

Scenes from the Collection

Opens January 21, 2018

The Jewish Museum, New York

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Why do we collect things? A museum is essentially an archive of art, not unlike a library. We collect objects of profound importance and beauty. We offer these works to the public, record their stories, and explore their meanings. A museum's collection is its heart and soul.

We also collect to preserve the past, in order to better understand the present. When we look back at our histories and traditions, objects help us see where we have come from – and suggest where we may go.

This is particularly important at the Jewish Museum, given the long, tumultuous history of the Jewish people. Our collection, viewed through a contemporary lens, is both a mirror of Jewish identities and a guide for the formation of new ones. The museum contains nearly thirty thousand objects in all media and across millennia. This unique mix of art and ceremonial objects speaks of the many strands of Jewish tradition, spirituality, and history brought into expression through artistic creativity.

The world has changed dramatically since the collection was established in 1904. In these Scenes from the museum's collection we present art and Jewish culture together, affirming universal values that are shared among people of all faiths and backgrounds. This display also acknowledges recent changes in curatorial approaches and the breakup of artistic canons that were dominated by the art of Western Europe and North America.

It accomplishes this in several ways: instead of a master narrative, the display is divided into seven Scenes – the name alludes to the dramatic and interactive qualities of theater. Each suggests a different filter through which we may understand art. Objects are thus set within overlapping and connected stories. The Scenes are punctuated with references to the history of the collection itself over its lifespan of more than one hundred years. Episodes in the origins and development of the museum expose some of the ways in which context is created by history, circumstance, and shifts in institutional mission.

Scenes from the Collection is not static: Scenes will change periodically to offer audiences the chance to see as much of the collection as possible, including new acquisitions. It presents our holdings as an ongoing evolution—reflecting an essential aspect of Jewish culture.

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CONSTELLATIONS

Some of the most powerful works in the Jewish Museum's collection are those that express aspects of Jewish culture, history, or values, while they also reflect universal issues of art and its relationship to society. When widely varied artworks are presented together in Constellations, multiple meanings and conversations can emerge. Some of the resulting dialogues revolve around the reinterpretation of traditions and the ways in which they are maintained, transformed, or transcended. Others explore the pursuit of spirituality - whether in the performance of ritual, the study of mysticism, or the creation of an artwork - and the ever-changing nature of identity.

TAXONOMIES

A taxonomy is a method of ordering and classifying things according to shared characteristics. This Scene celebrates the eclectic variety of the Jewish Museum's many collections, from Jewish ceremonial objects such as Torah pointers, spice containers, Passover plates, and marriage contracts to tools, jewelry, games, and watches. Works are juxtaposed in nontraditional classifications according to activities such as marking time, praying, and travel, or by material. This display recalls the Cabinets of Wonders that were popular in Europe in the Renaissance. Such rooms brought together a mix of rare or curious objects, from preserved animals and plants to exotic shells and stones, gems, clocks, and weapons, often arranged in artful ways, to demonstrate their owner's social status and humanist erudition. These collections were the precursor of the modern museum, which assembles objects for study, public education, and pleasure.

MASTERPIECES AND CURIOSITIES

The Jewish Museum's collection is vast and diverse. Some of the works are recognized artworks of great significance, beauty, and craftsmanship. Others are oddities - unexpected and eccentric creations that merit closer attention. This Scene focuses on a single piece, allowing us to reexamine and rethink it in light of other artworks and source materials. Even the most apparently peculiar work of art reveals complex histories and rich layers of meaning when seen in the larger context of cultural and social history.

Theresienstadt Bracelet

During World War II Greta Perlman (1904-1975) was a prisoner in the camp-ghetto of Theresienstadt, established by the Nazis in 1941 in what is now the Czech Republic. Despite horrific conditions, she was able to gather the twenty charms and badges assembled into this bracelet, each steeped in personal memories. Some 140,000 Jews were deported to Theresienstadt, many of them musicians, writers, and artists. Forced to produce decorative objects for the Nazis, prisoner artists also secretly made personal pieces such as many of these charms, which were smuggled out of the workshops and often exchanged for food. Greta Perlman survived Theresienstadt and, later, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, but most of her fellow prisoners perished. Works such as her bracelet underscore their quiet efforts to preserve their individuality and humanity through the impulse to make and own art.

ACCUMULATIONS

Most museum collections are built over time, often somewhat haphazardly. Along the way, a museum may accumulate a large number of similar works, responding to serendipitous opportunities as well as the need to preserve cultural and artistic heritage and to maintain important research functions. Despite their seeming redundancy, such groups of works reveal important information on artistic and social processes. Usually, just one object of a type is selected for display, while its duplicates languish in storage. This Scene takes the opposite approach: instead of emphasizing the preciousness of the unique artwork or artifact, it revels in the collective visual impact of multiples, a method of presentation that reveals new insights which might otherwise remain hidden.

Traveling in the Holy Land through the Stereoscope

The stereograph is an early form of 3D technology. When these miniature double photographs are fitted into a special viewer called a stereoscope, they appear to be life-size and give the illusion of depth.

Most of the stereographs seen here depict sites related to the Bible. They were packaged in albums of one hundred images or more, arranged in a virtual tour, and accompanied by a hefty guidebook and maps. Looking at these immersive images in succession, an armchair traveler was meant to feel transported to the region and indeed back to biblical times. The albums were originally marketed to a Christian audience and intended for use in Sunday school or for private devotional study, yet the images hold significance for Jews and Muslims too. The one hundred stereographs in our collection, on public view here for the first time, were collected and donated by Jewish Americans. By the time the sets entered the museum's collection they were incomplete; the original tours remain as fragmented as the ruins they portray.

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

Signs and symbols are representations of an idea or concept, constituting a visual language that is recognizable within a social group. The meaning attached to a particular image is not fixed, but open to interpretation. Symbolism, when applied to objects, endows them with significance beyond their everyday use. In the Jewish Museum's collections, where ethnically based and religious art are important components, signs and symbols play a major role.

The Star of David

The six-pointed star, commonly thought to be an ancient symbol of Jewish identity, actually assumed this significance fairly late. In fact, the hexagram has undergone numerous changes in meaning over time as well as being a widespread motif in other cultures. Originally a decorative device and magical sign in both Jewish and non-Jewish contexts, it was probably first used as a distinctive Jewish emblem in the 1600s, when it was adopted by the Jewish community of Prague. By the nineteenth century it had evolved into the symbol of the Jewish people as a whole. With the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the Star of David was placed on the Israeli flag and took on a specific national significance. Still, the six-pointed star remains a universal motif that appears in art worldwide.

TELEVISION AND BEYOND

Television has been shaping and reflecting our perceptions since its rise as a mass medium in the 1930s. In 1981 the Jewish Museum established the National Jewish Archive of Broadcasting, a collection of television and radio materials related to the Jewish experience. At that time, it was a bold statement to align television with other art forms in a museum. The Archive is a record of how Jews have been portrayed and have portrayed themselves on American TV over the decades. Inspired by the Archive, *Television and Beyond* draws on other programs and materials to further explore these issues.

Friends and Family

Depictions of identities—religious, cultural, gender, and others—are a recurrent preoccupation of Jewish artists and thinkers, as seen in many artworks in these galleries. On television, the presentation of ethnic identity has become more diverse and complex over time. The family sitcom has always been one of the medium's most popular genres and provides an instantly recognizable setting in which to explore identity, including Jewishness. It has also, traditionally, established the white, middle-class, nonethnic nuclear family as the American norm. *Friends and Family* highlights current television shows that disrupt this tradition, reflecting the ongoing conversations about identity that inform our present moment. These programs expand the notion of family to include invented and extended families and circles of intimate friends who become family. By including transgender and queer characters, multiethnic and interfaith families, and actors who do not conform to stereotypes, they alter embedded assumptions about what the American Jewish family looks like. The clips shown here capture defining moments for the characters, whether at home, in school, or even in prison.

PERSONAS

Among genres of art, portraits offer the most direct connection between subject, artist, and viewer, and no art form is more profoundly concerned with the core question of identity. In this museum, portraiture provides perspectives on the individual and on Jewishness at a particular moment and from a specific view.

The Jewish Museum's collection includes portraits dating from antiquity to the present, most either by Jewish artists or of Jewish sitters. It thus offers a historical view of Jewish identities in all their many facets, addressing religion and secularity, ethnicity and universality, fantasy and materiality, otherness and self-assertion.

Self-Portraits

A self-portrait is an opportunity for self-reflection, perhaps with a hint of theatricality. The artist's decisions about style, form, background, expression, and dress are all carefully chosen components in the project of self-representation. An artist may stage a self-portrait in ways that mask, hide, or construct his or her identity.

Moritz Daniel Oppenheim's early nineteenth-century canvas shows a man proud of his academic training. Lee Krasner, a century later, depicts a young woman whose firm gaze expresses her determined self-definition as a painter. The feminist artists Hannah Wilke and Joan Semmel rework the tradition of the nude to propose a self-possessed female sexuality. In works by Ross Bleckner and Deborah Kass, the self is evoked through symbolic forms associated with the artists' identities as queer Jews.

On reflection, might one not consider the entire cultural and artistic range of *Scenes from the Collection* as a kind of self-portrait of the Jewish Museum?