish home. Because of the personalized nature of the document's artwork, it is likely that the artwork was designed first and then printed. The blanks would have all been filled in afterwards by the couple and their witnesses.

Technical Analysis: How was this made?

Printing process: This document was likely printed using offset printing, a method accidentally discovered/invented by American printer Ira Rubel in 1904. Offset printing was completed on a three-cylinder press. The first cylinder holds the metal plate where the ink is held, the second is covered with a sheet of rubber that the inked image transfers to, and the final cylinder presses the paper in contact with the rubber to offset the image.

The ink: The ink would have been made of two components: the pigment and the carrier. The pigment is the dye itself; for example, the earliest inks used charcoal or soot as the main pigment to create black ink. The carrier is what the pigment is mixed with to transfer it to the paper. In the early 1900s, the ink would have likely used petroleum or chemical-based carriers and chemical-based pigments rather than naturally occurring ones as in previous decades.



Ketubah

United States, 1916 or prior
Printed colored ink on paper
23 in by 18.5 in

Provenance

The Mollie & Louis Kaplan Museum of Judaica History, 1970s to present

- This ketubah was originally found unexpectedly among some museum items that were in the process of being catalogued. Many constituents of Congregation Beth Yeshurun were called and asked about the document, but no one knew the people who were named in the document.

References

Encyclopedia Britannica, "The History of Ink: Beyond the Box" from Nolsue, *The Palgrave Dictionary of Medieval Anglo-Jewish History*, Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions, Danny Azoulay, The Mollie & Louis Kaplan Museum of Judaica History, "Iconography" and "Ketubbah from Jewish Virtual Library, "Symbolism in Jewish Art" by Heather Okin, Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University

Formal Analysis: What can we learn from what we can see?

Text

- The title of the document reads "Certificate of Marriage," and there is text written in Hebrew on two boxes on either side of the title. The left side translates to "the son-in-law's voice and every joy."



- The body text of the document is split into two halves. The left side is written in English and is a full translation of the right side, which has the traditional text of a ketubah written in Aramaic.
- According to a translation conducted by the museum, the first portion of the Aramaic translation reads: "On the first day of the week, the 12th day of the month of Elul, the year 5676, corresponding to the 10th of September, 1916, the holy covenant of marriage was entered into by the bridegroom, Elijah, the son of Herschel Frankel, and his bride Razel, daughter of Moshe Aaron Kaminsky."

Illustration

- Primary Colors: White paper; brown, orange, and blue detailing in the illustration. All the text on this document is in black ink.
- Illustrated Frame: A series of interlocking brown and blue connectors. Tiny orange and brown dots interspersed within the connectors. Each of the corners has a slightly different design like the handle of a fancy key with a spade at the top.
- Inner border: Red with small brown dots, almost like a beaded pattern. The bottom of the inner border is about double the width of the upper section with brownish-purple flowers. Every other flower has a blue center.



- Top portion of illustration: Acts like curtains overhead. The main pattern is brown diamonds outlined in blue with tiny pinkish-orange dots at each of the four corners of the diamond. An arc is created underneath the main pattern by a series of orange loops with brown tassel shapes on the ends.
- Columns: Three Greco-Roman style architectural columns on the left, middle, and right of the illustration. The columns have orange tops with plant symbols underneath. Each column has a circular lion's face in brown surrounded by a blue square. The columns then have a chevron pattern at the top and bottom of the next section with a few diamond-shaped symbols in the center. The bases of the columns are large bowl/bulb shapes sitting on top of drum shapes.