

# CONTINUITY

TRADITIONS OF JEWISH ART AND ARCHITECTURE



*Presenting the Old World artistic and architectural traditions of 17th and 18th century wooden synagogues in Eastern Europe*

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*Exhibition at the VILNA SHUL*

18 Phillips Street on Beacon Hill, Boston, MA  
April 24th - August 31st, 2006

*Funded by:*



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**Boston Center for Jewish Heritage**  
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*This program is funded in part by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, which receives support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and is an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.*

*With the help of:*

The Conservation of Historic Monuments, "ZAMEK," Warsaw, Poland  
The Wisconsin Society for Jewish Learning  
The Center for Jewish Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
School of Architecture and Urban Planning,  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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This exhibition presents the Old World artistic and architectural traditions of 17th and 18th century wooden synagogues from the small towns or shtetls of Eastern Europe. Zabludow and Gwozdziec, two of the most outstanding and well-documented wooden synagogues, are featured. The exhibit documents and celebrates a surprising tradition of prayer hall painting, emphasizing the many points of continuity between the synagogues and paintings from the Old World to the New.

Tragically, all the magnificent synagogues in this exhibition were destroyed along with their communities during the Nazi Holocaust. An extensive collection of synagogue photographs and drawings, documented by Polish architectural students and historians, survived the Holocaust and are the basis for this exhibit. They reveal the striking sculptural variety of wooden synagogue forms—a unique combination of both Jewish and Polish architectural traditions. **Continuity** seeks to recall the significant cultural heritage of Eastern European Jewish communities that was almost completely destroyed after 1939.

*Interior section and exterior elevation of the Zabludow Synagogue prayer hall.*



## GWOZDZIEC SYNAGOGUE WALL-PAINTINGS

Surviving photographs and drawings of the Gwozdziec Synagogue wall-paintings form the most complete documentation of a single Polish wooden synagogue. The exhibition analyzes the Gwozdziec Synagogue wall-paintings and interprets the variety of artistic styles, animal figures, Hebrew prayers, Jewish symbolism, and decorative art that adorned every surface of the prayer hall. According to architectural historian Thomas C. Hubka,



the Gwozdziec Synagogue is a “truly resplendent synagogue that exemplified a high point in synagogue art and archi-

itecture. Along with other wooden synagogues of its era, the Gwozdziec Synagogue represents some of the finest examples of Jewish art and architecture ever produced.”

The Gwozdziec Synagogue documentation and photographs were prepared by Professor Thomas C. Hubka of the Department of Architecture, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Research for the wall-paintings and for the entire exhibition is based on Hubka’s book, *Resplendent Synagogue, Architecture and Worship in an Eighteenth Century Polish Community*. Background research on the Polish wooden synagogue is based on the many works of Kasimierz and Maria Piechotka, Warsaw, Poland.



## **GWOZDZIEC PAINTED CEILING REPLICA**

**F**ull color, painted wooden sections of the Gwozdziec Synagogue ceiling highlight the exhibition. The panels are 1/2 scale replicas of pie-shaped segments of the synagogue's pyramidal ceiling. The painted segments are dominated by a variety of accurately drawn animal figures that primarily conveyed liturgical stories to their community. Two circular medallions contain the signatures of the two Jewish artists who painted the entire Gwozdziec ceiling in 1729.

The painted wooden ceiling sections were produced by students from the Massachusetts College of Art and Oberlin College under the direction of Rick and Laura Brown from Handhouse Studio. By referencing the surviving documentation of photographs and color studies of the Gwozdziec Synagogue, students built a 1/2-scale replica of the north and the south ceilings of the cupola. The painted panels bring the photographs to life and show the broad palate of deep intense colors that saturated the prayer hall. Many historians have associated these intricate designs with oriental carpets and decorative traditions in Jewish art. The east and west sections of the ceiling will be completed in future projects. When all the ceiling sections are completed and mounted together, they will form a domed, pyramidal ceiling.



## POLISH WOODEN SYNAGOGUES: ANNIHILATED HERITAGE

The “Annihilated Heritage” portion of this exhibition documents the finest examples of 17th and 18th century wooden synagogues from the historic lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The panels depict the full range of wooden synagogue structures from photographs and drawings that survived in scattered collections following the Holocaust. Although these synagogues may seem unique and exotic looking today, they represented the typical forms of wooden monumental architecture from the small towns or shtetls of pre-modern Eastern Europe. Although a few wooden synagogues from the 19th century have survived in Lithuania, all the synagogues shown in this exhibition along with their Jewish communities were completely destroyed during the Holocaust.

The **Annihilated Heritage** exhibition was prepared by The Association of Conservators of Historic Monuments of Poland, under the direction of Marek Baranski and Dominik Maczynski with research by Dr. Eleonora Bergman of the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw.

*Detail of east gable,  
Zubladow Synagogue,  
1939.*





**Z**abludow Synagogue was begun in 1637 by the Jewish community of Zabłudow, Poland. A masterpiece of carpentry art combining Jewish and Polish architectural traditions, it was one of the most photographed and documented wooden synagogues of the pre-modern period.

In 2003, Handhouse Studio participated in the Annihilated Heritage – Zabłudow Project Conference at Bialystok, Poland organized by the Association of Historic Monuments Conservators, Poland (SKZ). The objective was to create an international commitment to consider the construction of a full-scale reproduction of the Zabłudow Synagogue at the Museum Podlasie Bialystoku in Bialystok Poland.

The Zabłudow Synagogue Model is the first in a series of Handhouse Studio initiatives toward the goal of reconstructing this synagogue in Poland. In 2004, the Zabłudow synagogue was the focus of course work at Massachusetts College of Art, Wentworth Institute of Technology and Wheelock College, Boston, MA, spring semester, 2004. Students referenced the surviving documentation and worked directly with historians and architects to build a 1:12 scaled wooden model of the Zabłudow Synagogue. A cutaway of the eastern roof reveals the relationship between the Polish vernacular exterior massing and the distinctive canopy of the interior prayer hall—a space inspired by Jewish traditions in combination with ancient log building practices and advanced roof-truss framing techniques.



## THE VILNA SHUL RESTORATION

Jews from Vilna, Russia (previously Poland) established the Vilna Shul in 1898. Today, the Vilna Shul's community is currently restoring this historic synagogue. The project is attempting to restore many of the synagogue's original features. One of the major discoveries of the remodeling process has been the synagogue's elaborate wall paintings. These paintings, completed in several stages, included a variety of floral and architectural motifs, natural scenes, and decorative borders.

The **Continuity** exhibition presents the Old World artistic and architectural traditions that influenced Polish and Eastern European synagogues and continued to influence the making of synagogues in America. The exhibit documents and celebrates a surprising tradition of prayer hall painting that typically characterized the synagogues from the small towns or shtetls of Poland. It is interesting to note the many points of continuity between the synagogues and paintings from the Old World to the New.



As these layers of the Vilna Shul's history are slowly coming to light, **Continuity** presents some of the historic traditions of synagogue art that provide a Jewish artistic context for understanding the paintings of the Vilna Shul.

*Detail of a ceiling painting in the Vilna Shul (above) and detail of the Ark and the women's gallery (below).*

