

Folk Art and Ancestry: German Jewish Creation through Time

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Abstract

Nearly eight decades ago in 1938 the Wallach brothers, Moritz and Julius, along with their families were forced from their homeland due to the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany. Before their displacement, the brothers made their livelihood by collecting, creating, and reproducing German folk art. The Holocaust scattered the family, and their collection of handmade folk art and craft dispersed. Passion and artistry fueled the Wallach brothers' success and led them to emerge as two of the most instrumental German folk art collectors and preservationists before World War II. Traditional art collected for their museum, The Wallach House of Folk Art, included textiles, wood blocks, clothing, and decorated furniture. This research and corresponding artwork explores how traditional German folk art and family history can be represented within contemporary ceramic artwork. The history, patterns, and styles present in pre-war folk art were investigated over a five-week period at historic locations, museum archives, and local art manufacturers throughout Europe. The thorough analysis of the Wallach history was conducted with assistance from local historians and folk art scholars. Artwork inspired by this research examines the history of Jewish and German folk art. The artist also explores the future of Wallach art and artifacts within a contemporary creative context by applying a combination of color, form, and design. This research and corresponding body of artwork delves into themes of transformation, reclamation, and growth beyond traditional historic analysis.

Keywords: Folk Art, German, Ceramic, Wallach, Jewish

1. Introduction

Folk Art creation and collection is an important aspect of German culture and for many years those creating and collecting Folk Art were Jewish. However, with the advent of World War II and the expulsion and destruction of Jewish communities, much of that art was lost. While much research has been conducted into the horrors of the Holocaust less attention has been paid to Jewish artistic history. The intention of this research and corresponding artwork is to bridge that gap.

The Wallach House of Folk Art in Munich was known for its robust collection of traditional German art, clothing, and home décor. The Wallach family grew their business until, in the 1930's, the Nazi government forced them to abandon the company and flee Germany. At that time, the Wallach House of Folk Art was left in the possession of a non-Jewish family and the bulk of the Wallach artifacts were boxed up by the Nazis and put into storage. Production of Wallach folk art including textiles, wood blocks, furniture, and dirndls ceased to continue with the agency the business had pre-war and never regained the same momentum. Amazingly, many of these artifacts were returned to Moritz Wallach, my great grandfather, after the war.

Moritz Wallach and his brother Julius had a strong passion for collecting and preserving German folk art. They dedicated much of their lives to establishing the Wallach House of Folk Art in Munich, and with the help of their

brother Max, built a textile factory in Dachau. Moritz and Julius traveled to nearly every corner of Europe in search of furniture and art of interest that would both fit their traditional aesthetic and create a publicly desired look. During the summer of 2017, I retraced my great-grandfather's footsteps throughout Europe in search of a more complete picture of Wallach family history. Research conducted in Europe involved visiting historic sites, towns, and businesses described in Moritz Wallach's memoir. Additionally, I had the opportunity to visit folk artists, search museum archives, collectors, historians, and museum curators. Through this research, many stories, people, and artifacts were discovered and will be explored throughout this paper and corresponding body of ceramic work.

Through my ceramic artwork I explore Wallach brand ideals, German Jewish history and the sense of both displacement and reclamation experienced by those who survived World War II. Each piece aims to assist in the creating a narrative of time, adaptation, trauma, evolution, and growth. All information collected and artwork created better the understanding of Wallach history and explores the role of Wallach design within contemporary society.

2. Wallach's in Germany

Julius Wallach (1874 – 1965) and his brother Moritz Wallach (1879 – 1964) opened their first traditional German apparel shop in 1905. What started as a curiosity for tradition and design led the brothers to become two of the most influential folk collectors in Bavarian history. In Moritz Wallach's Memoir, which he composed shortly before his death, he wrote, "We saw a possibility to keep these irreplaceable traditions and to revitalize them."¹ This prospect paired with determination carried the brothers towards success, what follows is a recollection of prosperity, turmoil, and improbable positivity.

The brothers' careers began in 1895 when Julius first traveled to Munich and saw an opportunity to revitalize history. The brothers began building their inventory, marketing at local street festivals and fairs. The business grew steadily until 1906 when Julius brought a conventional costume from Brixton back to Munich. From this traditional piece the brothers created their first contemporary dirndl dress, a garment consisting of an intricately patterned skirt and apron with a white blouse. The popularity of the dirndl dress quickly grew, and the brothers became known throughout all of Europe. Dr. Monika Ständecke, curator of an exhibition titled *Dirndls, Trunks, and Edelweiss – The Folk Art of the Wallach Brothers*, writes, "Wearing dirndls on summer vacations in the country had been fashionable for some time – Viennese dirndl creations had set the precedent – but it was the Wallach's who made the dirndl fashionable. They created a festive silk dirndl for the wife of Prince Joachim of Prussia that caused a sensation when she wore it at a ball in Paris; virtually overnight the Wallach name became known internationally."² In 1910 the brothers were commissioned to create traditional costumes for the centennial Oktoberfest parade, which is a tradition that continues to this day.



Figure 1. Costume Collection, *From the Wallach –Workshops Munich*. Traditional Wallach Made Costumes for German cities Dachau, Reichenhall, Hochzeitlader, Tegernsee, Oberbayern, and Steingaden.³

As a result of their success, the business was able to move to a larger and more central location where a larger audience, including many upper class patrons, could view the collection. Dr. Ständecke documents this trend writing, “The Wallach Business enjoyed increasing renown; its guest books included the signatures of national and international aristocrats, industry magnates, and architects, as well as numerous painters, writers, and preformats.”² Moritz and Julius were commissioned to make traditional costumes and décor for the Royal Theater in Munich, the National Ballet, and the court of Saxony. Julius Wallach was recognized for his contributions and appointed Purveyor of the Royal Court.

In 1914 the First World War began and the company was asked to produce outfits for war; they promised their inventory as collateral in order to gain enough credit for the business to survive. For a few years the Wallach Company switched to production of knee socks, gloves, and gaiters out of pre-cut material for the Military’s ski troops. The business continued to grow, and Moritz co-founded the Trade Association of Bavarian Applied Artists. During the war, Moritz took advantage of the disinterest in traditional home ware and furniture, and slowly grew his collection for the greatly anticipated Wallach Museum. After the war, they were able to return to the production of folk art and costume.

In 1920 Moritz and Julius founded the “Volkskunsthause Wallach” a folk art museum in Munich, Germany. “The Volkskunsthause was to serve both as a retail space as well as an exhibition area for the Wallach brother’s folk art collection which they had acquired on their travels and from traveling merchants.”² The museum was centrally located and consisted of forty-two rooms spanning five floors, each decorated in the style of a specific European region. This collection of over seven hundred objects included paintings, textiles, furniture, woodwork, pottery, sculpture, glasswork, children’s toys, and wooden mannequins dressed in traditional ware. Volkskunsthause Wallach received national attention and quickly became one of the most popular attractions in the city of Munich.

Due to an economic depression in the 1920’s the museum flourished only for a few years. In 1926 the Volkskunsthause auctioned most of the folk art collection and closed its doors. After Volkskunsthause Wallach closed, Moritz established the Wallach House of Folk Art and Regional Consume. This operation took a more practical and accessible approach to traditional art and clothing. The Wallach House of Folk Art focused specifically on textiles and traditional costume. Moritz spent much of his time developing and perfecting wood block designs for fabrics, which were hand printed at the Wallach factory in Dachau. The company received commissions to outfit operas and theaters in traditional folk clothing both nationally and internationally.

The early 1930’s proved to be wildly successful for the Wallach House of Folk Art and Regional Costume, and Wallach textiles and costumes were still in high demand when the National Socialist’s seized power in 1933. Despite the fact that they were Jewish and that Hitler’s regime was particularly powerful in the city of Munich, the Wallach House of Folk Art and Regional Costume continued to manufacture and sell goods. Adolf Hitler’s residence was only blocks away from their home, yet the brothers did not immediately recognize anti-Semitism for the threat that it was in part because the family was never very religious and, “considered itself German first and Jewish second.”⁴

Over the next few years, though the family was targeted many times, their lives were not seriously threatened. In November of 1938 the family was warned of what would later be known of as Kristallnacht, or the night of broken glass. Moritz opted to stay in Munich while Julius thought it would be best to flee. After three days without being caught, Julius documented, “Glorious autumn days, sun over rust-red forests, it would have been marvelous hiking weather, had Hitler’s merry Jew-hunt not been declared.”⁵

The morning after Crystal Night, Moritz found many of his store windows destroyed. In typical Wallach fashion Moritz did his best to make the store presentable and attractive. “Wherever there was a clear space, he painted the outline of a house window, and inside, he decorated the interior as a peasant farmhouse, with a young girl preparing for bed.” Moritz remarked that there had never been a window display so popular. Before The Night of Broken Glass, Moritz had never considered leaving Munich and his beloved store. Moritz received a letter from the President or the Reichs Board of Art, a known member of the National Socialists, forbidding the “participation in the distribution of culture objects,” and requesting that Moritz “undertake the change the name of (His) firm so that the word “Art” no longer appears.”⁶ The president allowed Moritz two months to terminate his business and stated that “after thoroughly assessing (his) personal qualities and qualifications, (he) does not possess the necessary status and reliability to participate in the furtherance of German culture in a responsible position.”⁶ Moritz rejected the letter and argued for his position, though months later the business was turned over to the Bavarian Association of Fine Arts. Having worked for so many years to establish his business, Moritz did not intend to surrender to the Nazis, but fearful for their safety he and his family fled to the United States.

3. Life after War

Moritz and Meta Wallach arrived in the United States in 1939, where they met their children and other members of the family. With much determination, Moritz once again began producing hand printed fabrics. He carved new wood blocks tailored to the taste of those living in America, and soon regained popularity. Moritz received loans from those still in Germany and with the help of his newfound niche Moritz purchased a building in Lime Rock, Connecticut. In 1947 he opened the Hand Craft Studio, and decorated the new space in homage to his shop in Germany.

Moritz continued to live and work in America, taking frequent trips to Bavaria where he would visit the Wallach store and provide advice to the new owner Max Sedlmayer. In the conclusion of Moritz's memoir he wrote, "... I can look back with satisfaction on my successful, and although sometimes disappointing, rich life, I am particularly proud of the fact that I have been lucky enough, with neither knowledge of the language nor independent means, to rebuild an independent existence. Now I am eighty-two years old, am up at six o'clock every morning, and work because it pleases me, until evening."¹ Moritz died in 1964 at the age of eighty-five, and Julius died one year later in 1965. The Wallach House of Folk Art was later sold to the London-Frey Company and continued to exist until 2004 when the business closed its doors for the last time.

4. Wallach Design

In 1919, one year before the opening of Volkhaus Wallach, the Wallach Company purchased an old warehouse in Dachau, Germany. The space was renovated and converted into a textile factory where they operated a printing press, weaving mill, and spinning factory. Max Wallach, brother of Moritz and Julius, was head of the fabric manufacturing operation for the Wallach Company. At the factory in Dachau, Max worked to create a recognizable Wallach style by using specific colors, patterns, and elements of design. The brothers hired artists to collaborate with the creation and decorating processes; some of the artists involved were: Herman Stockmann, August Brandes, Richard Mahn, Otto Obermeier, Paul Neu, Bruno Gitensohn, Hans and Herman Weber, Georg Fuchs and Jan Balet.¹ Many of the fabric patterns were derived from the hundreds of wooden printing blocks that Julius collected from old fabric warehouses around Europe. The majority of designs for fabrics include floral patterns, animals, and folk characters. The designs are often lively and colorful and show great attention to detail. Figurative patterns were one of Wallach's most successful fabric designs; these patterns included: couples dressed in folk costume, half-timbered houses, forest animals, tavern scenes, wedding processions, and floating landscapes.²



Figure 2. Wallach Fabric Pattern Sample, *Wald und Tiere*³

Designs used for Wallach printing blocks were first hand drawn on paper, and many of the original sketches and designs from the textile factory have been preserved. The sketches are playful and share many of the same qualities of wood blocks, this same hand drawn quality was present in Wallach advertisements, pamphlets, posters, and catalogs. Artists such as Paul Neu were hired to create works that mimicked traditional textiles. These drawings often included characters wearing traditional German apparel adorned with flowers and bold patterns. On occasion Neu

would include woodland creatures from folk tales and other scenes from life in Bavaria. The wood block below is an example of a traditional Bavarian hunting scene.



Figure 3. *Wallach Printing Block*, Amelia Rosenberg Private Collection, 10"x6"

After fabrics were manufactured and printed they were sold by the yard or turned into costumes, tablecloths, pillowcases, and other assorted home goods. The design for costume and apparel derived from traditional Bavarian folk clothing such as dirndls and lederhosen. Inspired by the tradition and history of apparel, the brothers wanted to bring previously popular fashions into present day ware. The popularization of traditional clothing in Bavaria and surrounding regions can be attributed both to the success of the Wallach House of Folk Art and the brother's creative persistence.

5. Ceramic Design

Though I am not producing fabric, clothing, or furniture the process of making works that value tradition and ancestry in a contemporary environment are comparable. I chose to make my artwork out of clay as means to acknowledge this dynamic. Clay is a naturally occurring material that when fired, transitions into a permanent state. This dynamic was also present in the way I collected my research, as I spent time traveling Europe in search of goods that fit my ancestor's aesthetic while simultaneously seeking inspiration for my current project.

The more I learned of the design process and stories that accompanied each piece, the more I wondered what it all meant in terms of my personal and artistic trajectory. Above all, I learned that each pattern made, fabric printed, and piece of folk art collected had its own story. Those who know of the Wallach enterprise often told me more about the character of the business than the actual product. Their life work was about connecting the past to the present, bringing tradition into a modern, applicable environment.

In the beginning of my ceramic translation, I was enamored with the house shape and the idea that stories have a root, or home. Wallach fabrics acted as a foundation on which to build my own visual language. Pairing the house shape with colors and patterns found on Wallach fabrics seemed like an easy first step towards bridging the gap between past and present.

In *Water House* I selected colors that induced a sense of calm, and found a Wallach pattern that matched that same feeling. This artwork became the starting point for true reflection and the melding of tradition and modernity.



Left: Figure 4. Amelia Rosenberg, *Water House*, 2017 stoneware and underglaze, 13"x9"x6"
 Right: Figure 5. Fabric Sample, Fromholzer Textildruck Archives, Ruhmannsfelden, Germany

My artwork concerns history and its place in a contemporary environment. The Wallach's were successful in bringing German history into a modern context by using artwork as a mode of conceptual conveyance. My works are similar in nature, and create a bridge that connects folk art and ancestry to the present day. My work titled *Stories Called Home* is the most direct interpretation of Wallach motifs; marking the beginning of my exploration into reclamation of displaced narratives.



Figure 6, 7, and 8. Amelia Rosenberg, 3 of 7 pieces in series *Stories Called Home*, 2017, Stoneware and Underglaze, Each 1.5"x4"x4"

As my understanding progressed, my artwork followed. I began to interpret Wallach history, stories, and motifs in a more explorative manner. Instead of focusing on rigid forms, I imagined my artwork as part of Wallach development, instead of a separate entity. With this in mind, I became less focused on direct translation, and more involved in my own interpretation of designs, patterns, motifs, and stories. This newfound process called upon my intuition and creativity in a way that I hadn't experienced before. Not only did I allow myself the time and space to draw upon my own life experience, I challenged myself to see through my predetermined creative capabilities. The shift in my approach immediately resulted in artwork that well exceeded my expectations in relation to this research.

The first manifestation of this mentality is apparent in the series *Evolution*. This series marks the beginning of exploration into the idea that form and decoration are equally important parts of the final piece. The actual shape of each ceramic piece became much more organic and fluid compared to the previous house shape, and the surface design followed. Each piece in *Evolution* adopted its own personality.



Left: Figure 9. Amelia Rosenberg, *Evolution 5*, 2018, stoneware and underglaze, 13"x3"x14"
 Right: Figure 10. Amelia Rosenberg, *Evolution 2*, 2018, stoneware and underglaze, 11"x4"x21"

Sgraffito, a technique involving scratching away layers of colored slip to produce an image on the surface of a ceramic form, is often used to highlight traditional German craftsmanship. This method was widely used with colored plaster and stucco on townhomes and buildings within Western Germany. Scratching through layers of clay mimics the process of carving wood blocks that would be used to print on fabric. While developing artworks such as *Evolution* I referenced wood blocks and original Wallach designs that were housed at the Munich State Museum, Dachau State Museum, and Fromholzer Textile Company.

Many printing blocks and textiles incorporate organic imagery such as flowers, leaves, vines, and other foliage. This collection of flora allows for a broad repertoire to build off of within my ceramic practice. The interpreted patterns used in my artwork stem from motifs that led to the success of Moritz and Julius Wallach years ago. The translation from fabric to clay allows for a new permanence of ideology, experience, and family history.

6. Process

Beyond the physical transformations within my ceramic process, I have experienced tremendous emotional growth. My previous knowledge of Wallach history was purely factual, and I didn't spend much time speculating the emotional distress that World War II had on my great grandfather, my grandmother, and even my father. Traveling to Europe opened the doors to a new idea of self, and the role I can hold within my family's history. Through my travels I often found myself questioning the purpose of such discovery and asking about the relevance of Wallach history, but the more I discovered the more found purpose.

Researching something so close to my heart was a challenge; often feeling the work I was doing did not truly honor the dedication and perseverance that Moritz and Julius embodied during their lives. In the beginning this mentality resulted in art that felt sad or burdensome, when really I wanted to make art that honored the growth, love, and reclamation that the Wallach brothers and their families symbolized. In order to redirect my creativity I explored themes that paralleled my family's story: our desires, ideologies, motivations, and fears.

I found that we all share a love of history, nature, and storytelling. These overlapping interests became more prominent in my artwork, and as time progressed I became comfortable navigating visual conversations between past and present. I allowed myself time to explore the joyous disposition of Wallach folk art which resulted in a more

spirited presence manifesting in my own work. *Knowing* is an example of such exploration. In this piece I combined my personal design aesthetic with figures found in Wallach fabrics. The bird was a simple part of a larger fabric design; I chose to explore this shape as the primary focus of a large-scale artwork. I decorated the forms in a more intuitive manner and still felt like I was creating a Wallach presence within my own work.



Figure 11. Amelia Rosenberg, *Knowing*, 2018, Stoneware and Underglaze, 108"x7"x38"

Knowing required me to match my physical effort with emotional work. Much of the surface design was improvised, and I allowed myself time to explore my creative desires and push the limits of my imagination. Through the process I felt that my personal discoveries and research were just as important as my family's history, and these two pieces of time could live symbiotically. Since making *Knowing* my artwork has found a new sense of balance, and the research conducted in Germany now has context within my creative process.

7. Continuation

At the height of Wallach production "most of their printed fabrics were produced by the Fromholzer Company in the town of Ruhmannsfelden, in the Bavarian Forest"². The Fromholzer Company still exists today and is the last known enterprise to produce Wallach textiles. Josef Fromholzer, who started working in his father's print shop at the age of eleven, manages the 'Fromholzer Textildruck'. Josef is now ninety-two years old and can be found working in his shop nearly everyday. The company only has a handful of employees yet produces a large amount of fabric that are highly sought after across Germany. In his possession are over four hundred original Wallach wood blocks, as well as large silkscreens for quickly producing multicolored textiles. Additionally Josef owns a collection of over three thousand printing blocks, the oldest dating to the seventeenth century.

The Wallach brothers first started to commission the Fromholzer Company as a way to expedite the printing process and the two businesses formed strong professional and personal relationships. The two companies worked alongside each other in order to create well-designed, high quality fabrics. After the Wallach family was forced from Germany, The Fromholzer Textile company continued to produce signature Wallach fabrics. In addition to the countless printing blocks in Josef Fromholzer's possession, he also has binders full of every written transaction between the two companies, every newspaper article that mentioned the Wallach company, and numerous sketches, designs, and notes that were part of the collaboration process.

Josef Fromholzer's greatest concern is the future of his printing company, his printing blocks, and well-kept records. Because of his age, he is fearful that when he dies, the company will cease to exist. There is not a current interest to continue printing from any of his employees or family members. Fromholzer's greatest fear is that his goods will be auctioned off and the history of both Fromholzer and Wallach companies forgotten. When I visited his company in Ruhmannsfelden, Germany there was conversation around founding a museum in 2019. The museum would commemorate the relationship between the Wallach brothers and Fromholzer Company, and serve as tribute to the making of traditional textiles. All of the artifacts in Josef Fromholzer's possession would be preserved and open to the public. Currently the status of this museum is unknown, but the process has been set in motion. Members of the Wallach family who live both in the United States and Europe have become involved in the preservation process, and want the history of both companies to remain intact.

Fromholzer has committed his life to the story of these two families and their companies, he was ecstatic to learn of my project and meet a Wallach descendent. I will likely return to Germany in 2019 and revisit Josef Fromholzer. While there, I will work with local artists to be part of an exhibition honoring one hundred years of artistry in Germany.

8. Conclusion

From my point of view, the parallels between ancestry and personal creativity are unmistakable. Clay has a particularly receptive memory and is able to document each touch, just as people have recorded their own personal history. This naturally responsive quality creates a narration within each piece of work that is beyond form and surface. Combining memory with the practice of making has developed into a methodology that reaches beyond the studio.

Bringing this methodology to the story of my Jewish family's artistic presence in pre-war Germany and creative turmoil after, I aim to construct artwork with the psychology of positive change. Traditional response to grief is either suppression or replacement, whereas my work aims to honor traumatic change and develop from learned experience. I imagine that through my work the viewer will step into a transformative ethos.

This research and corresponding body of artwork explores themes of transformation, reclamation, and growth. Each piece explores stability, bravery and courage beyond traditional strength. I was particularly drawn to clay for this project because of its impressionable, responsive, and strong nature. These same characteristics are what I admire most in the members of my family who survived the Holocaust to rebuilt their lives elsewhere. I aim to find a softness in my works, some part of the story that doesn't attempt to quantify pain, but instead stands alone as important and true.

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11. Endnotes

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