For Immediate Release

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and The Jewish Museum, New York, Announce New Judaica Initiative

Partnership with The Jewish Museum, New York, and new gallery for Judaica at the MFAH will establish ongoing presence for Jewish ceremonial art in Houston

Houston, TX and New York, NY – June 8, 2022 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and The Jewish Museum, New York today announced a partnership to establish an ongoing presence for Judaica at the MFAH: In July 2022, the MFAH will open the exhibition Beauty and Ritual: Judaica from The Jewish Museum, New York, the first step in the ongoing partnership, which will bring exceptional objects from the Jewish Museum to Houston over a period of years. In early 2023, ongoing presentations centered on objects on loan from the Jewish Museum will begin when The Albert and Ethel Herzstein Gallery for Judaica opens at the MFAH. The Herzstein Gallery is a centerpiece of the World Faiths Initiative at the MFAH, a program of interfaith projects based on the museum’s collections and exhibitions and funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc.

Commented Gary Tinterow, Director, Margaret Alkek Williams Chair, of the MFAH: “The first significant piece of Judaica to enter the Museum’s collection was the Montefiore Mainz Mahzor, in 2018. Calligraphed and illustrated around 1310 in Mainz, some 150 years before Gutenberg would print his Bible in that same medieval town, the Mahzor is one of the earliest surviving illuminated Jewish prayer books from Central Europe. Now, with this significant partnership with The Jewish Museum, New York, and access to their extraordinary collections, we are able to amplify the cultural and artistic history of Judaism, first with this summer’s exhibition, Beauty and Ritual, and, beginning early next year, with presentations in the newly endowed, permanent Judaica gallery. I am enormously grateful to the Jewish Museum, New York, for their partnership, and to The Albert and Ethel Herzstein Foundation, in making possible this permanent presence for Judaica and historic Jewish traditions at the MFAH.”

Maker: BD, Menorah, 1867-72, Lemberg (now Lviv, Ukraine), cast, engraved, and traced silver, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman in memory of Adele Friedman, The Jewish Museum, New York

The Montefiore Mainz Mahzor, c. 1310-1320, illustrated manuscript on parchment; codex of 299 leaves, each ruled in ink, pricked, and written in back and red ink in Ashkenazi script; Museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
“After two years of discussion and planning, I am delighted that the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston will be offering its audiences a chance to see highlights from the Jewish Museum’s renowned collection of Judaica,” commented Claudia Gould, the Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director of The Jewish Museum, New York. “There are very few general fine-arts museums in the nation that have a dedicated space for Judaica, and this exciting collaboration will have significant impact on the field. As head of the Jewish Museum in New York, which maintains a unique collection of nearly 30,000 works of art, ceremonial objects, and media including one of the world’s major Judaica collections, I am looking forward to working with the MFAH on this important initiative.”

About Beauty and Ritual: Judaica from The Jewish Museum, New York

The exhibition Beauty and Ritual: Judaica from The Jewish Museum, New York will be the first of a series of presentations at the MFAH from the collection of The Jewish Museum, New York. On view July 10 to September 18, 2022, the exhibition will feature over 140 objects from the Jewish Museum’s world-renowned collection, examining Jewish ceremonial objects from antiquity to the present and exploring their artistic, ritualistic, and cultural significance.

The objects presented derive from Jewish communities throughout the world, ranging from Central Asia to North Africa and Western Europe. The exhibition also explores how artists—from different backgrounds—and Jewish communities have creatively adapted traditional forms of Judaica by utilizing a rich array of styles, materials, and techniques, and drawing on broader cultures. Three thematic galleries explore the ceremonial objects used for Jewish practice in the synagogue, in the home and beyond.

“The Art of the Synagogue: Adorning the Torah” features ceremonial objects used within the synagogue for the purpose of beautifying and protecting the Torah, the central ritual text of Judaism. One Torah ark, intended for housing the Torah, is a monumental 18th-century pinewood enclosure from Bavaria. The ark echoes the colorful, painted decorations of houses of that region, resembling an entrance to a home, and, at 10 feet in height, nearly at the same scale.

“A Day of Rest: The Radiance of the Sabbath” presents Judaica traditionally used for the Sabbath, the weekly day of rest. At the center of the gallery will be a 2012 commission for the Jewish Museum by artist Beth Lipman. In this...
ethereal work, Beth Lipman drew inspiration from traditional Jewish ceremonial objects in the museum’s collection, including those used for the Sabbath. The piece is a table set with an abundance of glass objects, evocative of the Baroque still life tradition of the vanitas painting in which worldly objects are shown together with symbols of mortality to prompt reflection on the inherent transience of beauty and life. The work conveys the household table as a place where festivity, family, history, and the fragile passing of time converge.

“Beyond the Synagogue and the Home: The Light of the Hanukkah Menorah,” examines the menorah, traditionally the lamp used to celebrate the holiday of Hanukkah, the eight-day festival of lights. This final gallery of the exhibition showcases the menorah’s history and visual presence as a symbol of Jewish culture to the world—from the earliest times with a fired-clay lamp from the third to the fifth century CE, to elaborate 18th and 19th-century Italian and German metalwork, and to 20th-century depictions by modern artists Marc Chagall and Ben Shahn.

About the World Faiths Initiative at the MFAH

Funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc., the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston’s World Faiths Initiative seeks to activate themes of religion, faith and spirituality in the Museum’s encyclopedic collections through innovative programming and reimagined displays. The focus on the many expressions of faith in the collections of the MFAH seeks to honor the diverse communities of Houston and inspire connections across cultures and beliefs. The World Faiths Initiative is centered on both The Albert and Ethel Herzstein Gallery for Judaica and cross-cultural installations and public programming exploring faith and spirituality, activities that serve the Museum’s long-term goals of representing world religions within the permanent collection. The project team is being led by Aimée Froom, MFAH curator, Art of the Islamic Worlds, and Caroline Goeser, W.T. and Louise J. Moran Chair of Learning and Interpretation. The initiative is supported with grant funds from the Lilly Endowment Inc.

Beauty and Ritual: Judaica from The Jewish Museum, New York
Brown Foundation Galleries, Audrey Jones Beck Building
July 10 – September 18, 2022
More information available at www.mfah.org/judaica
Images, checklist and wall text are available in the MFAH Press Kit.

Organization and Funding

This exhibition is organized by The Jewish Museum, New York in partnership with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

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About the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Spanning 14 acres in the heart of Houston’s Museum District, the main campus comprises the Audrey Jones Beck Building, the Caroline Wiess Law Building, the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden and the Nancy and Rich Kinder Building. Nearby, two house museums—Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens, and Rienzi—present collections of American and European decorative arts. The MFAH is also home to the Glassell School of Art, with its Core Residency Program and Junior and Studio schools; and the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA), a leading research institute for 20th-century Latin American and Latino art.

About The Jewish Museum, New York

The Jewish Museum is an art museum committed to illuminating the complexity and vibrancy of Jewish culture for a global audience. Located on New York City’s Museum Mile, in the landmarked Warburg mansion, the Jewish Museum was the first institution of its kind in the United States and is one of the oldest Jewish museums in the world. The museum offers diverse exhibitions and programs, and maintains a unique collection of nearly 30,000 works of art, ceremonial objects, and media reflecting the global Jewish experience over more than 4,000 years.

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