

The Szyk Haggadah

A new deluxe edition of the illuminated Haggadah created by Arthur Szyk 70 years ago will be published in early 2008. Thanks to the current state of digital colour printing, publisher Irvin Ungar promises this will be the most faithful reproduction of the original artwork ever achieved. It may also be the most ambitious publication ever undertaken entirely with digital printing technology. By Rollin Milroy

The Passover Haggadah created by Arthur Szyk is a masterpiece of 20th-century book art and illumination, made all the more powerful for having been created in the looming shadow of Nazism encroaching on the artist's homeland of Poland. Trained in Paris, Szyk (pronounced *shick*) was already a celebrated artist and illustrator when he began work on an illuminated Haggadah in 1934. The book would eventually become one of the greatest pieces of Jewish art—and commentary—to emerge from that period.

A Passover Haggadah describes the order of events and rituals in the Passover Seder, the celebration of the Hebrew people's escape from Egyptian bondage 3,300 years ago. A Haggadah tells this story through a collection of literary works from various periods, and includes biblical passages, psalms, benedictions, prayers, explanations of rituals, blessings, stories and dialogues. This wealth of material, and the faith's belief in reinterpreting the meanings of events in the Passover story, made it ideal for the attentions of an artist and illuminator of Szyk's calibre.

Szyk's original artwork for his Haggadah drew overt parallels between the Passover narratives, with their Egyptian taskmasters, and the threat of Nazi fascism to Europe's Jews. His illustrations included serpents and tigers bearing Nazi swastikas, their heads replaced with those of Hitler and Goering. Such images proved too extreme, and Szyk was forced to replace them for the book's first publication, a limited edition of 250 copies issued in England in 1940. This edition reproduced Szyk's original colour art through halftone printing, with all 250 copies printed on vellum. A copy of this edition, which rarely appears on the market, would now be priced around \$50,000. Several trade editions were published over the following decades, but none succeeded in reproducing the brilliant colours of the original artwork.

Enter Irvin Ungar, a former rabbi and founder of *Historicana*, a California rare book

and manuscript dealer. Through *Historicana*, he plans to finally reproduce Szyk's Haggadah illuminations as they were created, using digital printing technology.

Szyk died in 1951, and his reputation faded until Ungar's discovery of his work in 1991 and the creation of the Arthur Szyk Society, dedicated to reviving interest in the artist and his work. Reproducing the Haggadah has been a decade-long goal for Ungar, who says he had to "wait for technology to catch up with my dream."

"The only way to capture the exquisite colours and elaborate design and detail of Szyk's artwork was through digital photography and printing," Ungar told *Amphora* during an interview last summer. "Our edition takes advantage of every recent advance in photography, colour reproduction and papermaking technology."

Ungar doesn't consider the use of digital technology such a big leap for the Haggadah, which has always been open to contemporary stylings in its content.

"I used the intervening years as an opportunity to revisit and rethink the translation and commentary of the text. The Haggadah is one book in the Jewish tradition that has always been adapted to local customs and times. It is completely appropriate, then, to take advantage of this tradition to bring the Haggadah into the 21st century," Ungar says.

Despite limited appreciation for Szyk's work in the years after his death, in 1982 the original artwork sold for almost a quarter of a million dollars when it was auctioned for the family by Sotheby's. It was purchased for a private collection, where it stayed for the next 25 years. Then Ungar brokered its sale to one of his clients, another private collector who lives in the Bay Area. The new owner gave Ungar access to have the artwork digitally photographed, and the project of its republication began.

Szyk's Haggadah artwork interweaves the texts, in Hebrew, with his detailed illumina-

tions. Opposite each of the illuminated pages in the original 1940 edition was an English translation, set to duplicate the facing calligraphic Hebrew. For the *Historicana* edition, Ungar felt a new translation was warranted, and a new approach to integrating the two texts. Here again digital technology offered creative options not available to typographers working with metal in 1940. The texts to be read out loud have been set in an Ehrhardt type, believed to have originated in Amsterdam with Nicholas Kis and improved upon in Leipzig around 1720. The interwoven commentaries are set in Lucas de Groot's *The Sans* and printed in a second colour. The titles are set in Lance Hidy's *Penumbra*.

Ungar's vision was to create a book equal in every aspect of production to Szyk's art, in the tradition of the 1940 edition but with greater fidelity in the reproductions. To do this, he enlisted a team skilled in both traditional book crafts and the latest in digital imaging and printing. This is perhaps the most significant aspect of the project; where there is a bias among some collectors against digital printing (see page 27), this is because the phrase "digitally printed book" usually conjures an image of sheets run out of someone's home printer with little or no attention paid to (or knowledge of) the various talents and crafts, from typography through binding, that must be combined to create a book beautiful.

Historicana's Szyk Haggadah will be published in an edition of 300 two-volume sets (plus 10 copies printed entirely on vellum). The companion volume features essays by Jewish scholars, and the edition includes a DVD on the remaking of the Haggadah. Both volumes will be the same size as the 1940 original (about 9 by 11 inches). The Deluxe Edition (215 copies, US\$8,500) will be bound in full leather and boxed with the companion volume (160 pp.) in quarter leather. The Premier Edition (85 copies, US\$15,000) will feature a more elaborate binding and clamshell box, and a suite of 12 prints from the book. The 10 vellum copies are priced at about twice the Premier Edition. This clearly is not an instance of digital printing being used because it is the cheapest or easiest option.

The book is being printed by Rick De Coyte at Silicon Fine Art Prints in Philadelphia. Silicon Gallery, started by De Coyte in 1994, was the first gallery in the United States to exclusively show digitally created artwork.

In addition to the gallery, De Coyte runs a full digital print studio equipped with state-of-the-art ink-jet printers. These printers require specially coated papers to allow the pigments to sit on the paper's surface and produce a rich image. Most of these papers are too heavy to be used in a book, so Ungar had to source-test a variety of text-weight sheets, none of which suited the project. Eventually, through Atlantic Papers, he was able to source a specially coated version of Hahnemuhle's Bugra, suitable for ink-jet printing. The German papermaker agreed to make a special order (1,000 pounds!) of the paper, to the weight and finish required, for the Szyk Haggadah.

Backing up text (i.e., printing on both sides) remains a problem with digital printers (De Coyte says one would expect registration to vary by as much as an eighth of an inch), not to mention the fact few papers coated on both sides are available. The 1940 edition offered a design solution to backing up: its sheets were printed on one side only, folded once and bound at the open edge (i.e., with the folds at the fore edge), and so backing up was not required. *Historicana's* edition takes a similar approach, printing on one side only of long sheets that are folded to make 12 pages (instead of just two, as in the 1940 edition). These "sections" are then sewn at the open edge onto a concertina structure, to make the codex. Printing each of these 12-page sheets takes about 45 minutes, so basically it takes a day to print a single copy of the 96-page Haggadah (not to mention the 160-page companion volume of commentaries).

Asked whether, despite all the attention that has gone into material selection and design, some bibliophiles might still balk at paying such prices for a digitally printed book, Ungar brushes the question aside as a non-issue. "People are focused on the quality of the project, which only digital can achieve," he says, adding that there is no alternative printing technology of comparable quality. "The reason we are using digital printing instead of more conventional methods is because it is only digital printing that permits the highest quality reproduction of the original artwork."

De Coyte explains that this is because, unlike offset printing, which mixes four standard ink colours to make all of the colours required for in print, ink-jet printers use eight colours. "This means we can achieve a much wider gamut of colours than a commercial press, espe-



cially on the watercolour-style papers we typically print on. The range of colours achieved on the Szyk Haggadah exceeds what would be possible if it was printed traditionally.”

Arthur Szyk moved from Poland to England in 1937, to oversee the publication of his Haggadah. During the summer of 1940 he toured with his works in Canada and the United States, and he moved to New York City that fall. Throughout the war he worked as a political cartoonist, and in support of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. In the years immediately following the war he returned to illustrating books, including several major multi-volume projects for the Limited Editions Club (tip to would-be Szyk collectors: check them out!). He became an American citizen in 1948 but only three years later was caught up in the Communist frenzy that gripped the USA. In 1951 he was investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Szyk died later that year, of a heart attack that was blamed on the stress of the investigation.

No less an authority than Stanley Morison noted in a review of the 1940 Szyk Haggadah: “It is no exaggeration to say that the volume, in respect to the range of problems set by the artist’s delicate and multi-coloured designs...forms a unique triumph.” (He went on to judge the book worthy “to be placed among the most beautiful of books that the hand of man has produced.”) It’s an innocent game to wonder whether Morison, or Szyk, would have fretted about the legitimacy of digital printing as a means for reproducing the artist’s delicate designs. One suspects the true connoisseur knows to focus on the result, rather than the method.

The Historiana Szyk Haggadah is scheduled for issue at the start of 2008. For more details, see the Web site www.szykhaggadah.com. For more information about the artist, see the Arthur Szyk Society’s site at www.szyk.org. Rick De Coyte’s Silicon Gallery site, www.fineartprint.com, offers a wealth of information for artists interested in digital printing.