

## 10.

**Jewish Wedding Ring with Miniature Building**Central or Western Europe, 19<sup>th</sup> century

Height 33.8 mm; exterior diam. of hoop 21.5 mm; bezel 10.5 x 13.9 mm

Weight 10.7 grams

U.S. size 8; U.K. size P ½

The flat hoop of this gold ring surrounds the finger; its lower half has grooved lines on the outer side that imitate the shaft of a column or pilaster in relief with engraved details. The slightly enlarged shoulders terminate in a geometric-style column top. On either side of the hoop forming the shoulder is a hand in opaque white *ronde bosse* enamel. Both hands clasp the bezel, which is shaped like a small castle with rectangular ground plan but curved on the underside to conform to the finger when worn. The windows are square arched. Four coarsely formed lion heads appear on all four side walls, rather like gargoyles. The roof is gabled with tiles, and the corners of the building are accentuated by small crenellated turrets. The detailed motifs are mainly engraved.

The motif of two hands unified as a *dextrarum iunctio*, a gesture symbolizing the acceptance of the marriage contract, dates back to Roman times; it became fashionable again in Western Europe during the Renaissance and continued to be popular into the nineteenth century. The symbolism of clasped hands or a heart on a betrothal or wedding ring is a Western European tradition, but the clasping of an architectural structure is an iconographic feature characteristic of Jewish marriage rings.<sup>1</sup> These often have a house, chapel, or even as here, a castle-like building. The earliest surviving examples of Jewish marriage rings that come from well-documented archeological finds are those from the Colmar and Erfurt Treasures, dating to the first half of the fourteenth century, although the practice dates back well into the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The rings found in Colmar and Erfurt all have bezels with a small building in



differing designs. There are various interpretations of the architectural motif's significance, ranging from Solomon's Temple, the Dome of the Rock, the synagogue, or more likely in this context, the Torah's vision of the house symbolizing the wedded couple's future life and home. Gertrud Seidmann quotes a saying from the Talmud: "His house is his wife," which gives the latter a further meaning.<sup>3</sup>

**The aedicule or architectural form on a ring in fact occurs on Byzantine rings** of the sixth to seventh centuries.<sup>4</sup> Jewish marriage rings have often been associated with Venice or northern Italy, where there were large Jewish communities, mainly of Sephardic Jews from various parts of Europe, and the influence of Greek craftsmen in the Mediterranean is well known. In recent years it has become evident that Jewish marriage rings have their origin in several regions of Europe; traditions from the countries in which the families lived were influential.<sup>5</sup> Thus determining the origin of a Jewish marriage ring is often complicated. The style and iconography of this ring point to a Western European tradition, including its use in Central Europe.

**In recent years goldsmiths specialized in Judaica have taken on the challenge** of re-creating rings with such architectural structures in a contemporary idiom; an example made in 1977 by Moshe Zabari (b. 1935 in Israel) is in the Jewish Museum, New York, as are rings by Mila Tanya Griebel (b. 1963), regarded as one of the foremost contemporary silversmiths. (BCS)

**Provenance:** Melvin Gutman (1886–1967); Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, May 15, 1970, Part V, lot 110, as "German Renaissance ... late 16<sup>th</sup> century"; Benjamin Zucker, New York; on deposit, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 1985–2013.

**Exhibited:** Baltimore Museum of Art, 1962–1968; Yeshiva University Museum, New York, 1977 (Pappenheim 1977, no. 150).

Few Jewish wedding rings are dated, and medieval examples are generally considered rare. This ring from the Colmar Treasure constitutes one of the earliest surviving examples. It must date before 1348 and was probably buried with a hoard of money and jewels by a member of the Jewish community in Colmar, Alsace around the time of the Black Death 1348-1350. Its typology – with a small pyramidal building formed by eight panels and the inscription *Mazel tov* – typifies that of Jewish wedding rings of the next six centuries.



**Jewish wedding ring**  
Italy, c. 1300

(Paris, Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme, deposit from Musée de Cluny - Musée national du Moyen Âge, CL20658)

Found in 1826, this ring from the Weissenfels Treasure is the second of the earliest Jewish wedding rings of the same typology as that from the Colmar Treasure. Buried after 1310 and probably before 1348-1349, it displays a similar architectural construction and gothic style arches, slanting panels, and bears the same inscription "*Mazel tov*."

**Jewish wedding ring**  
c. 1300-1350

(Halle, Saale, Art Museum of Moritzburg, MOKHWEM00162)



**Literature:** Chadour 1994, 2: no. 1070; Scarisbrick 2007 [repr. 2013], no. 154.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The inspiration for this Jewish wedding ring type can be traced back to seventeenth-century examples, such as one in the Alice and Louis Koch Collection (Chadour 1994, 2: no. 1070, with further parallels noted: in the Jeidels Collection (now the Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim); Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna; and the present example). The stylistic combination of the Classical column, medieval castle, and lion gargoyles points to a revivalist ring with a nineteenth-century date.
- <sup>2</sup> Descatoire 2009, 60–63.
- <sup>3</sup> Seidmann 1981, 50.
- <sup>4</sup> Compare Spier 2012, nos. 28 and 29.
- <sup>5</sup> Compare Röhrs 2011, 184.



**The endurance of this appealing imagery of the open house is demonstrated in the endeavors of contemporary jewelers to recreate and “modernize” the form.** Widely regarded as one of the world’s foremost contemporary Judaica silversmiths, Mila Griebel has exhibited in Britain and the United States, with a number of museums acquiring her work for their permanent collections. This group of silver marriage rings represents a modern concept of the traditional Jewish type.

**Mila Tanya Griebel, Jewish marriage rings**  
England, 2006

*(New York, The Jewish Museum, Contemporary Judaica Acquisitions Committee Fund and Hyman and Miriam Silver Fund for Contemporary Judaica, 2008-150; 2008-151; 2008-152)*