

## **Exhibition Exploring Suspicious Provenance of Colonial American Portrait Pair from the Jewish Museum Collection Opens March 18, 2016**

New York, NY – Raising questions of authenticity and fraud, *Masterpieces & Curiosities: The Fictional Portrait* will reveal surprising new analysis of two portraits once thought to depict an 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish couple. On view at the Jewish Museum from March 18 through August 14, 2016, the exhibition will present the disputed works alongside a selection of other portraits from the Museum's collection, offering a reflection on questions of truth and representation in portraiture. During a decade of research, the identities of the artist and sitters have been reconsidered through archival investigation, genealogical studies, and recent X-ray analysis. *Masterpieces & Curiosities: The Fictional Portrait* continues a series of exhibitions focused on individual works in the Jewish Museum's world-renowned collection.

At the time of their acquisition in 1957, the two key works in this exhibition were believed to be portraits of Judah Mears and his wife Jochabed Michaels, made around 1740 and attributed to Jeremiah Theus, an American colonial portraitist active in Charleston, South Carolina. Scholarly examination of the paintings indicates that they do not resemble other works by Theus, and no other visual representations of the couple are known to exist. In 2015, the Jewish Museum commissioned stereomicroscopic examination and technical imaging of the two portraits. This analysis revealed that the works, though most likely produced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were painted with different pigments using different methods. X-ray and infrared scans of the paintings will be reproduced in the exhibition.

Only one source is known to document the paintings. A 1957 note from the seller, Marie Ambrose, to the Jewish Museum traces the history and ownership of the paintings. The stated provenance was researched and deemed plausible at the time. However, there is evidence of widespread fraud in the market for early American portraits during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Frank Bayley, a noted Boston art dealer, is mentioned in the seller's note, raising further questions. Bayley was implicated in the fraudulent sale of portraits, including one of George Washington in 1928, which led to closure of his gallery and ultimately to Bayley's death in 1932.

Given the lack of hard evidence for the provenance of the paintings, a theory emerges: the works were not painted by Jeremiah Theus, do not depict Judah and Jochabed Mears, and were likely given a false attribution when transferred from Bayley's gallery to Marie Ambrose, possibly in the late 1920s or early 1930s. The works may have

originated in England or Scotland and appear to have undergone some alteration before being brought together as a couple.

Traditionally, portraits speak both to the time when they were created and to the future. Serving as repositories of memory and generating a sense of familial continuity, such portraits are often entwined with considerations of genealogy and status. Portraits commissioned by Jewish patrons or families in the young United States, in addition to fulfilling the traditional functions of remembrance and recognition, also served as visual statements of social standing and belonging. Common-sense interpretations of portraits often involve intuiting some direct relation between the image and the sitter. However, there is risk in reading character or history into a representation that is mediated by the artist, the sitter, and the viewer, whether in the past or today.

In addition to the disputed works and related materials, *The Fictional Portrait* will include other portraits from the collection of the Jewish Museum produced between 1680 and 1900. Some notable examples from the wide variety of portraits in the Museum's collection are featured, including works by unknown artists or of unknown sitters. On view will be portraits by prominent artists such as Thomas Sully, "the prince of American portrait painters," and Isidor Kaufmann, the Viennese master of Jewish portraiture and genre. There are depictions of other significant figures: Solomon Isaacs, president of New York's Jewish community in 1790; a portrait by a student of Rembrandt considered by some to be of philosopher Baruch Spinoza; and silhouettes of such notables as philanthropist Judah Touro, created during the 1840s, when the medium was at the height of its popularity.

Over the course of 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 Diane Arbus photograph, to a Hanukkah lamp designed by Peter Shire. 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.

*Masterpieces & Curiosities: The Fictional Portrait* is curated by Stephen Brown, Associate Curator. 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.

### Support

*Masterpieces & Curiosities: the Fictional Portrait* is made possible by an anonymous donation in memory of Curtis Hereld and the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Exhibition Fund.



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### **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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Press contacts:

Anne Scher, Molly Kurzius, or Alex Wittenberg  
The Jewish Museum  
212.423.3271 or [pressoffice@thejm.org](mailto:pressoffice@thejm.org)

