

12-31-2017

Mintz, Sharon Liberman, Shaul Seidler-Feller, David Wachtel, eds. *The Writing on the Wall: A Catalogue of Judaica Broadsides from the Valmadonna Trust Library*. London; New York: Valmadonna Trust Library, 2015. 320 p., \$75.00. ISBN: 9780692453032

Barry D. Walfish

*University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada*, [barry.walfish@utoronto.ca](mailto:barry.walfish@utoronto.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ajlpublishing.org/jl>

---

### Recommended Citation

Walfish, Barry D.. "Mintz, Sharon Liberman, Shaul Seidler-Feller, David Wachtel, eds. *The Writing on the Wall: A Catalogue of Judaica Broadsides from the Valmadonna Trust Library*. London; New York: Valmadonna Trust Library, 2015. 320 p., \$75.00. ISBN: 9780692453032." *Judaica Librarianship* 20: 184-188. doi:[10.14263/2330-2976.1291](https://doi.org/10.14263/2330-2976.1291).

Mintz, Sharon Liberman, Shaul Seidler-Feller, David Wachtel, eds. *The Writing on the Wall: A Catalogue of Judaica Broadsides from the Valmadonna Trust Library*. London; New York: Valmadonna Trust Library, 2015. 320 p., \$75.00. ISBN: 9780692453032

The Valmadonna Trust Library is considered to be the greatest private collection of Hebraica assembled in the twentieth century. Its owner Jack Lunzer, diamond merchant and bibliophile, assembled it with loving care over the course of some sixty years. It numbers over 10,000 volumes. During the last years of his life, Lunzer tried to find a purchaser for the collection, who would promise to keep it together. The collection was entrusted to Sotheby's who had it for several years while attempts to find a purchaser were being made, without success. In December 2015, Sotheby's auctioned off the most valuable items in the collection, including a fine copy of the Bomberg Talmud (Venice 1525). It was the most valuable auction of Judaica ever, grossing close to \$15 million. Lunzer passed away in December 2016. In January 2017, it was announced that The Valmadonna Library would be moving to the National Library of Israel (NLI), thanks to its joint acquisition in cooperation with David and Jemima Jeselsohn of Zurich, Switzerland. This was a real coup for the NLI and ends years of uncertainty over the fate of this extraordinary collection.<sup>1</sup>

Among the riches in the Valmadonna Library is a fine collection of broadsides from the early modern period covering a wide range of topics. Recently a handsome catalogue of this broadside collection was published by the Valmadonna Trust Library and it is this volume which is here under review.

The volume consists of:

1. A catalogue of the entire collection, consisting of 554 items, arranged by topic and within each topic by geographical subdivisions (pp. 148–251). The topics covered break down as follows:
  - a. Poems (150 items), mostly from Italy (141), but also from Holland (2), and India (7).
  - b. Prayers (111 items), from Italy (45), France (1), Holland (1), Poland (1), India (56), Ottoman Empire (3), and the Land of Israel (3).

---

<sup>1</sup> See the NLI announcement here: <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/library/news/Pages/valmadonna-trust-library.aspx>.

- c. Amulets and Mizrah plaques (16 items), mostly from Jerusalem (13), but also from India (2) and Iraq (1).
        - d. Mantuan sumptuary laws (17 items).
        - e. Other communal documents (96 items), from Italy (42), Holland (9), Ottoman Empire (1), Land of Israel (37), India (4), Yemen (2), and America (1).
        - f. Documents issued by outside authorities (65 items), mostly from Italy (60), but also from Holland (3), France (1), and the Land of Israel (1).
        - g. Calendars (80 items), from Italy (72), Germany (3), Ottoman Empire (3), Land of Israel (1), and India (1).
        - h. Educational documents (19 items), from Italy (6), Spain (1), Germany (2), Central Europe (2), Holland (2), India (5), and Iraq (1).
2. Highlights from the collection (36 items in all), with full-page reproductions and descriptions, as well as English translations (pp. 84–147, 254–304).
3. Several important essays by scholars on different parts of the collection:
  - a. “Introduction” by Adam Shear
  - b. “Wall Calendars” by Elisheva Carlebach
  - c. “Liturgical Broadsides” by Ruth Langer
  - d. “Hebrew Poems” by Dvora Bregman
  - e. “A Survey of Jewish Sumptuary Laws” by Nahum Rakover
4. The book is rounded out by a bibliography of works cited and a general index.

Broadsides are sheets of paper, printed on one side, intended for use on special occasions or for display on the walls in public places or private homes. While some items were issued for special occasions, many others were meant to last a long time and were not time-sensitive.

Adam Shear provides a very useful overview of broadsides in general and of the Valmadonna collection in particular and its place among other such collections in other libraries and institutions. Other major repositories include the NLI, the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) in New York (which has about 1,100 items), the Klau Library of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and the Mendel Gottesman Library of Hebraica and Judaica at Yeshiva University in New York. The scope and coverage of the Valmadonna Collection is similar to that of the JTS collection, to the best of my knowledge, though it is about half the size. Both have heavy concentrations of material from Italy in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and indeed Italy seems to have been a place where this form of communication was particularly popular.

Shear makes the point, as do other contributors to the volume, that not all broadsides were meant to be used and discarded. Indeed, there is great variety in their purposes. Some material was time-sensitive, intended to be used at a specific occasion while other items were meant to be used repeatedly over a number of years, on a daily, weekly or annual basis (an example of the latter: Sukkot decorations). Nevertheless, I would still maintain that these materials are ephemeral by virtue of their being single sheets which were difficult to store and preserve (cf. Shear's essay, pp. 11–13). And not everyone would see the value in preserving a sheet of paper which was no longer of practical use (such as a calendar).

Different parts of the collection differ in the percent of items that are meant for special occasions and are time-sensitive and items that are meant for long-term use. For the poems section of the collection, time-sensitive items predominate. Examples include wedding poems and riddles of which there are sixty-seven in the collection from Italy in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries (especially unusual in the rebus wedding poem from 1850, pp. 126–127) and four from India, all dating from ca. 1875; or dedication poems for new synagogues or the restoration of old synagogues, for Torah arks, and Torah scrolls. Other poems honor recipients of medical degrees, or the memory of prominent members of the community, while still others were issued in honor of specific individuals or events.

Dvora Bregman, in her interesting analysis of the poems in the collection, focuses on the social and poetic dimensions of the phenomenon. The production of these poems was a common practice in Italian Jewish society in the early modern period, featuring the participation of major figures in the community, such as Moses Zacuto (1625–1697) who served as rabbi in Venice and Mantua, as well as amateurs who were encouraged to try their hand and were given instruction and encouragement by their more expert brethren.

In the case of prayers, the division between the time-sensitive and the more permanent is more even. Thus, we find several prayers for protection against plagues or epidemics, prayers in time of war, prayers in time of drought, or prayers for the recovery of a monarch or leader from illness. One particularly poignant broadside outlines a memorial service for the sixty-five victims of a building collapse in Mantua in 1776 (cat. 171, p. 33). These are all time-sensitive. Other liturgical broadsides meant for indefinite use contain prayers related to specific holidays, such as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, or Hanukkah, or prayers for the sick, the priestly benediction, and blessings over food (handwashing, grace after meals). Still others were meant as supplements to the printed prayer books, reflecting liturgical innovations or the need to preserve local customs (p. 45).

In her essay, Ruth Langer points out that many of these liturgical ephemera challenge our definition of broadsides, as they were not meant to be displayed on walls as posters, but were liturgical “handouts,” produced on small sheets of paper, printed on both sides or even folded over into small booklets (p. 32). Many of the needs they responded to are still present in Jewish communities today.

Amulets were also mixed in nature, some meant to protect newborns and their mothers, while others served more general needs, such as protection against any evil, or the home in general. Mizrah plaques are another example of items meant for permanent display, still popular in Jewish homes to this day.

The educational items consist mainly of Hebrew alphabet charts, Hebrew grammar charts, and various prayers for students to recite as well as other teaching aids and rabbinical diplomas.

The case of sumptuary laws is an interesting one. These are laws meant to curb extravagance in clothing, jewelry, celebrations, festive meals, and gift-giving. The sheets span the years 1598–1794. Much can be learnt from them about fashions in men’s and women’s clothing, types of celebrations for life-cycle and other events, and other customs and practices. The sheets on which these laws were printed were jam-packed with text; e.g., the translation of item 278 takes up three full pages. One wonders about the effectiveness of these laws, which were probably defied as often as observed. With the coming of the Napoleonic Era, Jewish communities in Western Europe lost their autonomy and no longer issued these decrees (*takanot*). Nahum Rakover’s “Survey of Jewish Sumptuary Laws” provides a useful introduction to the whole topic.

The wall calendars in the collection were also chock-full of information, as printers tried to squeeze onto one sheet the same information they printed in pocket calendars bought by individuals. The wall calendar for 5354 (1593–1594) reproduced in the catalogue and translated, includes all kinds of calendrical calculations concerning the year in question, the times of appearance of the New Moon for each month, the days for the holidays, for each Torah reading, the times of the changing of the seasons (*teḳufot*), and even the important days on the Christian calendar (pp. 84–85, 254–259), a sign of acculturation and the need to accommodate to Gentile society. These sheets were meant to be read and used over an entire year, as described in Elisheva Carlebach’s essay (annotated example, p. 29).

In her essay, Carlebach focuses on the work of two printers, Israel Zifroni in Venice and in Fuerth and their roles as disseminators of Jewish culture. She shows how much influence a single individual can have on the printing process, both in terms of content and format. Zifroni especially seems like a driving force in the industry, adding new features to his calendars every year, presumably to guarantee their continuing appeal to his audience. She notes that with the addition of so much extra information, these calendars were transformed into almanacs.

As mentioned above, despite, or perhaps because of the long-term use of some of these broadsides, their very survival was “miraculous” and in that sense they can be considered ephemeral. Calendars especially were not valued and there was little incentive to keep them after the year they were printed for had passed. It is therefore indeed remarkable that the Valmadonna has so many of these calendars. Italy is especially well represented, with forty-six from Mantua spanning 230 years (the Jewish years of 5319 [1558–1559] to 5549 [1788–1789]) and twenty-five from Venice, spanning 254 years (the Jewish years of 5309 [1548–1549] to 5562 [1801–1802]).

The Valmadonna Broadside collection is noteworthy in many ways. Its breadth and depth are impressive and are a tribute to the assiduousness of the collector, Jack Lunzer, who tracked down these items with tremendous determination and dedication. Their value for research is also considerable, as they bear witness to printing practices and social mores and customs that have not been adequately researched. The recent move of the Valmadonna Library to the NLI assures that these items will be available to scholars in the future. In the meantime, we can be grateful to the editors of and contributors to this beautiful volume for providing a rich and well-documented introduction to this important collection.