

# Recycling Righteousness

*Art + Ideas is a forum for junior curators to write about distinctive works in the collection. This edition is by Rebecca Pristoop, Leon Levy Curatorial Assistant. The Henry J. Leir Initiative in Contemporary Judaica is supported by the Leir Charitable Foundations.*

Artist Harriete Estel Berman uses repurposed tin to create sculptures and Judaica that raise awareness about our society's oversaturated and wasteful material culture. In 2001, The Jewish Museum acquired her wall installation, *Tzedakah*, 1999, a grid of 50 individual envelopes crafted out of vintage doll houses, cookie boxes and other tin containers. Originally produced for the San Francisco Jewish Museum's invitational *Making Change: 100 Artists Interpret the Tzedakah Box*, this piece comments on the Jewish value of *tzedakah* (righteousness through charity) in relation to consumer society.

Within a richly patterned grid of tin envelopes, Berman mixes recognizable emblems of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century snack foods with nostalgic blue-and-white Jewish National Fund charity boxes. The snack tins feature mouth-watering images of cookies, succulent fruits and marketing slogans like "uncommonly good" designed to attract consumers and sell products. The JNF charity boxes on the other hand, introduced in 1904 to raise money for the reforestation of Palestine, portray scenes of people working the land and planting trees along with the directive to "make the land bloom." This propagandist presentation is designed to elicit donation instead of consumption.



*Alms Container: Tzedakah*, Harriete Estel Berman, San Mateo, California, United States, 1999, pre-printed steel and aluminum rivets. The Jewish Museum, New York. Purchase: Dr. Joel and Phyllis Gitlin Judaica Acquisitions Fund.

Her tin envelopes mimic the dimensions of the small envelopes that became synonymous with charitable solicitation in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Portraying envelopes as the modern *tzedakah* box signifies a shift away from a tradition cultivated by Jewish families in the shtetls of Europe before World War II

and in America until the 1960s—the of dropping coins into alms containers when gathering on the Sabbath and other holidays. Today, a great deal of charitable solicitation takes place on the Internet. In this sense, Berman's *Tzedakah* captures a specific moment in the history of charitable giving.