Highlights of *Identity, Culture, and Community: Stories from the Collection of the Jewish Museum*
The Jewish Museum

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300. Introduction

JAMES S. SNYDER: I'm James Snyder, Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director of the Jewish Museum, and I'm excited to welcome you to *Identity, Culture and Community: Stories from the Collection of the Jewish Museum,* an installation showcasing over 200 works of art tracing the rich history of migration and assimilation, survival and resilience across life in the Jewish diaspora. This installation is part of a reimagining of our Museum's third and fourth floors and features artworks and objects that tell stories about 3,500 years of Jewish culture and Jewish cultural identity.

Identity, Culture, and Community has been conceived and realized by Darsie Alexander, Senior Deputy Director and Susan and Elihu Rose Chief Curator, together with the Museum's entire curatorial team.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Hi, I'm Darsie Alexander, and I'm delighted to walk you through the collection galleries today. I'll be joined by my co-curators of the exhibition, Claudia Nahson, Abigail Rapoport, Kristina Parsons, and Rebecca Frank, as well as some of the artists whose works are on view.

All of the items that you're going to be seeing in this exhibition were selected from the Jewish Museum's collection of approximately 30,000 objects to tell a story of Jewish culture, identity, and experience—from the role of ceremonial objects in communal Jewish life to the bold experimentation of contemporary artists. Together, these works present Jewish culture in dynamic dialogue with the events of history, shaped by chapters of trauma and hardship, as well as times of great triumph and innovation.

Don't be fooled by how quiet some of these objects might look, sitting calmly in their frames and cases. They have lived dramatically, passing through borders, hands, and years to be here, in these galleries, at this moment.

We invite you to immerse yourself in this exhibition and to explore the ideas and perspectives that continue to resonate with us today.

JAMES S. SNYDER: After this tour, we also encourage you to visit our Pruzan Center for Learning on the fourth floor to see ancient artifacts, works of art, and ceremonial objects all on view to promote teaching and learning in museum gallery settings beginning with our spectacular new display of Hanukkah lamps from around the world relating to the universal theme of the meaning of light.

301. Michal Rovner, *Dark Light*, 2024

NARRATOR: Israeli artist Michal Rovner creates videos and video installations that alter actual footage of people migrating across landscapes, and turns them into abstracted, mesmerizing works of art. Here, Rovner depicts poppies she filmed outside her home, swaying in the breeze.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Poppies have ancient roots in the Middle East and are laden with symbolism—of sleep and death, but also of remembrance and resilience. You'll notice that instead of naturalistic colors, the artist has chosen a monochromatic palette of whites, grays and blacks for this work, imparting a somber quality to the gently undulating flowers. The dual screen and soft palette of these colors also add to the sense of dream-like otherworldliness this piece conveys.

The idea of how people and things travel, the barriers that impede or support free movement, is often present in Rovner's work. This quiet, mesmerizing piece brings up our own associations of nature, memory, and the delicate fragility of life.

302. Dana Frankfort, *Star of David (Orange)*, 2007

DANA FRANKFORT: To paint a star in some way felt transgressive.

I'm Dana Frankfort. I live in Houston, Texas. And I'm a painter. I was an art history major in college, and I have looked at a lot of painting and I haven't seen a lot of Stars of David.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: One of the wonderful things contemporary artists can do is to take something very familiar and make it their own. When Frankfort made this work, she had been painting words. She was exploring how letters are simply marks to which we assign meaning—asking herself, "How does the mind process that?" Frankfort was investigating the tension between what we see and what those images might represent in different contexts.

DANA FRANKFORT: I was making paintings of my name and address and phone number—I was at that time deeply committed to this idea of painting what I know—and so this was sort of an extension of that. I wanted to explore how the mind processed a symbol compared to a word.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Frankfort was inspired by the monochrome paintings of artists like Ad Reinhardt, in which a faint geometric shape may appear to emerge, or recede, through subtle gradations of color. But instead of a shape, she's using a symbol.

DANA FRANKFORT: I'm interested in creating an experience where the symbol is simultaneously arriving and dissolving. Maybe it was coming forward and it's just about to recede, or maybe it was receding and it's just about to come forward. I like having that kind of teetering happen in the painting.

It's a quieting painting, so that the viewer can sort of be in a moment of quiet as they begin to walk into the gallery.

303. Torah in case with Finials, c. 1850–85

LUCETTE LAGNADO: People don't realize this, but in Iraq, where this Torah scroll came from, there were hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of Jews once upon a time. And other countries, Algeria, Syria, you name it. There were Jews, and that means there were synagogues and there were Torah scrolls and there were specific traditions associated with these communities. And yet what united us all was our love, above all, for the Torah.

NARRATOR: That was Lucette Lagnado, a best-selling author who wrote eloquently about her Jewish identity.

"Torah" means teaching in Hebrew. It refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, or to the handwritten scroll that contains this text.

The beautiful Torah case you're looking at was probably made in Iraq in the late 19th century. But it was used at a synagogue in Kolkata, India, which was home to a Jewish community with Iraqi origins.

LUCETTE LAGNADO: I was born in Cairo, Egypt, to an Egyptian Jewish family. We had to leave Egypt when I was a little girl, and we came to America in the 1960s. And I grew up in Brooklyn in a small enclave where a lot of other Egyptian and Syrian Jewish refugees settled.

NARRATOR: Every Saturday, Lucette attended services at a synagogue in Bensonhurst. As in most Orthodox synagogues, the women and girls were seated separately from the men and boys. And the men played a more active role in worship.

LUCETTE LAGNADO: The culmination of every service was the Torah scrolls being brought out.

I've never quite forgotten the longing, the kind of the mixed feelings of jealousy, envy, and love I felt toward the men who had the privilege of carrying those Torah scrolls.

It's actually a very profound belief of observant Jews that the Torah scroll is alive. And the proof of that is if—God forbid—it ever becomes damaged you're not allowed to throw it out; you have to bury it. You have to treat it as we treat the dead in Judaism. And that's yet another element of why I feel so passionately about what a museum would call an object. And I want to cry out: No, it's not an object; it's alive. It's a part of God.

304. Wang Hing and Co. and Rao J. Workshop, Esther Scroll in Case, late-nineteenth century

NARRATOR: This recent acquisition reflects the museum's ongoing commitment to collecting Judaica from a wide range of regions, highlighting the diversity and vibrancy of Jewish communities around the world. Morris and Eva Feld Senior Curator, Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: When we use the word "Judaica," we are actually referring to many different types of objects, all related to Jewish ritual and ceremony. Here we're looking at a beautifully decorated case containing an Esther Scroll—or Megillah—the Biblical book read on the Jewish festival of Purim. According to the Book of Esther, Queen Esther prevented the annihilation of the Jewish people during the First Persian Empire, when she risked her life by appearing before the king to plead for her people.

NARRATOR: The Esther scroll contained within the case was likely copied in the late 19th century by a scribe in Baghdad, in Iraq, where there was a thriving Jewish community.

The case, however, was made in Hong Kong and delicately adorned with light green and deep blue enamel. The alternating bamboo leaves and flowers reminiscent of cherry or almond blossoms, are popular motifs in Chinese art. A silk and spice merchant named Ezra Ezekiel Ezra commissioned the case. The Ezras, along with other Baghdadi Jewish families, had settled in India in the 19th century, later expanding their business to China, establishing synagogues in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Ritual objects such as this case speak to the interconnected world these families inhabited.

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

CLAUDIA NAHSON: This is a magnificent portrait of David Sassoon, who is basically the patriarch, if you wish, of the modern Sassoon family. He was born in Baghdad in 1792, and he died in Pune, which is in India, in 1864.

NARRATOR: Notice David Sassoon's clothing in this portrait: turban, wide-sleeved outer cloak, striped tunic, paisley sash. Though painted in India, Sassoon wears typical Baghdadi Jewish attire. Senior Curator Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: It really kind of immediately situates him as connected to his original place, which is Baghdad. And although the background is suggesting Mumbai – Malabar Hill in Mumbai – it really tells you right away that David Sassoon is grounded in Baghdad.

NARRATOR: Sassoon left Baghdad several decades before this portrait was painted. Fleeing Jewish persecution in his homeland, he arrived in Mumbai in 1832 and settled among the city's tight-knit Baghdadi Jewish community. In Mumbai, he began a new life – and a new business.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: He started trading spices, cotton, pearls, etc. And slowly his business grew. And the children were his assets, basically; in particular, his eight sons, whom he deployed widely in order to expand his business.

NARRATOR: As Sassoon's trade network grew globally, he remained deeply rooted in his Baghdadi local community and religious observance. With his children and associates strategically stationed from China to England, Sassoon turned to philanthropic pursuits. He established synagogues, schools, and other institutions in Baghdad, Mumbai and Pune.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: He's a well-established member of Mumbai's merchant class. And he really is working on building a legacy.

306. Torah ark, c. 1500, redesigned 1624, Urbino (now in Italy)

REBECCA FRANK: My name is Rebecca Frank, and I am a curatorial assistant at the Jewish Museum.

This Torah ark's glistening panels and rich patterning resemble the wooden cabinetry in the study rooms of the palaces that were built for the Duke of Urbino in the late 15th century.

NARRATOR: An outstanding example of Renaissance furniture, this Torah ark was altered as tastes and fortunes changed. In the late 15th century, royal leadership expelled Jews from Spain and Portugal. Some Jews went on to settle in Urbino, which is in central Italy, and built the synagogue that housed this Torah ark. Soon after, the local government enacted anti-Jewish measures. But in 1623, Duke Francesco Maria II restored many of those rights. This ark was likely modified in gratitude by the Jewish community there.

REBECCA FRANK: Notice the Hebrew inscriptions along the top? One is from the Book of Isaiah and translates to "You shall be established through righteousness."

We believe the ark's original stained wood, fluted pilasters, and gilded frieze inscription were painted over, likely around 1624, to give the object a new look and appearance. Hundreds of years later, in 1984, museum conservators cleaned the old linseed oil off of what appeared to be dark wood, and they discovered a marvelous surprise—this lovely teal blue.

NARRATOR: By the mid 17th century, the Jews of Urbino were consigned to a "ghetto"—a historic Italian word for the gated quarter in which Jews were required to live. This beautiful ark with its long and remarkable history, is a reminder of a time of greater tolerance, and a testament to the extraordinary care and craftsmanship emanating from the Jewish community through its objects.

307. Mortiz Daniel Oppenheim, *The Return of the Volunteer from the Wars of Liberation to His Family Still Living in Accordance with Old Customs*, 1833–34

NARRATOR: The depiction of a soldier returning home from war was a popular subject with painters in the 19th century, when there was no shortage of wars from which to return. In this case, the soldier and his family are Jewish.

How do we know? We see the skull caps on the men, a Kiddush cup and challah bread on the table, and the hanging festival lamp above. These give us clues that this soldier has traveled on the Sabbath, in violation of Jewish law. Senior Curator, Claudia Nahson.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: Each member of the family regards the soldier's return differently—his sister embraces him, his mother seems relieved, his younger brother checks out his sword, perhaps hoping to distinguish himself in battle one day. Even the cat, peering out from under the table, is eyeing his boots. The father, drawn away from his book, is fixated on an object on his son's chest—an Iron Cross, a Prussian military decoration for bravery and that complicates the father's pride in his son's achievement.

The artist, Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, was the first Jewish painter to receive academic training. Before the 19th century, European art schools did not admit Jews. But when Oppenheim painted this, German Jews were attaining new civil rights, and many were assimilating into the larger world. So, we see a reflection of the anxiety that some members of the Jewish community were experiencing as they tried to navigate being Jewish in Germany. At the top left, you'll see a portrait of the former Emperor of Prussia, Frederick the Great, to reassure the viewer that this is a family of patriots.

NARRATOR: This dynamic has resonance with later history. As the Nazis rose to power in the 1930s, German Jews who fought for their country in World War I thought their Iron Crosses might offer protection from persecution, to little avail.

309. Attributed to Frans Francken II, *Cabinet with scenes from the Book of Esther*, c. 1620

NARRATOR: This spectacular cabinet was designed to display the owner's prized possessions. At the heart is the Book of Esther, a biblical text whose themes of courage and political acumen resonated deeply with both Christians and Jews in seventeenth century Flanders. Esther, a young Jewish woman, prevented the annihilation of the Jewish community by pleading to her husband the king. Her bold intervention and story are commemorated annually on the Jewish holiday of Purim.

Abigail Rapoport, Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Curator of Judaica.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: All the key Esther scenes from the Book of Esther can be seen on this fantastic cabinet. At the very bottom, we also see allegorical figures symbolizing the four elements of the world. From left to right, we can see water, air, fire and earth. And I love that juxtaposition, where it's like Esther is in the world, she's infused with the very elements of the world.

Another aspect of it is the way the architecture of the cabinet is sort of in sync with the story setting itself: like, in the very center of the cabinet we can see this archway, and then there's these little columns and pillars that are flanking that moment from the story of Esther.

NARRATOR: The cabinet was not just ornamental.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: There is this really kind of theatrical element in how you're using it, how you're engaging with it, how you need to unlock parts of it to uncover the story and to work through it.

I think there's also this idea that this cabinet is a domestic object, too. That you're seeing Queen Esther in your cabinet. It encapsulates living with Queen Esther.

310. Gertrud Kauders, Untitled works, 1920–39

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Sometimes the stories behind artworks are almost too profound for words. The works here, portraits of family and friends painted by Czech artist Gertrud Kauders, belie the talents of a young, capable artist. They are also remarkable examples of objects that survived against incredible odds. Here's what we know: In 2018, workers tearing down an old house in the Prague suburbs made an astonishing discovery: about 700 works of art—rolled up canvases and works on paper—hidden behind walls and stashed in the ceiling. As the building was dismantled, the objects literally came tumbling out. You can almost sense the chaos in the frayed edges and creased marks of these fragile works.

NARRATOR: Kauders, who was from an affluent Jewish family, acted quickly when the Nazis' intentions became more evident. She brought her cherished works to the home of a friend and fellow artist Natalie Jahudkova, who was not Jewish, and hid them there, where they remained, completely out of sight for over seventy-five years.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: A year later, Nazis and their collaborators deported Kauders to the Theresienstadt ghetto-camp and then to the Majdanek the death camp, where she was murdered. Her friend Natalie, who died in 1977, never revealed Kauders' secret. Fortunately, however, following the discovery in 2018, the works of art were eventually returned to the Kauders family. In 2024, the family donated 35 of those works to the Jewish Museum.

We have decided to keep them close to the state in which they were found instead of performing extensive conservation. In their intimate scale and subject matter, the images provide a window into Kauders' life in Prague before the Holocaust.

311. Abraham Manievich, *Destruction of the Ghetto, Kiev*, 1919

CLAUDIA NAHSON: This monumental painting is by Abraham Manievich, a Jewish artist and one of the founders of the Academy of Arts in Kyiv. It is one of the most powerful works in this exhibition– a scene of visual and psychological intensity in which a cityscape is splintered into broken shards of black, red, and orange.

In the foreground, a lone goat stands at the precipice of the composition, looking out onto buildings and rooftops, collapsed into a field of vertical angles and fractured planes. In the center of the painting, a large wooden building resembling an Eastern European synagogue, dominates the main axis of the composition. Behind it, a glowing red sky of sharp lines echoes the fragmented forms of the buildings. This cubist work is both a testament to artistic invention and a reflection of a devastating reality: the destruction of the ghetto in Kyiv in 1919.

The village depicted in the painting was destroyed in a pogrom, a riot in which antisemitic mobs physically attacked Jews, looted their property and burned their homes to the ground.

NARRATOR: This kind of violence was common under tsarist rule. Jews gained rights under the Revolution, but the civil wars that erupted soon afterward led to renewed antisemitic attacks. The artist's own son was killed while fighting against Ukrainian nationalists, who opposed Jewish emancipation. Even though this work was painted two decades before the Holocaust, it foreshadows the horrors to come.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: Manievich embraced the avant-garde. But he fell out of favor because of this kind of experimentalism. That's because the Russian Communist Party mandated a new style of art known as socialist realism, characterized by idealized depictions of proletarian life.

Manievich immigrated to the United States in 1922, where he lived and worked for the remainder of his life.

312. Bracelet, 1941-44, Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia (now Terezín, Czech Republic)

CLAUDIA NAHSON: This group of 20 charms, created in Theresienstadt, belonged to Greta Perlman, a Czech Holocaust survivor and a prisoner at the camp between 1941 and 1944. She had worked in the camp kitchen and at times had exchanged food for art. This is all I knew when I started researching the bracelet.

We don't know who made the charms. Greta Perlman possibly obtained some of them from fellow prisoners who worked in the metal workshop in exchange for food, and it is possible that some were given to her as gifts, but such a large group of charms owned by one single person is quite rare.

Several bear the inscription "M433," Greta Perlman's transport and prisoner number assigned to her when she was deported on December 14th, 1941. That day happened to be Greta Perlman's 37th birthday.

Some charms allude to her work in the kitchen, such as a triangular charm featuring a female cook stirring a pot designed with her transport number, M433. Other charms bear her initials, GP. A miniature latrine points to the humiliations of everyday life, a wooden clog was a prized commodity in a place where prisoners often went shoeless, and a fine-tooth comb a necessity where lice were widespread, while a charming cut-out window with a potted plant evoked the safety and tranquility of home, a distant memory.

Two of the most moving pendants contain shards of porcelain. One is inscribed "Greta," the other "Theo." The matching pair might indicate a lover's exchange. The charms are dated September 1, 1943, a few days before some 5,000 prisoners were sent to Auschwitz. Theo may have been one of the deportees, and their pledge, possibly taken before their impending separation, makes their exchange even more poignant.

Taken together, the small, intimate pieces constitute a self-portrait of sorts, offering a window into her life as a prisoner in Theresienstadt. They are a testament to her struggle to maintain what the Nazis were trying to divest her from: her own identity.

313. Arlene Shechet, *Travel Light*, 2017

ARLENE SHECHET: My name is Arlene Shechet and I am an artist and was commissioned to make a work for the Jewish Museum collection, and I'm standing right now in front of Travel Light, which is the sculpture I chose to make.

I decided to work with the candlesticks that my grandparents had brought over from Russia-Poland when they came to New York. They weren't really, from a monetary point of view, worth that much. But from a spiritual and ceremonial point of view, clearly, they were worth a lot. I always use these original candlesticks in my home for Passover or the high holy days and other holidays. For years, I struggled with the idea of trying to work this past into my present. So, I decided—and especially because of the political discourse of the moment—to speak directly to the notion that we in the United States are really all immigrants and I took the image of the candlesticks themselves and scanned them to make a multiplicity of them.

NARRATOR: Shechet worked with a 3D model to embed a digital image of her grandmother's passport into the resin substance on one side of the suitcase. It's a personal element that brings together the past and the present.

ARLENE SHECHET: I got a suitcase of the era that represented the year that my grandparents came here: 1922. And I worked with an animator, and we worked for several months trying to stuff the candlesticks into the image of this suitcase, so that it would be bulging and off center. And had the feeling of those ships that I've seen pictured crammed with—and overflowing with—human beings with very little room but very strong intention.

314. Barnett Newman, *Untitled I, 1955*, 1955

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Barnett Newman was both a theorist and a trailblazing artist. This is what Newman called a "zip": a vertical band of contrasting color running the entire length of the painting. It may remind you of the zipper on a jacket or zipping up the blocks of color on either side.

In Newman's zip paintings, he endeavored to paint, he said, "from scratch, as if painting never existed before." What did it mean to paint, to cover a canvas with color, to make a line? For him, a straight line was not just a straight line; it was, as he said, "an organic thing that can contain feeling." This particular zip painting is special, because it's an intimate example of works he would later execute at a much larger scale. The separation between these blocks of color isn't sharply delineated; the zip is jagged and rough, as if it were dragged through a plane of wet paint. It's almost like a scratch in paint.

NARRATOR: Like many of his contemporaries, Newman was making work in reaction to the nightmares of the mid-twentieth-century horrors of unfathomable scale: the Holocaust, and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Perhaps for Newman, the zip paintings were an opportunity to transcend these devastating realities by creating an entirely new visual language and to reach for the sublime.

315. Louise Nevelson, *Three Night Figures*, 1960

KRISTINA PARSONS: I'm Kristina Parsons, the Leon Levy Assistant Curator at the Jewish Museum. In this work, three figures loom mysteriously, like shadows taking form in the darkness of night. They are elongated and blocky, almost reminiscent of a cubist composition. The artist Louise Nevelson fashioned these figures from wooden pieces that she scavenged from the sidewalks of New York City, using things like scraps of furniture, crates left outside grocery stores and other detritus. She then painted these sculptures a monochromatic black. Nevelson explained: "When I fell in love with black, it was an acceptance. Because black encompasses all colors. Black is the most aristocratic color of all. You can be quiet, and it contains the whole thing."

NARRATOR: In the 1950s, large swaths of New York were marked for what was called "slum clearance" by the city's urban planner, Robert Moses. Nevelson's home in Kip's Bay, near midtown Manhattan, was one such place slated for demolition.

KRISTINA PARSONS: Nevelson constructed her wooden assemblages by hand, first at a very intimate scale, then growing to the size of this work here, and eventually expanding to encompass entire rooms. For her, these sculptures were monuments to what had been discarded and disregarded, and a way of rebuilding the city that was being destroyed around her.

316. Moshe Zabari, Torah Crown, 1969

REBECCA FRANK: This space-age Torah crown, with its swirling lines and dangling pearls, is emblematic of an artist who was always thinking of traditional Jewish ceremonial objects, giving them a contemporary, even futuristic look and feel.

MOSHE ZABARI: I am Moshe Zabari who worked at the Tobe Pascher Workshop at the museum from '61 to `88. I taught many adult students twice a week in the evenings, riding the subway back home at 11 o'clock.

REBECCA FRANK: Moshe Zabari was at one time also the co-director of the Tobe Pascher Workshop established in 1956, the first studio of its kind devoted to the creation of modern Jewish ceremonial art. The Workshop was housed in the basement of the Jewish Museum, and its goal was to promote modern design and support the creation of innovative ceremonial art that new audiences were demanding.

MOSHE ZABARI: I loved the Judaica, I loved the art that was around, and I tried to combine the two worlds together. I always try to put some elements, either design elements or symbols or thoughts into my art, my objects.

REBECCA FRANK: The post-World War II years saw an explosive growth of new congregations in the United States, particularly in the suburbs. Expanding Jewish communities asked architects to build synagogues that would look at home in the modern era; reimagining ritual objects to fill those sanctuaries was the obvious next step.

MOSHE ZABARI: And so, it was for me a dilemma. Am I going to do Judaica, or what excited me was that new modern art?

REBECCA FRANK: It may be difficult to envision now but taking ritual objects that had looked a certain way for hundreds of years and embracing this Modernist moment was radical. In this case, you'll also see an eternal light by Ludwig Yehuda Wolpert, the first director of the Tobe Pascher Workshop, along with other examples of modern ceremonial art by other artists who reimagined what these objects could look like, at mid-century and beyond.

317. Philip Johnson and Ibram Lassaw, Torah ark for Torah reading platform, Kneses Tifereth Israel Synagogue, 1956–57

CLAUDIA NAHSON: This Torah ark was made for Kneses Tifereth Israel, a synagogue in Port Chester, New York, designed by the Modernist architect Philip Johnson. Johnson transformed the landscape of American architecture, starting with his famous Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. For New York audiences, he is best known for his bold skyscrapers in Midtown Manhattan, like the one formerly known as the AT&T building and the Lipstick Building. This Torah ark is the embodiment of classic midcentury modernism, with its spare box-like shape yet warm oak surface.

NARRATOR: To design this Torah ark, Johnson collaborated with the Egyptian-born Jewish artist Ibram Lassaw. Here you can see an interesting tension between the rigid Modernist lines and smooth polished oak and the rustic, hammered bronze Hebrew letters.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: Read from right to left, each one of the four horizontal lines represents a biblical verse abbreviated to the first letter of each of its words. The top line, *yud*, *aleph*, *vav*, *aleph*, stands for, "God is one and his name is one." But Hebrew letters also represent numbers, and the sum of the numerical values of all the letters in this ark is 613, which is the number of commandments in the Torah.

NARRATOR: The years following World War II saw an increase in new congregations in the growing American suburbs. And many engaged modern architects to design synagogues that spoke to the postwar aesthetic. Congregants also sought to redesign the ritual objects inside these buildings, such as the ark, which holds the Torah, and the eternal light, which represents God's eternal presence. Together, these efforts served to reassert Jewish presence in the years after the Holocaust.

CLAUDIA NAHSON: For Johnson, this was an unusual project—and an act of atonement. In the 1930s, Johnson had been a vocal supporter of Hitler and the Nazi regime. By the 1950s, he had renounced his earlier antisemitic views and designed the building and its contents without taking a fee; however, Philip Johnson remains a controversial figure.

318. Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, 1963–64

DARSIE ALEXANDER: This painting was made by the talented young artist Eva Hesse when she was around 27. Raised in the Jewish community of Washington Heights, New York after fleeing Nazi Germany with her family in the 1930s, Hesse later rose to prominence as one of the most adventuresome sculptors of her generation. But in this work, she is still very much the painter, exploring an array of interlocking shapes and colors in a work that exudes the playful musings of an astute composer and assembler of form.

Observe here how elements connect to another – a big blue square with fanned edges tips against a column of stacked greens, yellows, and blues, topped by a perfect gray circle. Animating the white, lightly painted background are other lines and squiggles, sometimes evoking body parts, other times crosses and ladders. "How might these markings look together?" You can almost hear the artist asking herself this question as she seeks out her answers with this composition.

Though Hesse's sculpture is often considered in terms of her connection to Minimalism, another postwar development coinciding with her career in art, there is nothing of the austere, restrained language of this genre in her work. Nor is it tied distinctly to abstract expressionism, embraced by people like Jackson Pollock. Nope – Hesse is instead going for her own distinct aesthetic, like many women of her generation tired of being held to artistic terms and categories set largely by men. I think you can feel that freedom in this work, as if the artist is developing her own private language. Though her career was unfortunately very short, works like these reveal an imagination in the fullness of its material expression, capable of producing works we are inspired to contemplate, question, and unpack some sixty years later. In that process, she encourages us to get creative. That in and of itself is extraordinary.

319. Rachel Feinstein, IPPOLITA (manufacturer), *Marriage Ring*, 2023

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Beginning in the Middle Ages, Jewish weddings were sometimes celebrated with ceremonial rings modeled after European castles. These miniature architectural marvels were intended to evoke the temple of King Solomon, which was destroyed in 587 B.C.E. When sculptor Rachel Feinstein was commissioned by the Museum to make her own marriage ring, she was captivated by these intricate wonders. But her model was closer to home.

RACHEL FEINSTEIN: I grew up in Florida, and part of being a Florida kid is you went to Disney World in Orlando like five to eight times a year. And when I was a kid, my parents bought me a little gold ring that had Sleeping Beauty's castle on the ring. And I was obsessed with it.

Walt Disney, he was looking at Neuschwanstein and Segovia, in Spain. So, there are these curling staircases going around the turrets. There's a little tiny lozenge-like shape coming off of another turret, and as far as I know, that doesn't exist in any castle except in Disney World castles.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: But unlike the rings in the museum's collection, this one is set atop brass knuckles. The reason was practical.

RACHEL FEINSTEIN: It was, how could you physically support something that huge on your hand? It would have to be multiple rings. And then it became a structure, all of these rings, and joining them together. That's when I was like, "Oh my god, they're brass knuckles."

DARSIE ALEXANDER: If Feinstein's castle is much larger than the historic ones in the Museum's collection, perhaps it's because, for the artist, the fairy tale looms larger.

RACHEL FEINSTEIN: Little girls still to this day buy into the white wedding and the big princess dress. This type of still this fantasy that exists, you know? Which is what the Marriage Ring is about, for me.

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

AMY REICHERT: Hi, my name is Amy Reichert. I am an architect, exhibition designer, and Judaica designer, and we're standing in front of my Miriam's Cup.

Each Jewish object responds to a kind of ritual need in our tradition, but this is a brand new one that evolved from the feminist Seders of the early 1980s.

NARRATOR: A Seder is a ritualized meal that takes place during Passover, which is the holiday that commemorates the story of Exodus and the Jewish people's escape from slavery in Egypt.

AMY REICHERT: It was felt that Miriam, the older sister of Moses, the prophetess, and musician mentioned in the Bible, was a very important part of the Exodus story. Yet, she really had no presence on the table. So it was a call for a new object that would express her importance and presence and bring new life to what was a very old ritual.

NARRATOR: Traditionally, a cup of wine is placed on the table for the prophet Elijah. Amy's Miriam Cup holds water because water from Miriam's bottomless well sustained the Jewish people as they traveled through the desert toward freedom. After they crossed the Red Sea, Miriam sang and played the tambourine, so her cup also makes music.

AMY REICHERT: The cup is hemispherical, so the shape itself evokes the bottomless well. But because of the bottomless nature of the cup, when you hit the Seder table or if somebody kicks it by accident, the tambourine sort of shimmers and makes music. So it becomes a kind of interactive object on the Seder table for everybody to engage with.

NARRATOR: Engaging all the senses is an important aspect of the Seder. During the meal, participants read from the Haggadah, which recounts the Exodus story.

AMY REICHERT: Embedded in the text itself is this call or charge to expand and elaborate the story, so that really opens it up to new characters, and new objects, and new stories, so that each generation can make it its own.

321. Miriam Schapiro, *Blue Burst Fan*, 1979

NARRATOR: Miriam Schapiro, the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants is known for her bold rethinking of forms and the expanded possibilities of art, and took inspiration from the everyday, particularly as it related to women's lives.

KRISTINA PARSONS: Schapiro takes this common, usually small object, a fan, and reimagines it on a large scale. You can also see the influence of patchwork quilts in the repeating blocks of pattern, which resemble marbled fabrics and brocade stitching.

Schapiro was a proponent of Feminist art in the 1970s and a key figure in the Pattern and Decoration movement. This movement embraced the political and social momentum of feminism by challenging art historical cannons to make room for new artistic expressions that reflected the unique lived experiences of women.

In particular, Schapiro looked to decorative traditions from around the world, such as quilting, embroidery, and wallpaper, and embraced these rich approaches to craft which the art world had long overlooked.

The result of these influences and experiments is Schapiro's own delightful composition, which, in tandem with its unique shape, is every bit as sophisticated and complex as the formalist and modernist paintings that had come before.

322. Vivian Suter, Untitled, undated, assembled in 2017

VIVIAN SUTER: My name is Vivian Suter and I'm a painter. And I live in a old coffee plantation in Guatemala, Panajachel, nearby a lake and three volcanoes.

I work in collaboration with nature. I work outside, having around me my paint pots and brushes and rainwater and fish glue I mix in with all my paint. It's called *cola de pescado*. It comes in bars, and I have to cook it.

I work on the mountainside; the stretcher leaned on the tree or on the ground. Maybe there are leaves or the dogs walk over it. I have to walk up there. And I come at night back with the flashlight, and so then in the morning I go and look how the painting looks, because I finished it in the dark. I have no electricity up there, so it's always a surprise. I also have another location under a mango tree where I like to work. Mostly I work not just one; I work like two or three together. I see my work as a whole. It's a landscape or could also be like a map.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Suter's mother and grandparents fled Vienna on the eve of World War II. Her family dispersed.

VIVIAN SUTER: I was born in Argentina and with 12 I went to Switzerland. I was not really aware about this Jewish situation. In Switzerland, I was, yeah, Swiss. This migration thing is in me, all the movements we make.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Migrations, like the ones undertaken by Suter's family, have been a fundamental aspect of the Jewish experience for millennia. If you look up, you'll see a case containing over 130 Hanukkah lamps, or menorahs, on the fourth floor, evidence of the migrations of Jewish people to all corners of the world.

323. Tim Hawkinson, *Head Shoulders Knees and Toes*, 2017

DARSIE ALEXANDER: This small sculpture, with its candy-colored pink hues, plays at the absurdity and vulnerability of the human body. Multimedia artist Tim Hawkinson often uses his own body as the foundation for his work, whether a kinetic sculpture collaging pictures of his face, intricate animal skeletons assembled out of his own fingernail clippings, or, in this case, casts of his feet. These sculptures, while at times strangely amusing, nevertheless carry resonance with our daily lives, as the human body is subjected to interventions such as surgery, gene editing, fitness regimes, and more.

Using the form of his body as the raw material for sculptural exploration, Hawkinson takes the power of reconfiguration into his own hands, referencing the title of a children's song *Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes*, he pushes viewers to reflect on both the humorous and extreme aspects of viewing and manipulating the body in its most fragmented states.

NARRATOR: Since the 1960s, the Jewish Museum has championed contemporary art, giving artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg their first solo museum exhibitions. The Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation's gift represents a significant expansion of the museum's contemporary art holdings.

324. Avery Singer, *Free Fall*, 2023

AVERY SINGER: I heard the first plane coming in, and I immediately knew something was very, very wrong.

My name is Avery Singer. I grew up two blocks north of the World Trade Center. My mom worked in the World Trade Center. The underground mall was a place where I'd meet my friends. I kind of treated the Borders bookstore as a library.

On 9/11, I was home alone. And I was sitting at my kitchen table eating buttered toast and jam and I was wearing capri jeans and my Virgo tank top because it was the day after my birthday. It was my first week at Stuyvesant High School and I just walked to school because I didn't know where else to go. And then we were evacuated from school and just told to walk north. I was eventually able to find my parents. When we moved home the fires were still burning.

KRISTINA PARSONS: This painting is one of a series of works by the artist that she made as a way of processing that day, having witnessed the events unfold, and watching as people fell to their deaths.

AVERY SINGER: So this figure in this painting looks kind of like they're tumbling through space and there's kind of suggestion that they're moving down but it's, it's heavily abstracted. How do they kind of fit in this format that I use? Because I don't use a portrait, a landscape or a minimalist, canvas ratio? Um, so I really just sort of condensed the falling figure into the ratio that I'm working in.

325. Ilana Savdie, *Cow*, 2023

ILANA SAVDIE: My name is Ilana Savdie. I grew up in Colombia in Barranquilla, where the Carnival happens every year. The ethos of the Carnival is a really big part of my work. You're invited to express the most exaggerated version of yourself, invert the normal into the grotesque, tell the darkest aspects of your history through the most brightly colored, theatrical way possible.

NARRATOR: For Savdie, the act of painting is corporeal. She often starts with her canvas on the floor, pouring paint with a physicality that is really felt in the final product. While she has a general plan or framework for each painting, she also improvises and works with the trails and washes of paint created in that moment.

ILANA SAVDIE: I make fairly large-scale oil, acrylic and wax paintings that deal with theatricality and performance as modes of subversion and as rooted in the body. It's important for me to use my entire body in the making of each piece. The work addresses joints, the relationship between things, the way things meet. So, it feels imperative to the process to use my wrist, my elbow, to my shoulders, to my knees. Painting is a sort of reminder that I have a body. I always say that out loud, because it feels really important to remember. So, I work in a scale that feels like I can really do that.

This piece came from an encounter I had with a Susan Rothenberg painting entitled *Mary III*, in which a human figure crouches in an almost all-fours position. I became fascinated with reclaiming the power of this posture. I used myself as a model, which I don't often do. So, this piece actually ended up becoming almost a self-portrait. There was something extremely powerful about making a self-portrait and calling it *Cow*.

NARRATOR: Through an oversaturation of palette and density of imagery, Savdie leans into excess as a strategy to scramble figuration and make something unsettled, and entirely anew. That's accomplished by slathering on materials, in what's often a race against time.

ILANA SAVDIE: A key aspect of this work is my interest in materials that dry quickly. I'll do acrylic pours that will dry as the liquid travels through the surface. The painting is laying on the ground and there's very little control that I have over that. I also work with melted wax that dries as I brush it onto the canvas. The yellow, very textural area in the center, that is wax pigmented with an encaustic. Things really start to become about responding to the decisions that the material wants to make.

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

MEL BOCHNER: I've come by the Jewish Museum, and there's people looking at this painting, talking to each other like, "Oh, I remember your grandfather used to say, 'Oh, that guy's a real gonif.'"

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Artist Mel Bochner, who passed away in 2025, spoke to us about his painting, *The Joys of Yiddish*. It was inspired by the 1968 book of the same title by Leo Rosten.

MEL BOCHNER: I had that book, and these words just jumped off the page. I think of them as very funny. You can call people the same name and it is endearing, or it's very critical. So that adds the notion of voice and inflection to all of it.

So, the words are *kibbitzer*, which is a wise guy; *kvetcher*, chronic complainer; a *k'nocker*, which is a braggart; a *nudzh*, which is someone who's always pestering you; a *nudnick*, a nag; a *nebbish*, a sad sack; a *gonif*, shady character or crook; *tumler*, a prankster; *tsitser*, a useless bystander, somebody who stands around and he goes "ts-ts-ts." A *meshugener* is a crazy person; a *shmoozer* is a gossip. A *schmo* is a fall guy. A *shlemiel* is kind of social misfit. A *shlimazel* is a born loser. A *shvitzer* is a show-off, somebody who's always sweating. *Alter kocker* is a cranky old man. A *pisher* is someone who still pees in his pants. A *plosher* is a blowhard, and a *platke-macher* is a troublemaker.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: The words may be familiar to some, but this painting has a subtext that is often not recognized.

MEL BOCHNER: The color scheme is the color scheme that the Nazis forced the Jews to wear as armbands. And yellow on black is the most instantly readable color combination, and that's what I wanted.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: For Bochner, the commas have an important function beyond separating words.

MEL BOCHNER: A comma doesn't end the thought. It just means the thought continues. I wanted to use the comma to represent the fact that antisemitism is never-ending, and we're living through a comma right now.

327. Nicole Eisenman, *Seder*, 2010

MARTHA ROSLER: My name is Martha Rosler and I'm an artist who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

We're looking at a painting of a Seder by Nicole Eisenman. This is a painting that seems to be bursting at the seams, reminding me of the apartments of my family and friends, tight little spaces, often full of too many relatives, especially during the Seder. In this bursting representation of home, with its psychedelically bending and scrawly space, the family appears as an enclosing bulwark and confining nightmare. The bloated hands of the patriarch ripping the matzo ritually in two are very much bested by the solid glare of the mother figure at the other end of the table. It's early in the meal, as the gefilte fish is present on the plates, and a young child, the one who does not know to ask the four questions, is heedlessly, happily digging in.

On the Seder plate is the unlikely but politically insistent orange, placed there in quiet conspiracy, started a few decades ago by defiant women, especially lesbians, because Jewish women are rightly known for a certain tendency to stroppiness and interruption of patriarchal ritual.

NARRATOR: Oranges began to be added to Seder plates in the 1980s to mark solidarity with LGBTQ individuals during the AIDS crisis, as well as with anyone who had been marginalized within the Jewish community.

MARTHA ROSLER: In any case, the bright orange speaks sweetly of other things than the bitterness and sorrow central to the retelling of the story of enslavement and redemption in eternal revolt, or a wishful addition plopped down by the artist's desire.

328. Dor Guez, Works

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Artist Dor Guez, who made this series of works, was born in Jerusalem. These objects reflect the experiences of his paternal grandparents who escaped from concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Tunisia and later, in 1951, immigrated to Israel.

DOR GUEZ: My grandparents had a theater company in Tunisia. My grandmother was the leading actress and the costume designer, and my grandfather was a playwriter.

He wrote all of his plays in maalek, in Judeo-Arabic, a language which is a mix of Arabic and Hebrew characters with its own alphabet. Maalek is currently not in use. My grandparents' personal belonging, including the plays that my grandfather wrote, were damaged by water in the belly of the boat during their emigration from Tunisia. One of the plays survived, a manuscript written by hand. The ink was blotted on these fragile pages, and in my work, the ink stains are scanned, enlarged and duplicated.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: Through this unique digital-imaging process, which he calls scanography, he transformed those fragile pages into something new.

DOR GUEZ: The lettering is engulfed in abstract spot, and this become a metaphor for the junction between two Semitic languages, between one mother tongue and another and between homeland and a new country.

DARSIE ALEXANDER: There were other treasured belongings from his grandparent's theatre company that survived that boat trip, including designs for a child's vest and art deco buttons used for costumes.

DOR GUEZ: I'm presenting a museum-like display of several objects in vitrines who relates to their artistic practice as costume designer and as a writer. I'm doing it to emphasize the handling of the object, to emphasize what time actually did to the object. So beside having the information of what you are looking at, if it's a photograph or a document, you also have information about the material itself, about the history of the image as an object.