Origins | 1904

First Seeds of a Collection

In the beginning, Mayer Sulzberger donated fifteen objects to the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, then in midtown Manhattan. Sulzberger, an eminent American jurist and scholar, hoped these artifacts "used in varying rites and ceremonies" could "serve as a suggestion for the establishment of a Jewish museum." The year was 1904, a time of enlightenment, acculturation, political disruptions, and migrations for Jews in Europe and the United States. In this climate of ferment at the dawn of the twentieth century, new museums were opened on both continents to preserve and study Jewish culture.

These first seeds of the collection represented a particular vision of what was considered necessary for the scientific study of Judaism at the time. Sulzberger's gift included cases for the Torah, the central text of Jewish law; circumcision implements for the act that binds Jewish men to the community; and portraits of rabbinical scholars who studied and interpreted Jewish law and history.

Origins | 1925

Riches from the East

For its first twenty years the Jewish Museum consisted of a few display cases in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. In 1925 a major acquisition took the museum to a new level. It purchased a collection of three hundred ceremonial objects that had belonged to Hadji Ephraim Benguiat, an antique dealer from Smyrna (today Izmir, Turkey). Rich in beautiful and important textiles and metalwork from Ottoman lands and Italy, as well as Western and Central Europe, the collection had been displayed at world's fairs and was then on loan to the Smithsonian Institution.

With the Benguiat acquisition, a more formal setting for the museum was established. In 1931 the newly named Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects opened in a room of its own in the seminary library. Ritual art and historical materials were displayed alongside manuscripts and documents from the library. The little museum was now overseen by a curator, Paul Romanoff, whose major goals were to counter rising anti-Semitic sentiment in the United States and to educate assimilated members of the Jewish community in an effort to foster understanding and tolerance.

Origins | 1931

An Immigrant Collection

Beginning in 1931 and over the next three decades, the museum received gifts of more than six thousand objects from Dr. Harry G. Friedman. Friedman, an investment banker with a deep knowledge of Judaism, had developed a passion for collecting Jewish ceremonial art and artifacts. He is said to have left his office every afternoon to scour the antique and consignment shops of Manhattan, purchasing works for the museum. He also persuaded other people to donate their collections and family heirlooms.

The geographic origins of Friedman's collection mirrored the patterns of Jewish immigration to the United States. The largest wave of arrivals came from Eastern Europe between 1880 and the 1920s, as Jews fled pogroms, poverty, and revolutionary turmoil. Second were German Jews, who came in the mid-nineteenth century along with other Germans, Irish, and southern Europeans, leaving behind economic hardships and nationalistic wars. In the 1930s Jews from across Europe, especially Germany, emigrated to escape the Nazi regime. Others came from North Africa, Iraq, and Iran. These immigrants brought their precious ceremonial objects with them, but after a generation or two, sometimes Grandma's candlesticks were no longer appreciated and were sold. Friedman's collecting took on a particular urgency during and after the Holocaust, as he sought to salvage the remnants of destroyed Jewish communities.

Origins | 1939

The Holocaust

The destruction of European Jewry during the Nazi era had a profound effect on the Jewish Museum. The necessity to preserve the cultural material of eradicated communities became urgent. When World War II swept through Europe, two major Judaica collections were sent for preservation to New York.

The first came from the Jews of the city of Danzig (now Gdańsk, Poland) in 1939. The Great Synagogue there possessed magnificent ritual objects used in services as well as a museum of Judaica. As war loomed, Jews fleeing Danzig entrusted their treasures to the American Joint Distribution Committee, which brought them for safekeeping to the Jewish Theological Seminary. The loan stipulated that if the Danzig Jewish community was not reconstituted in fifteen years, the committee could take ownership of the works. While many Danzigers escaped, they did not return after the war, and their ceremonial objects were formally donated to the Jewish Museum in 1954.

The second body of orphaned objects was gathered in Europe at the end of the war by the United States Army. Led by Hannah Arendt, the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction organization found these works homes in various institutions and communities. The staging ground for distributions in the Western hemisphere was in the basement of the Jewish Museum, by then located on Fifth Avenue. The objects assigned to the museum came primarily from Eastern Europe and from the destroyed Jewish Museum of Frankfurt. They were selected by Guido Schoenberger, the Frankfurt museum's former curator, who came to work for the Jewish Museum in New York. They were formally accessioned in 1952.

Origins | 1947

The Warburg Mansion

In 1947 the Museum of Jewish Ceremonial Objects moved from one room in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary to a splendid mansion on Fifth Avenue and 92nd Street. The house, built in 1908 in the Gothic Revival style, had been the home of Felix and Frieda Schiff Warburg, major supporters of the seminary and museum. It also acquired a new name: the Jewish Museum. These changes signaled an intention to broaden the institution's ambitions for its exhibitions and collections.

The mansion underwent two major renovations over the following years: one in 1963, the other in 1993. First, the Vera and Albert List Wing was added, dramatically increasing display space for contemporary art. Three decades later, the museum expanded once more to accommodate *Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey*. This long-term, historically based display of the collection showed an eclectic mix of art and artifacts together, interpreted in social and political contexts; it remained on view until 2017.

Origins | 1957
Contemporary Art

In 1957 the Jewish Museum mounted a landmark exhibition, *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation*. Following that, it began to show avant-garde art that did not necessarily have Jewish content, seeking to attract a broad visitorship increasingly excited by contemporary art. Between 1957 and 1971 it produced a string of celebrated exhibitions that interpreted breaking trends in the art world: *Black and White* (1963), on the aesthetics of monochrome; the first survey of Minimalist sculpture, *Primary Structures* (1966); *Software* (1970), a prescient examination of information technology and art; and others. Also famous were its solo shows of new artists such as Robert Rauschenberg (1963) and Jasper Johns (1964). Thrilling as this initiative was, little of the avant-garde art on view was acquired for the collection.

In the same period, the museum promoted modern design and supported the creation of innovative contemporary ceremonial art through the establishment of the Tobe Pascher Workshop, directed by the silversmiths Ludwig Yehuda Wolpert and Moshe Zabari. Its aim was to reenergize Jewish ritual practice after the devastations of World War II.

Origins | 1973

Antiquities

Having made a name for its contemporary art exhibitions in the 1960s, the Jewish Museum began in 1972 to turn its attention to the archaeology of ancient Israel. Shows about recently excavated sites drew large crowds. In 1973 the museum's modest collection of a few hundred ancient objects more than doubled with a major purchase from New York University of nearly five hundred antiquities. These came from three archaeological sites in Israel that had been excavated in the 1920s and 1930s. A series of long-term installations on Jewish life in antiquity enabled the fledgling education department to develop a popular program in archaeology, coordinated with the New York public school curriculum.

After UNESCO produced its important Convention on Cultural Property, the museum became an early adopter. This Convention prohibits the acquisition of works that were removed after 1970 from their country of origin without an export license.

Origins | 1981

Collecting Art

Among the first works given to the Jewish Museum in its earliest days were portraits of important rabbis and scholars. Still, for many decades the institution's holdings were far more robust in Jewish ceremonial arts—objects created for use in a religious context. When paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, and sculptures were occasionally donated, they were mainly images in an academic style, depicting Jewish religious or historical subjects.

After the museum moved to its own building on Fifth Avenue in 1947, a greater emphasis began to be placed on the art of living artists. In part the impetus was to assert the survival and vibrancy of Jewish culture after World War II. But it was only in the 1980s that the museum began to collect modern and contemporary art systematically, creating an acquisitions committee and establishing collecting criteria. The standards for acquisition were high artistic and cultural significance and the inclusion of artists of all backgrounds whose lives or work resonated with the Jewish experience.