Engaging with History: Works from the Collection

One hundred and twenty years in the making, the Jewish Museum's collection is its heart and soul. Its seeds were planted in 1904 when Mayer Sulzberger donated fifteen objects to the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. An eminent American jurist and scholar, Sulzberger hoped these artifacts, "used in varying rites and ceremonies," could "serve as a suggestion for the establishment of a Jewish museum." The time was one of enlightenment, acculturation, political disruption, and migration for Jews in Europe and the United States. At the dawn of the twentieth century and in this climate of ferment, new Jewish museums were formed to preserve and explore Jewish culture.

As the collection grew over the following decades, a dedicated building was needed. Frieda Schiff Warburg, who with her late husband, Felix, had been a major supporter of the Jewish Museum, generously donated their family home. The mansion, situated at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Ninety-Second Street, has been home to the Jewish Museum since 1947. Today the Museum has over thirty thousand objects, including paintings, sculpture, photography, ceremonial art, antiquities, and new media. Its dynamic holdings reflect an ever-evolving understanding of the relationship between art and global Jewish culture across time, striving to capture history as it unfolds in the contemporary moment. As we reimagine a largescale presentation of our collection, which will open in late 2025, we invite you to view the selected highlights in these three galleries.

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Look for these symbols in the galleries to discover

(D) Insights from artists and experts

AD))) Audio Descriptions that translate the visual into spoken word, designed for individuals who are blind or have low vision

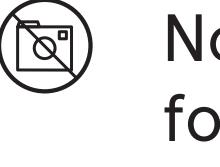
Observations for kids and families

(ASL) Videos in American Sign Language

Devices are available for loan at the admissions desk, except on Saturdays and select Jewish holidays.



All works are in the collection of the Jewish Museum, New York, unless noted otherwise.



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Portraiture

Among the artistic genres, portraiture most directly connects subject, artist, and viewer and is profoundly concerned with the core questions of identity, belonging, and inheritance. Most portraits in the Jewish Museum collection are either by Jewish artists or of Jewish sitters. As such they offer a multifaceted view of Jewish identities, addressing religion and secularity, otherness and self-assertion. In this gallery, portraiture primarily takes the form of photography, with works executed in painting, sculpture, and textile also represented. The Museum's photographs range from nineteenth-century daguerreotypes to twentieth-first century digital color prints, from documentary series and ethnographic studies to avant-garde and contemporary art.

Memory

The theme of memory pervades the Jewish Museum's holdings, reflecting the global Jewish experience. Nazi persecution and decimation of European Jewry had a marked effect on the Museum's collection, adding urgency to the need to preserve objects from destroyed communities. This history is part of the impetus today for the acquisition of contemporary art that wrestles with these and other atrocities that defy comprehension. On view in this gallery are two powerful works—the first created in the Theresienstadt ghetto-concentration camp and a second honoring lives lost during the Holocaust. One is an intimate charm bracelet steeped in the personal memories of Greta Perlman, a survivor of Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, and the other is a large installation by the French artist Christian Boltanski that memorializes children murdered by the Nazi regime. Of disparate scale, these two works create a moving dialogue with each other.

Past and Present in Dialogue

This gallery presents a selection of Jewish ceremonial artworks from the Museum's extraordinary Judaica collection. They exemplify the varied, ever-evolving, and beautifully crafted objects that are integral to Jewish ritual. Hanukkah lamps make up the largest grouping within the Museum's Jewish ceremonial art holdings, with more than one thousand examples from most regions where Jews have settled. These works emphasize the diversity and malleability of Jewish tradition, which can be continually reinterpreted and transformed.

The Jewish Museum is also the repository of important historic collections including that of the once-thriving Jewish community of Danzig (today Gdańsk, Poland). In the summer of 1939, shortly before the Nazi invasion of Poland, the Jewish community of Danzig sent more than three hundred objects to New York for safekeeping. In addition to other examples of traditional Jewish ceremonial art, contemporary works that reinvent and expand notions of inclusiveness further enhance the collection. Works on view here establish a vibrant, and at times defiant and haunting, dialogue with the past and illuminate the present in all its complexities.

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 Daniel Kershaw

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Clint Ross Coller