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*****PRESS PREVIEW*****
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

***THEY CALLED ME MAYER JULY:
PAINTED MEMORIES OF A JEWISH CHILDHOOD
IN POLAND BEFORE THE HOLOCAUST
OPENS AT THE JEWISH MUSEUM ON SUNDAY, MAY 10TH***

**A LOST WORLD CAPTURED IN ASTONISHING DETAIL IN
MORE THAN 80 VIBRANT PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS
BY MAYER KIRSHENBLATT**

New York, NY – *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust* opens at The Jewish Museum on Sunday, May 10 and remains on view through October 1, 2009. In this lively exhibition, visitors will discover a lost world captured in astonishing detail in more than 80 vibrant paintings and drawings by Mayer Kirshenblatt. Born in 1916, Kirshenblatt left Poland for Canada in 1934. Intimate, humorous, and refreshingly candid, the exhibition is a remarkable record of Jewish life in a Polish town, Opatów (Apt in Yiddish), before World War II, as seen through the eyes of an inquisitive boy fascinated by the world in which he lived.

Mayer Kirshenblatt, now 92 years old, first began to paint at the age of 73. To his amazement, the town of his childhood emerged in living color in scenes of birth and death, and images of kitchens and farms, inhabited by a lively cast of shoemakers, butchers, prostitutes, street performers, thieves, chimney sweeps, and musicians. Painting by painting, story by story, he recreated the entire world of his youth. He painted everything he could remember about the streets and courtyards, the synagogue and marketplace, and the many characters who lived in Apt: the pregnant hunchback, who stood under the wedding canopy just hours before giving birth; the cobbler's son, who was dressed in white pajamas to fool

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the Angel of Death; the teacher caught in bed with the drummer's wife; the butcher who kept his accounts in chalk on his boots; the well-dressed kleptomaniac who slipped a fish down her bosom; and the woman who washed floors in a wedding gown. The exhibition is a tribute to the artist's distinctive imagination and sharp recollection of his hometown.

Also on view are two videos produced for The Jewish Museum. The first video shows Mayer Kirshenblatt and his daughter, acclaimed scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in the artist's Toronto studio and on a trip to Apt. In addition, the exhibition includes a toy theater created by Great Small Works, based on a Mayer Kirshenblatt painting called *The Boy in the White Pajamas*. The toy theater is comprised of cardboard cut-out recreations of Kirshenblatt's artwork on a miniature stage and set. There is an accompanying video of a performance in the toy theater of fantastic stories from Apt in which tiny figures from the painting slide across tracks on the stage.

They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust was organized by the Judah L. Magnes Museum in Berkeley, California. Following the New York City showing, the exhibition will travel to Amsterdam's Joods Historisch Museum in late 2009 and Warsaw's Museum of the History of Polish Jews in 2011.

Mayer Kirshenblatt left the village of Apt in 1934, at the age of 17, for Toronto, Canada, where his father had emigrated six years before him. He started painting, with no formal training, decades later when in his seventies, at the urgings of his daughter and wife. His ability to recall so much after such a long absence is astonishing. The fact that he was abruptly cut off from his colorful hometown right at childhood's end locks his artwork in time and place. Kirshenblatt has created an artistic rendering of a community and a way of life just before they were destroyed during the Holocaust.

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Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett interviewed her father over a span of 40 years, which led to the exhibition and a book brimming with rich narrative detail that adds context to the paintings. She is a noted scholar of Eastern European Jewish life and culture, and a professor of Performance Studies at New York University. This unique project is a blend of memoir, oral history, and visual interpretation. Published by the Magnes Museum and the University of California Press, a beautifully illustrated 411-page, hardcover book accompanies the exhibition. With 196 color illustrations and 11 black and white drawings, the book is available in the Museum's Cooper Shop for \$39.95.

A delightful and informative, 60-minute, random access Acoustiguide tour accompanies the exhibition. Exhibition visitors are guided through the exhibition by Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as well as Gershon Hundert, Professor of Jewish Studies and History at McGill University and a noted expert on the history of Apt; Jeffrey Shandler, Professor of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University and a scholar of modern Jewish culture; and theater historian John Bell, Director of the Ballard Institute and the Museum of Puppetry at the University of Connecticut. Mayer Kirshenblatt speaks a bit in Yiddish and Polish. The audio guide is available free of charge and made possible by Bloomberg. The tour component has been produced by The Jewish Museum in association with Acoustiguide.

They Called Me Mayer July was curated by Alla Efimova, Chief Curator at the Magnes Museum. The New York City presentation of the exhibition was coordinated by Aviva Weintraub, Associate Curator at The Jewish Museum.

The exhibition has been made possible through a grant from the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture and thanks to the generosity of Jean and Sandy Colen, Varda and Irving Rabin, and Katie and Amnon Rodan.

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The presentation at The Jewish Museum is generously supported by the Weiser Family Foundation in honor of Siegfried and Paula Weiser; The Atlantic Philanthropies; the Joseph Alexander Foundation; Goldie and David Blanksteen; the Robert I. Goldman Foundation; the Koret Foundation; the Winnick Family Foundation; Amy Rubenstein; and other donors.

About The Jewish Museum

The Jewish Museum was established on January 20, 1904 when Judge Mayer Sulzberger donated 26 ceremonial art objects to The Jewish Theological Seminary of America as the core of a museum collection. Today, The Jewish Museum maintains an important collection of 26,000 objects – paintings, sculpture, works on paper, photographs, archaeological artifacts, ceremonial objects, and broadcast media. Widely admired for its exhibitions and educational programs that inspire people of all backgrounds, The Jewish Museum is the preeminent institution exploring the intersection of 4,000 years of art and Jewish culture.

General Information

Museum hours are Saturday through Wednesday, 11am to 5:45pm; and Thursday, 11am to 8pm. Museum admission is \$12.00 for adults, \$10.00 for senior citizens, \$7.50 for students, free for children under 12 and Jewish Museum members. Admission is free on Saturdays. For general information on The Jewish Museum, the public may visit the Museum's Web site at <http://www.thejewishmuseum.org> or call 212.423.3200. The Jewish Museum is located at 1109 Fifth Avenue at 92nd Street, Manhattan.

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