

## ***Masterpieces & Curiosities: A Russian American Quilt***

**Opens August 22, 2014**

### **Third Offering in New Exhibition Series Exploring Works from the Jewish Museum**

New York, NY – Showcasing a colorful patchwork quilt bearing Eastern European and American imagery, *Masterpieces & Curiosities: A Russian American Quilt* continues a series of exhibitions focused on individual works in the Jewish Museum's world-renowned collection. On view from August 22, 2014 to February 1, 2015, this exhibition highlights a rare quilt (c. 1899), a fascinating expression of the acculturation process undergone by newly arrived immigrants. The quilt was owned by a Russian Jewish family that likely arrived in America during the late 19th century and incorporates imagery from both cultures. Also included in the exhibition are related works from the Museum's collection which feature Russian motifs or reflect a conflation of Russian and Jewish traditions, items of Americana that provide context, and a few works from other collections.

Originally owned by a Russian Jewish immigrant family, the velvet quilt, embroidered with wool, silk, and metallic threads and embellished with glass beads, was assembled in America, incorporating panels probably embroidered in Russia in a cross-stitch technique often used in late 19th century Jewish ceremonial textiles. Its triangular pieces are aligned in a half-square pattern, and their random colors create a visual effect similar to that of a crazy quilt, a form of quilting which assembles pieces of fabric of various shapes and sizes that was popular in America at that time. Four panels in the quilt picture embroidered figures dressed in Russian costumes: a woman raising the side of her skirt, a common gesture in folk dancing; a dancing man; and a seated musician playing the balalaika. The source for these figures can be traced to Russian folk art, where they are elements of a design that was common in the late 19th century in printed textiles marketed among peasants.

The decoration in the border of the quilt reflects America around 1900 as seen through the eyes of an immigrant, with interests ranging from politics to sports to entertainment. Symbols of patriotism such as the American flag are combined with the Star of David. Two crossed American flags are flanked by depictions of a typical Russian woman dancing and of Admiral George Dewey. The popularity of Admiral Dewey, hero of the Battle of Manila during the Spanish-American War, was at its peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Dewey's victory prompted the manufacture of a wide range of products bearing his image, examples of which will be on view. Since Dewey was not promoted to the rank of admiral until

March 1899, the quilt could only have been finished after this date, even though the central panel bears the date of 1898.

Motifs in the quilt's border relate to sports that became popular in America c. 1900, including a baseball or football referee or umpire, hot-air ballooning, and tennis. Their inclusion reflects a vivid interest in pastimes that were a novelty to Jewish immigrants coming from Eastern Europe, where life, especially for Jews, was harsh. Also on view are ephemera reflecting the role of sports, including a Yiddish-language greeting card for the Jewish New Year, showcasing a couple riding in a hot-air balloon; a trading card depicting pitcher Barney Pelt, the "Yiddish Curver," one of the first Jewish baseball players in the major leagues; and a photograph of football player Joseph Magidsohn, the first Jew to earn a varsity letter at the University of Michigan.

Several works look back on Jewish life in Russia including self-taught artist Zelig Tepper's *Czar Nicholas Thumbing His Nose at Teddy Roosevelt's Protesting the Kishinev Pogrom* (1954). Tepper's painting depicts the czar defiantly thumbing his nose at Roosevelt, who stands in front of the United States Capitol, brandishing a club—an allusion to his maxim on foreign policy, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." Other highlights include a velvet bag for *tefillin* (leather boxes containing scriptural passages worn during morning prayers) decorated with silk thread embroidery of the Russian imperial doubled-headed eagle; a linen towel for the Sabbath featuring cotton thread-embroidered Russian folk motifs; a set of vodka beakers repurposed for use as *kiddush* cups; and gingerbread molds used to bake *fluden* (cakes filled with honey, nuts, and sugar, traditionally eaten during Purim). Two more recent photographs by Jerome Liebling focus on later Russian Jewish migration to Brighton Beach, Brooklyn (taken in 1985 and 1995).

Over the course of the seven exhibitions in the *Masterpieces & Curiosities* series, which runs from 2013 to 2017, the Jewish Museum's curators are exploring objects that highlight the breadth and diversity of the collection, ranging from an iconic Alfred Stieglitz photograph, to a Moroccan wedding costume, and a painting of a Passover seder by Carnegie Prize-winner Nicole Eisenman. These intimate exhibitions provide new insights into works from the Museum's collection – contextualizing, examining, and rethinking the piece on view by surrounding it with other artworks, documents, and source materials.

The *Masterpieces & Curiosities* series was organized by Jens Hoffmann, Deputy Director, Exhibitions and Public Programs, and coordinated by Daniel S. Palmer, Leon Levy Assistant Curator. *Masterpieces & Curiosities: A Russian American Quilt* is curated by Claudia J. Nahson, Morris & Eva Feld Curator.



**About The Jewish Museum**

Located on Museum Mile at Fifth Avenue and 92nd Street, the Jewish Museum is one of the world's preeminent institutions devoted to exploring art and Jewish culture from ancient to contemporary, offering intellectually engaging and educational exhibitions and programs for people of all ages and backgrounds. The Museum was established in 1904, when Judge Mayer Sulzberger donated 26 ceremonial objects to The Jewish Theological Seminary as the core of a museum collection. Today, the Museum maintains a collection of over 30,000 works of art, artifacts, and broadcast media reflecting global Jewish identity, and presents a diverse schedule of internationally acclaimed temporary exhibitions.

The Jewish Museum is located at 1109 Fifth Avenue at 92nd Street, New York City. Museum hours are Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, 11am to 5:45pm; Thursday, 11am to 8pm; and Friday, 11am to 4pm. Museum admission is \$15.00 for adults, \$12.00 for senior citizens, \$7.50 for students, free for visitors 18 and under and Jewish Museum members. Admission is Pay What You Wish on Thursdays from 5pm to 8pm and free on Saturdays. For information on the Jewish Museum, the public may call 212.423.3200 or visit the website at [www.thejewishmuseum.org](http://www.thejewishmuseum.org).

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