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From the SelectedWorks of Samuel D. Gruber, Ph.D.

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JONATHAN ADLER RE:FORM

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PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF JEWISH ART
Happy, handcrafted, and luxe. Rare, rustic, and recherché. Earthy, elegant, and eccentric.

These are Jonathan Adler's own descriptions of his widely collected pottery. Launched in 1994 with a single order from Barney's, Adler's career in clay has transformed the Brown University-educated New Jersey native into the head of a burgeoning empire that now includes four eponymous retail stores (in New York, East Hampton, Los Angeles, and Miami Beach), representation in hundreds of other shops and galleries throughout the world, textiles that channel folk and modern-art inspirations through traditional Persian weaving techniques, a decadely eclectic and imaginatively hued furniture, and a growing roster of clients for his interior-design services (among Adler's recent high-profile commissions: the Park Hyatt Tokyo Hotel).

Adler is a leading figure in contemporary design. His pottery and other products are regularly featured in periodicals such as Metropolitan Home, Wallpaper, Elle Decor, House & Garden, and establish an urban and stylish tone on the sets of Will & Grace, The Today Show, and The Apprentice, among other programs. The influence of his organic shapes and textures, in particular, can be seen throughout the offerings of today's home-furnishings manufacturers and retailers, but his work also reflects the fascinations of a happy — and visually and intellectually stimulating — 1970s childhood.

Adler's aesthetic was nurtured in the bodely modern home of his parents, and he found wonder in the newly minted — and, often, architecturally adventurous — temples that sprang up in the baby-booming suburbs of his youth. "I have always been drawn by and fantasized about moving into those synagogues," he writes in a 1990 profile in the New York Times. "They have such a goofy, brutalist, modern thing going on."

This quote is the starting point for Jonathan Adler: Reform. This first museum retrospective of Adler's ceramics pans his pottery with Paul Robesbee's photographs of striking modernist synagogues. Like Adler's creations, this exhibition contains an element of whimsy. With Adler's great accomplishments showcased alongside images of a singular source of creative inspiration — the American temple at mid-century — one may delight in his inventive forms, surfaces, and colors while exploring a distinctive but largely untapped period in synagogue architecture and American Jewish life.

Matthew F. Singer
Curator, Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art
Matt Singer: What is your creative process? Do you start with an idea in mind — perhaps even sketch things in advance — or does the inspiration come as you’re working with the clay?

Jonathan Adler: It’s really a combination. Usually I make a sketch and then, when I’m working on a piece, it develops.

MS: You’ve said that the temples you visited as a kid inspired you. How so? How might that inspiration be reflected in a given piece of pottery?

JA: When I was growing up, we belonged to a Conservative congregation (Beth Abraham in Bridgeton, New Jersey), and the building was not very over the top. But, I can still remember the ecstatic frisson I felt when I went to friends’ Reform temples. To me, the Reform movement represents a kind of futuristic, utopian ideal. And the Reform temples I visited then were the architectural embodiment of the modern idealism of the movement. Houses of worship have always been architectural gems, from Renaissance churches to Le Corbusier’s Ronchamp. Communities really open their handbags wide to pay for temples, and architects really go for it in an attempt to create a transcendental experience. Reform and other synagogue architecture of the period embraced organic modernism as a style and took it to the extreme, with abstract, free-flowing forms and, often, a decorative-patterned overlay. My pottery uses an organic modernist vocabulary with a layer of pattern and decoration.

MS: What’s next?

JA: About a quillion things are next — more stores (Miami, Santa Monica, and San Francisco all opening in the next few months), more stuff, more giggles with Simon and Liberace (my husband and dog, respectively), and, I hope, more vacations!

MS: If you could design a synagogue, what would it look like?

JA: I think I would strive to take my idea of progressive synagogue architecture (organic modernism with a nod to transcendentalism) to an extreme. I’d love to design a totally futuristic white pod with pattern and decoration and a sense of fun.