

Audio Descriptions of *Identity, Culture, and Community: Stories from the Collection of the Jewish Museum*

The Jewish Museum

STOP LIST

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501. Attributed to William Melville, *David Sassoon*, mid-nineteenth century

NARRATOR: This painting, titled *David Sassoon*, is attributed to William Melville, a British artist, active in the 1840s. It is oil on canvas. It measures 41 1/2 inches high and 33 inches wide, about the size of a bath towel. Its frame is made from gilt wood. Let's explore what this painting tells us about David Sassoon, the patriarch of the first generation of Sassoons shown in this exhibition.

In this painting an older man is posed seated – his presence dominates the composition. He wears a sandy beige turban with bands of red and blue patterns. His skin is a pale ocher with ruddy accents. His white mustache flows into a beard that frames his jowls and yellows as it comes to rest on his chest. His dark brows frame heavy-lidded eyes that look to the right. His nose is long and narrow. Thin pink lips – surrounded by facial hair – are closed – neither frowning nor smiling.

This man is shown sitting in a beige robe. The portrait is cropped at his thighs which rest under the folds of his garment. The robe has a red border and opens at the chest revealing a striped top and a paisley patterned band around his waist. The fabrics are painted with some shine, giving the impression of a man wrapped in luxurious and thick silks. This dress was typical Baghdadi Jewish attire, which speaks to David Sassoon's heritage and birthplace.

The wide sleeves of his robe cover his arms, but his hands are visible. His left-hand rests on his left thigh – fingers close together – a ring with a dark red oval stone on his pinky finger. His right forearm rests on a table. His hand hangs over the table – four fingers visible – another glittering ring on his small finger. His hands look soft and seem small in comparison to the bulk of his body.

David Sassoon's presence takes up most of the painting. He is framed by fragments of his domestic interior and the outside landscape. A partial view of a table, draped in orange-colored material holds a vase filled with roses to the left, followed by a view of a landscape – water, mountains, blue sky, soft clouds – in the upper left area. This piece was painted shortly before David Sassoon's death, and the scene shows Mumbai, India, where he resettled his family in 1832 after fleeing persecution in Baghdad. The upper right corner contains a warm brownish-red column that disappears behind the chair on which David Sassoon sits. With the shine of his robes, the placid scene behind, and the warm colors throughout, the painting seems to glow – stately, warm, and comforting.

502. Nicole Eisenman, *Seder*, 2010

NARRATOR: We are in front of an unframed painting titled *Seder* by the contemporary American artist Nicole Eisenman. The work is oriented horizontally and is three-and-a-half feet high by four feet wide, hung in the middle of a wall. This work is a figurative painting presenting a Passover Seder, a traditional meal and celebration focused on telling the story of Exodus. The canvas is filled with people of all different ages sitting around a table, reading the Hagaddah, a book traditionally read during the Passover meal.

I will describe the figures at the table as if we are moving clockwise around the face of a clock.

At six o'clock on the painting, emerging from the bottom edge, is a large set of pink hands which are holding a broken piece of matzah, a large thin square of unleavened bread traditionally eaten during Passover. We as the viewer are positioned to peer down the long length of the table from behind these hands, looking at the eight other participants in this meal. At seven o'clock, and on the left side of the long table, sits a person with short gray-blond hair, a rosy complexion, and a striped blue and white shirt with a green patterned scarf or jacket. They stare blankly forward, hand resting on an almost empty glass of wine. Next to them sits a middle-aged person, somewhat gender non-conforming with a warmer, more golden complexion, holding open a Hagaddah while raising a full glass of wine to their lips. Next down the line, a young boy rests his head in hand. Eyes closed, his fingers drum on his plate with boredom.

At 12 o'clock, and at the head of the table, sits a middle-aged woman with broad shoulders and straw-colored hair. Her body language is strong, almost sculptural, and she stares directly at us. Clasp the same type of Hagaddah in both hands, her stare is intense and attentive. To her left, at 2 o'clock, and on the right-hand side of the table, a middle-aged woman with chestnut brown hair and almost stone-grey skin leans toward the man to her left to read from his open book. Perhaps the only other clear male at the table, he has a neon-orange colored complexion and wears a yarmulke over his bald head. He's wearing a suit and tie, slightly more formal than the other individuals. A little girl sits to the left of him, stabbing food with a knife. Beside the little girl, the last individual stares solemnly forward while holding their book, their eyes bulging and nostrils flared. The table is covered in a white tablecloth, and in the center a round white Seder plate holds some token items including a hardboiled egg, a leaf of lettuce, a shank bone, and an orange. Two white candles are lit at either end, and in front of each person is a plate with gefilte fish and small piles of purple horseradish.

The brushstrokes are thick and buttery in some moments, and scraped and worked in others. This creates an uneven painted surface, which entices a closer examination of choices the painter has made in rendering and texture. The people are painted in a loose, somewhat cartoonish style, with varying skin tones and degrees of realism. The mood of the environment is at once humorous and disturbing. Children and adults display every attitude from attentive interest to boredom. Their expressions, from the grotesque and distorted to the charming and tender, may make the scene familiar to anyone who has celebrated a family holiday.

504. Arlene Shechet, *Travel Light*, 2017

NARRATOR: *Travel Light* is a sculptural object, depicting a small suitcase with a number of candlesticks emerging from it. It is placed atop a white pedestal with metal legs, which measures 3 feet wide, 2 feet deep, and 3 feet high. The suitcase and candlesticks are made of gypsum, a plaster-like material, giving the entire sculpture a uniform off-white color.

The suitcase is around 2 feet long, 18 inches high, and 12 inches deep. It was modeled after an older-style suitcase, made of thick textured leather, reinforced with smooth leather at the corners and the opening. This bag would've been carried by two handles at the top, but the handles seem to be missing from this work. Instead, two straps were wound over the top and bottom of the suitcase a few times to keep it closed. The sides of the bag are bulging like it was overstuffed. Although the sculpture is made of gypsum, the texture is sumptuous. If you were to touch it, however, it would feel more like tile than fabric.

From the top of the object, parts of at least five candlesticks are visible, all made of this same white material. At varying heights, they seem to sprout out of the surface of this work. For two, you see the ornate and wide bottom of the candlestick, and for the other three you see the top which would hold the candle. These three contain light-grey wax candles, one non-plaster element of this piece. They appear to have been lit at different times—their stubs are different heights, and drips of wax descend down the sticks. The work is in fact a functioning candelabrum; if not in a museum it could be used for the Sabbath ceremony.

The other, non-plaster element of the piece is a document embedded in one side of the suitcase, partially obscured by a plaster strap. It is light brown, clearly an aged document, with black writing.

In this piece, Arlene Shechet's past, present, and future are subtly intertwined. She began with a pair of candlesticks that her grandmother brought from Belarus in 1920, the only material objects the family possesses from their country of origin. As she sought to learn more about them, she uncovered long-forgotten family documents, from which she was able to track down previously unknown relatives. The document embedded in the side is an image of her grandmother's passport.

Three more iterations of the work are planned, and the artist will ask each subsequent owner to give her a cherished family record, which she will also embed in the piece. Thus, *Travel Light* will continue to absorb new stories, as suitcases acquire travel labels, embracing the future as well as the past.

505. Amy Klein Reichert, Stephen Smithers (manufacturer), Miriam Cup, 1997

NARRATOR: This object, a Miriam Cup, is a piece of contemporary Judaica that was commissioned by the Jewish Museum in 1997 and designed by Amy Klein Riechert. This piece sits in a case with other Judaica, largely made of metal and glass. It is positioned adjacent to the painting, *Seder*, by Nicole Eisenmann.

This ritual object is a bowl-like vessel, approximately 8 inches in diameter and made of silver. The shape of the object was made through hammering the metal, which can be seen in the rhythmic indentations that pattern the surface. The metal is highly polished giving it a reflective finish, like water.

About one inch above the vessel's edge is a thin silver ring, held up and connected to the cup by 6 vine-like posts. In-between each post hangs three pairs of quarter-sized metal circles, or cymbals. If you were able to move the Cup, these 18 pairs of cymbals would delicately hit together to make a tinkling noise.

In the 1980s Jewish feminists introduced the Miriam Cup, a new component added to the traditional Passover meal, honoring the prophet Miriam, sister of Moses. During the Passover meal, or Seder, participants tell the story of Exodus. The cup is meant to hold water, symbolic of the well that accompanied Miriam as the Jews wandered the desert after their flight out of Egypt. For those who partake in this new ritual, the cup would be placed on the Seder table along with other ritual objects.

The piece is meant to affect the senses in many ways. First through sound—the cymbals represent Miriam and other women dancing with tambourines after crossing the Red Sea. Light also dances around this piece, reflecting off of the faceted metal surfaces. Writing about this piece, Reichert said: "What are the sounds of freedom? The wind rustling through grasses, the murmuring of exiles, desert sounds, a joyous song with a tambourine. Miriam's cup is a restless vessel, like her ancient well accompanying the people of Israel along their journey. It is heard as well as seen, its cymbals dancing in response to the slightest vibration of the table."

This Miriam Cup is one of the first pieces of Judaica created by Amy Klein Reichert, an architect and exhibition designer. Exploring her own spiritual connection to Miriam and Jewish women, the artist originally created the work for a groundbreaking 1997 exhibit of Miriam cups by Jewish women artists.

506. Ilana Savdie, *Cow*, 2023

NARRATOR: This exuberantly colorful painting titled *Cow* is by the artist Ilana Savdie. The piece is 65 ½ inches wide and 80 ½ inches high and is covered in abstract forms made of oil paint, acrylic paint, and beeswax on canvas stretched on panel. The background of the painting shows a variety of textures, surrounding a more detailed but still abstract oval-like composition in the center. The painting is unframed and hung on a pale peach-pink wall. Let's hear from the artist.

ILANA SAVDIE: My name is Ilana Savdie. I am originally from Colombia. I was raised between Colombia and Miami, and I'm currently based in Brooklyn. I'm a painter and sculptor, and I primarily make fairly large-scale oil, acrylic and wax paintings that are very brightly colored and deal with themes around theatricality and performance as modes of subversion and as rooted in the body. There're different modes of mark-making throughout the piece, sometimes highly textured, other times smooth or highly reflective they combine luscious thick gestures with layers of transparency. And there's moments of gestural abstraction colliding with moments of realism. It's very much about the sort of intertwining of disparate modes of existing, modes of making modes of metabolizing the materiality of paint.

NARRATOR: This play with materiality and gesture is seen throughout the painting. Let's start with the background. The left-side of the canvas is a tumbling gradient of saturated color, beginning with pink at the top, moving to orange, primary yellow, bright green and blue, to a wisp of dark purple at the bottom. The colors here are transparent, leaving no harsh lines between them, and giving the layered impression of a watercolor painting or the moving swirls of ink dropped into water. The background on the right side is an opaque, shiny, deep brick-red, with slight variations of color seen in the thick horizontal brush strokes.

This surrounds a bulbous egg-like shape stretching from top to bottom. The base has a curve of deep indigo blue, giving weight to this centerpiece. Above it are two large swoops painted as if they are wrapping around this shape to meet in the middle. From the right there is orange, and from the left yellow accumulations of wax dripped onto this section of the canvas. An oval is painted onto the center of the yellow to reveal a circle of tightly clustered red orbs, like peeling away pomegranate skin to reveal the jewel-like fruit inside. Elongated swoops of paint surround it and extend downwards.

Here's Ilana Savdie.

ILANA SAVDIE: So, a big part of the making of the painting is about responding to the more sort of process-based decisions that the material itself made. And then there's areas like

the yellow, very textural area in the center, that is wax pigmented with an encaustic and it's brushed onto the canvas and it layers into this texture. I'm very expressive in my application of the material as I'm working so that it really behaves in this almost uncontrollable fashion and then it becomes about trying to control this thing that does not want to be controlled.

NARRATOR: Above and spilling out over the yellow and orange is a mix of greens, blues, purples and pinks, pieced together like a collage. Some parts are painted with that transparent quality of watercolors, some solid blue, and some like spikes or feathers crowning the top. There is a solidity and wave to this top section of the painting, giving the impression of fabric or flesh folding over itself as a body bends. A fleshy pink hand or foot zigs down on the right side, stretched out like bubble gum.

ILANA SAVDIE: This piece came from an encounter I had with a Susan Rothenberg painting entitled *Mary III*, in which a centered human figure crouches in an almost all-fours position. The grotesque and action-oriented animalistic posture felt powerful in that piece. Yet the act of behaving as an animal or languaging a human through animalist terms has historically served as a mode of degradation and debasement. So I became fascinated with the idea of inverting this idea of the degraded, the debased, and reclaiming the power of this posture, of this performance. Its exertion of submission and dominance through a mode of performance is interesting to me. So, this piece actually ended up becoming almost a self-portrait, like I used myself as a model, which I don't often do. There was something extremely powerful about making a self-portrait and calling it Cow.

507. Mel Bochner, *The Joys of Yiddish*, 2012

NARRATOR: We are now going to explore Mel Bochner's *The Joys of Yiddish*. This piece was made in 2012, and its materials are oil and acrylic paint on canvas.

This large, unframed painting has rows of yellow words on a solid black background. The words rest on thin, white, horizontal lines that stretch from one edge of the painting to the other, giving the appearance of a large sheet of lined paper that's been completely filled in with language. Measuring about eight feet high and seven feet wide, the piece is about two feet longer and just a few inches wider than a king-sized mattress.

The words are all spelled from the English alphabet but they are in fact Yiddish words. They tightly fill each of the twelve horizontal rows that crowd the canvas, with only a small comma separating each term. The repetition recalls a marching band, each letter equally spaced in tight formation. When a word is too long for a line, Bochner inserts a dash and continues the word on the following line, creating the impression that space is at a premium. The words are painted in capital letters, in a blocky, unadorned font with rounded corners.

Starting from the top left, the words read: KIBBITZER, KVETCHER, K'NOCKER, NUDZH, NUDNICK, NEBBISH, GONIF, TUMLER, TSITSER, MESHUGENER, SHMOOZER, SCHMO, SHLEMIEL, SHLIMAZEL, SHVITZER, ALTER KOCKER, FISHER, PLOSER, PLATKE-MACHER

The words chosen by Bochner are at turns social, personal, disparaging, and funny. Nebbish, meaning "sad sack" or "nerd," or Kvetcher, which translates to "Complainer," are not necessarily positive words, but ones that are commonly deployed in different situations. One might use them to joke with a good friend, or refer to someone who isn't well liked—depending on the particulars of the situation. Here's the artist, Mel Bochner speaking about the work.

MEL BOCHNER: Yiddish is the original ghetto language, developed by perpetual outsiders to cope with a foreign, and often hostile, reality. Reflecting an ironic, unrefined, and frequently scatological view of human nature, it is completely indifferent to polite taste. Personally, having grown up with parents and grandparents who spoke Yiddish, I find these particular words quite funny.

NARRATOR: Bochner used Leo Rosten's classic 1968 book "The Joys of Yiddish" as his source for this piece. The book is a compilation of Yiddish words that have migrated into American popular culture. That some of these words have been anglicized and have entered common usage might speak to the assimilation of Jews into American society.

The artist's color choice is also significant. The starkly graphic yellow letters on a deep black background, are also a coded reference to the stars Jewish people were forced to wear during the Nazi occupations of World War II.

Throughout his career, Mel Bochner has explored the intersection of language and image. His thesaurus paintings are an important part of this particular line of inquiry. With their laser focus on text and its various interpretations, these works reposition language as a form of pictorial expression. These paintings make viewers think about the related acts of reading and looking, while considering the painterly ideas of representation and abstraction, and how they might intermingle.