A rich tradition of decorating Hebrew manuscripts flourished in Italy during the Renaissance period, reaching its peak in the 15th and 16th centuries, when members of wealthy Jewish families commissioned lavishly illustrated works.

The codices produced during those years, which include, among others, Hebrew prayer books,1 Haggadot2 and rabbinic writings such as Maimonides’ משנה תורה (Mishneh Torah)3 and Jacob ben Asher’s ארבעה טורים (Arba’ah Turim),4 are splendid testimonies to Jewish life and culture in Renaissance Italy.5

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2 See the Haggadah contained in the forementioned MS Heb. 8 4450, Metzger, “Un mahzor italien enluminé du XVe siècle,” pp. 159–96; the Haggadah included in the Rothschild Miscellany, Israel Museum MS 180/51; the Haggadah included in a mahzor dated 1520, Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris), Fondation Smith-Lesouef, MS 250, fols. 108v–118; G. Sed-Rajna, Les manuscrits Hébreux enluminés des Bibliothèques de France (Paris 1994), p. 116; and a 15th-century Passover Haggadah from the Padua Mahzor, now in the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library.


4 Vatican Library (Vatican City), MS Ross. 555, Mantua, 1435; Narkiss, Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts, p. 136, pl. 48.

Fifteenth-century Italian manuscript illumination is often considered the zenith of this art form, and many Hebrew books were of the same calibre as those produced for Christians. This should not be surprising, as the codices commissioned by Jews were often illuminated in Christian workshops so that the decoration was similar. What is clearly evident is the real bibliophilic passion that led wealthy Jews in Italy to commission illustrated texts whose grandeur would rival that of the contemporary Latin books.

One of the most famous and richly illuminated codices produced during this period is a manuscript known as the Rothschild Miscellany, an elegantly decorated volume that includes a varied collection of religious and secular works.\(^6\) It is clear that Latin codices decorated in a recently developed Renaissance manner influenced the taste of the manuscript’s Jewish patron. That the Italian artistic language was used in Hebrew works is also apparent in other codices, in the use of elegant vegetal scrolls with interleaved flowers and vines, mixed with ornaments derived from classical monuments, such as the classical grottesche decoration and the naked putti\(^7\) (Fig. 1). The classical motif of two putti flanking a wreath was readily adapted to support the owners’ coats of arms in countless margins of Renaissance manuscripts, both secular and religious. This can be seen as proof that the rules of humanistic culture and art were also accepted and even proudly displayed in liturgical book illustration as something that would confer prestige upon the patrons—both Christian and Jewish—and testify to their cultural values.

Among the many types of illuminated Hebrew books were Bibles, which in most cases were decorated but only rarely illustrated with narrative scenes. From the 13th century on, the tradition in Italy was for these Bibles to be elegantly decorated. This practice is reflected in an early Bible from Rome, dated 1286, written by a scribe from the renowned Anav family and decorated with graceful floral and zoomorphic motifs (Vat. Ross. 554).\(^8\)

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\(^7\) See the relevant folios of the forementioned Rothschild Maḥzor (6v, 9v, 115v, 226v) and Joseph Albo’s Sefer ha-Ikarim, Rovigo, Accademia dei Concordi, MS Silvestriana 220; Narkiss, Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts, p. 154, pl. 57.

\(^8\) Vatican Library, MS Ross. 554; Rome to Jerusalem. Four Jewish Masterpieces from the Vatican Library.