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A Museum's Fresh Take on the Whole Megillah

By JASON FARAGO JAN. 25, 2018



The exhibition "Scenes From the Collection" at the Jewish Museum highlights an untitled work by William Anastasi, from 1987, composed of four canvases forming a cross, with the term "jew" overlapping one quadrant as if transgressing the space allotted to it. The artist considers this the most charged word in the English language, as well as an affirmation of Jewish culture. Right, "The Joys of Yiddish," one of Mel Bochner's "Thesaurus" paintings, from 2012.

Jason Mandella/The Jewish Museum, New York

The Jewish Museum is housed in one of New York's most ornate mansions: a French chateau sitting right on Fifth Avenue. Yet if you walk into its new permanent collection displays — airy, spotless, with light gray walls and freshly poured concrete floors — you may find yourself wondering if you've been teleported to Chelsea.

Earlier this month the museum reopened its permanent collection galleries on the third floor of its extravagant home, which after 25 years had become dowdy and cramped. Working with

the architect Calvin Tsao of the firm Tsao & McKown, the museum has undertaken a surgical renovation, excising a staircase and exposing clerestory windows onto Central Park. Stuffy wall texts have been replaced by short panels in a zippy sans-serif typeface, part of a larger rebranding by Sagmeister & Walsh.



From “Accumulations,” a section in “Scenes From the Collection,” a display of stereoscopes, an early form of 3-D. They offered armchair travelers a virtual tour of sites related to the Bible. The albums were marketed to a Christian audience for use in Sunday school or for devotional study, yet the images hold significance for Jews and Muslims, too. Jason Mandella/The Jewish Museum, New York

Up here the building feels freer and friskier, and the collection presentation does too. Where the previous permanent collection display aimed to narrate 4,000 years of Jewish history, in roughly chronological order, the new one, [“Scenes From the Collection,”](#) takes a fractured, impressionistic tack. Artworks and artifacts are freely intermingled in broad groupings, with no regard for the timeline. It’s an adventurous revision, and follows a vogue for nonchronological hangs that privilege thematic links over historical progression.

The trend dates at least to the opening of Tate Modern in London in 2000, and institutions such as the Brooklyn Museum and Atlanta’s High Museum followed suit. When it works, such anachronism can reveal unexpected connections across time. Just as often, this approach (especially in the Tate’s case) can favor superficial similarities over historical rigor.

We’ll see how the Jewish Museum plays it going forward. “Scenes From the Collection” will be rethought and refreshed every six months. What we can say now is that the display puts visual art, not just Jewish history, at the museum’s heart.



From left: Israel Dov Rosenbaum, mizrah plaque used during prayers (1877); Kehinde Wiley, "Alios Itzhak (The World Stage: Israel)," from 2011; Abraham Shulkin, Torah ark from Adath Yeshurun Synagogue (1899), in Sioux City, Iowa. Jason Mandella/The Jewish Museum, New York

It also assumes a fair amount of familiarity with Judaism; unlike the previous presentation, it declines to enumerate basic facts about the religion, from the nature of monotheism to the demographics of the diaspora. Walking away from a "master narrative," in favor of discrete "scenes" (as an introductory text here states), the Jewish Museum now offers a nimbler and lighter perspective on art and faith. In places, this feels exciting; in others, the curators may have scrapped too much and added too little.

In "Constellations," a grab bag of an opening gallery, artworks and Jewish ceremonial objects play off one another in aesthetically pleasing, if historically nebulous, counterpoint. A papier-mâché costume of a golem (a mythical creature brought to life from clay) designed by Robert Wilson for a stage production stands next to an ornate dress of the sort worn by Sephardic brides in 19th-century Morocco, garlanded with gold ribbons and passementerie. A vitrine of chanukkiyot, or nine-stemmed menorahs, is smaller and more judiciously curated than one from the previous collection display, and includes examples from baroque Germany, 18th-century Venice and big-hair Los Angeles of the 1980s, where the Memphis designer Peter Shire crafted a cantilevered candelabra of pastel steel. Early paintings by Mark Rothko and Eva Hesse reveal two young refugees, one from imperial Russia and one fleeing Nazi Germany, feeling their way to new visual languages.

There are fluffed notes. A Torah ark from Sioux City, Iowa, dating to 1899 and featuring a profusion of carved lions, eagles and flora, stands next to an equally ornate but far more rigid portrait of [an Ethiopian Israeli by Kehinde Wiley](#) that, as so often in this painter's work, drowns complex political and historical circumstances in formulaic ornament. This is an

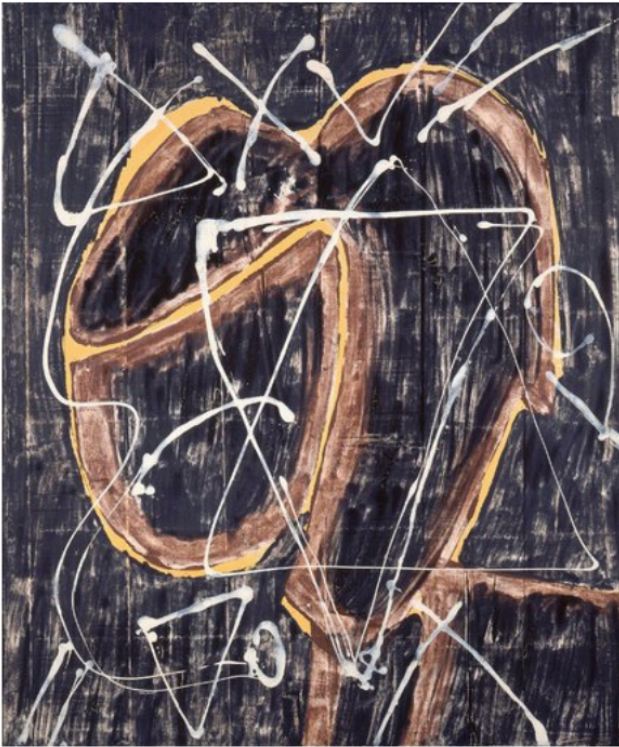
example of what nonchronological hangs get wrong: favoring easy visual rhymes — in this case carved wood and floral embellishments — over deep engagement with time, place and method. Beyond the ruptured timeline, this is actually quite a conservative way of displaying art — closer to a 17th-century princely collection than a modern scientific museum.



Louise Nevelson's "Self-Portrait,"
1935.

2018 Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York; The
Jewish Museum, New York

Century-spanning juxtapositions have a more illuminating impact in a section of the show called "Personas," in which you'll find portraits from three centuries, by Jewish artists and of Jewish sitters. The earliest is a self-portrait from 1814-16 by the German neoclassicist [Moritz Daniel Oppenheim](#), holding a painter's palette and thrusting his hips in luxurious contrapposto. It hangs alongside Louise Nevelson's morbid vision of herself, and Lee Krasner's studious one, both painted more than a century later. In these self-portraits, the challenge of representing oneself also must account for roadblocks that elite art institutions put in front of Jewish artists, and particularly Jewish women. Photographic self-studies by Man Ray, Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman (raised Episcopalian, and done up here as a bearded magus from a B-list biblical movie), and paintings by Deborah Kass and Ross Bleckner, further explode the notion of a unified Jewish identity.



Morris Louis, "Man Reaching for a Star," from "The Charred Journal series," circa 1951.
The Jewish Museum, New York

"Scenes From a Collection" works best when it uses anachronism as an interpretive tool, and not just a visual style. That's especially clear in the excellent gallery called "Signs and Symbols," which focuses on the Star of David — which, we learn, was initially a pan-religious mystical symbol, and first took on Jewish significance in 17th-century Prague. A marble fragment of a Palestinian tombstone features the familiar hexagram and would have decorated a Muslim grave. The familiar yet still horrifying yellow fabric stars, with the word "Jew" in German or French, appear along side postwar paintings by Morris Louis and Nancy Spero that treat the star as an emblem of both Jewish mourning and universal suffering.



Theresienstadt Bracelet, 1941-43, by Greta Perlman, a prisoner in the Theresienstadt camp in what is now the Czech Republic. She gathered charms including a lice comb and bullet. Perlman survived Theresienstadt and, later, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.

The Jewish Museum, New York

A section called “Masterpieces and Curiosities” focuses on a single object: currently, an extraordinary charm bracelet made by Greta Perlman in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, whose modest bangles (a bullet, a lice comb, a miniature ladle) testify to the endurance of individual creation in the face of barbarity. “Taxonomies” follows, a Judaica display that is essentially a cabinet of curiosities, with dozens of shofars, [groggers](#), and Torah breastplates and finials. Elsewhere, television clips from [“Transparent”](#) and [“Orange Is the New Black”](#) map the influence of Jewish culture in a diverse America, and the endurance of Jewish humor in the streaming age.

The museum now credits the reinstallation to “the Jewish Museum curatorial team,” but an earlier news release, from November, named two lead curators. One was [Susan L. Braunstein](#), a senior curator and Judaica specialist who has been with the museum since 1980. The other was Jens Hoffmann, the museum’s former deputy director and a contemporary art specialist, whose relationship with the museum was terminated on Dec. 17 after a review of allegations of sexual harassment. The pair had previously collaborated on a 2015 show, “Repetition and Difference,” that displayed contemporary art alongside archaeological and spiritual materials. “Scenes from the Collection” is a heftier continuation of that project, and expands on its free exchange of art and liturgical objects. Contemporary art, in particular, has a much larger presence than in the old permanent collection showcase.



Nicole Eisenman's "Seder," 2010. The Jewish Museum, New York

[Candida Höfer](#), the German photographer known for her precise images of interiors, captures the sweeping, angular architecture of a synagogue in Philadelphia designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. [Nicole Eisenman](#), the witty and sometimes scabrous New York painter, is represented by a macabre painting of a Passover Seder, in which a young child stabs her gefilte fish with a serial killer's élan. [Ruby Onyinyechi Amanze](#), an exciting Nigerian-American artist and the youngest represented here, recently entered the museum's collection with a tender drawing based on a ketubah, or Jewish marriage contract. The drawing integrates Hebrew and English pledges of love with an interpolation of George Hoyningen-Huene's famous 1930 photograph "Divers." The woman here wears her hair in elaborate braids, a traditional Ibo hairstyle. (Many Ibo [believe they are descended from one of the "lost tribes" of Israel](#), and several thousand practice Judaism.)

As this display recalls, the Jewish Museum gave early exhibitions to leaders of the postwar avant-garde, including Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and presented innovative group exhibitions like "Primary Structures," curated by [Kynaston McShine](#), who died earlier this month. Yet it rarely integrated art from those groundbreaking shows into its permanent collection. It's heartening to see the museum's current leadership taking an early interest in artists like Ms. Onyinyechi Amanze. A supporting player now, she may be a lead actor in this museum's subsequent scenes.



Ruby Onyinyechi Amanze's
"Marriage contract," 2017.
The Jewish Museum, New York

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