

Luminous: A thousand years of Hebrew manuscripts

Luminous: A thousand years of Hebrew manuscripts celebrates the history and traditions of one of the world's oldest and most influential cultures. Open in the Keith Murdoch Gallery until April 2024, the exhibition explores the significance of the written word as a foundation for contemporary Jewish practice, showing how ancient manuscripts are part of a dynamic and diverse living culture.

Deborah Rechter, curator and experience developer for the exhibition, and Paul Forgasz, the exhibition's cultural and content consultant, explain what makes *Luminous* an unmissable event for anyone interested in book history and culture.

'The exhibition showcases manuscripts from the British Library and the David Hailperin Collection of the State Library of Victoria,' explains Deborah. 'Also displayed are objects on loan from the Jewish Museum of Australia that show how ancient texts are central to everyday life and practice.'

Paul says of the dazzling objects on display, 'The origins of the 37 rare Hebrew manuscripts from the British Library span a vast geographic area, from North Africa and Europe, through the Middle East to China, and stretch from the 10th to the 19th centuries. They present a history of the Jewish world from a vast array of perspectives – science, religion, law, music, philosophy, magic, alchemy and Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism.

'The oldest object, a 10th-century Hebrew Bible decorated with geometric

and floral patterns, shows the influence of Islamic art on Jewish manuscripts produced in Muslim countries. There is also a 12th-century *responsum* or legal opinion, handwritten and signed by Maimonides, one of the greatest minds of the medieval world. A manuscript likely to attract much interest is the reply of a 16th-century Italian rabbi to a question posed to him by King Henry VIII's legal advisers regarding the annulment of the king's marriage to Catherine of Aragon.'

'On loan from the Jewish Museum of Australia are items of Judaica, or ritual objects used in observance,' says Deborah. 'Many are contemporary, created by local artists referencing Australian flora, fauna and landscape. They highlight intersections between Jewish and Australian life. Just as we see the influence of historical cultures and events in medieval illuminations in the manuscripts of the British Library collection, these contemporary pieces reveal the influence of local and modern contexts.'

'These objects show how ancient and significant manuscripts inform a living tradition. Ancient texts, such as those on display, guide religious observance and cultural expression. They are central to a culture that has adapted to changing circumstances for generations.'

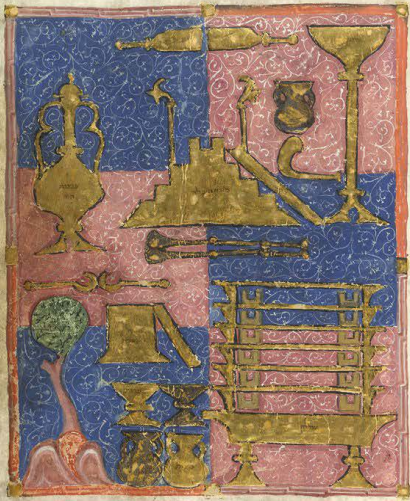
Exhibition highlights

Harley Catalan Bible

Catalonia, Spain, 14th century

On loan from the British Library, London HARLEY MS 1528

For centuries, the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was the centre of a sacrificial system of worship. After the Romans destroyed it in 70 CE and exiled the Jewish people, the Temple continued to occupy a central place in Jewish imagination and memory. Indeed, among Spanish Jews, the Bible was referred to as Mikdash-ya, or Temple of God. This idea is captured in these illustrations from a 14th-century Spanish Bible, which reference the Temple and its place at the centre of Jewish observance in the Diaspora.





Barukh ben Jacob Schick (1752–1810)

Amudei ha-Shamayim

Berlin, 1777

Hailperin Collection, State Library Victoria RARES 520 B28

This treatise on the planets and stars is a scientific commentary on Maimonides’ laws for sanctifying the new moon. This is significant because the Jewish lunar calendar system sets the timing for observance of religious festivals. Barukh Schick was an 18th-century Polish-Lithuanian rabbi, who developed a fascination with the sciences. In his commentary, *The Heavenly Bodies*, Schick reflects a traditional medieval view of the cosmos; that is, he describes a Ptolemaic cosmology of an Earth-centred universe and shows absolutely no awareness of Copernicus or his model of the heliocentric system, which placed the sun at the centre of the universe.



Nikki Green (Born 1965)

Preiḥah

Western Australia, 2013

Jewish Museum of Australia 13817

This manuscript by Australian Jewish artist Nikki Green contains images that depict the mystical significance and attributes of Hebrew letters. With a title that translates as ‘Blossoming’, it references the healing properties of Australian indigenous plants and flowers that match the qualities of the Hebrew letters. It also compares Jewish reverence for the book with Aboriginal connections to Country. Each page was printed from a carved lino block onto hand-dyed paper using dyes extracted from native plants near her home in Denmark, south-west Western Australia.