

JEWISH CURRENTS

ACTIVIST POLITICS & ART

A FASCINATING REVAMP AT THE JEWISH MUSEUM

By [Dan Grossman](#) on [January 22, 2018](#) .



“**SCENES** from the Collection,” the first permanent exhibition at New York’s Jewish Museum in over twenty-five years, pulls off the triumphant feat of being both rooted and experimental. The exhibition it replaces, “Culture and Continuity,” attempted to tell over three thousand years of Jewish history in only two floors. “Scenes from the Collection” turns this vertical history on its side, creating a web of connections across time periods and places. Instead of marching from Canaanite days through the birth of Israel, visitors immerse in different “scenes” that include “Signs and Symbols,” which explores the significance of the Star of David over the centuries; “Television and Beyond,” about Jews in family sitcoms; and “Personas,” a range of portraits primarily by 20th-century female artists. Unlike the old exhibit, which stayed mostly the same for twenty-five years, the new exhibit will rotate in new scenes, allowing it to evolve alongside the community.

The shift from a linear narrative of history to various “scenes” might appear like a casting-off of tradition in favor of postmodern fuzziness, but the opposite is true. In real life, Jewish texts and rituals are forever collapsing boundaries in time and space: The rabbis of the Talmud imagine Abraham praying three times a day; the Passover seder became a time-travel device into and out of Egypt. A museum that’s open to many interpretations gets closer to the rabbinic concept that

the Torah has infinite readings, and the new exhibition, rather than aspiring to be an encyclopedia of history, is a kind of open-ended Talmud of objects, debating, quoting and telling stories. The presence of a Cabinet of Wonders (a *Wunderkammer*), featuring Jewish ceremonial objects like spice boxes and Torah pointers, harkens back to old museum practices that suit our hyperlink era better than the tired chronologies to which we've grown accustomed. The new show is thus a return to form, or to more exciting forms.



Interweaving past and present is at the heart of “Alios Itzhak” (2011, above), a portrait by Kehinde Wiley in the scene called “Constellations.” One of Wiley’s artistic goals has been to add more people of color to art history, and this included a trip to Israel where he painted Itzhak, an Ethiopian Jew, on this nine-and-half-foot canvas. Wearing a t-shirt and jeans, Itzhak stands with his hand on his hip against a backdrop of a *mizrah*, a plaque in a home or synagogue that indicates the direction of Jerusalem. Actually, the *mizrah* from 19th century Europe, which the curators display next to the painting, is more than a backdrop, since the yellow and blue vines

decorating the margins climb up Izhak's torso, while his finger rests on the base of the pink temple. Itzhak looks both confident and self-possessed, brought out by the electric colors and huge scale, yet he's woven into the intricate pattern of a dreamed-up Jerusalem. Had Wiley painted him against modern Jerusalem, Itzhak would be situated in real time and real place, but this embeds him in Jewish history, in the unique space-time of art and culture.



One of the pleasures of the new exhibit is the sheer range of creative experiences. In the scene called "Accumulations" (2011, above, photo by Jason Mandella), visitors can sit down at a round table of stereoscopes and look at 3D images of Palestine from the turn of the 20th century. These miniature double photographs, produced by American companies such as Underwood and Underwood, reflected a consumer craze for biblical sightseeing and Orientalist romanticism (in "Picturesque Palestine," from 1900, an Arab shepherd gazes off at the Galilee hills. Tourism, religion, and capitalism all collided to produce these sepia-toned images, which were marketed to Christian Sunday schools and prayer groups but also collected by Jewish Americans. In several cases, the images serve as antidotes to historical amnesia. A picture of the Western Wall (or "The Wailing Place," as they call it) depicts women and girls praying alongside men, and it's with a shock that we realize the common practice of 1900 will get you spat on in 2018. Haunting, too, is the image of young Syrians traveling on a camel through Lydda, an Arab city where in 1948 hundreds of Palestinians were massacred and tens of thousands expelled. Once new and cutting-edge, the stereograms now leave behind ghostly traces.

ANOTHER RECURRING theme is the impact of the Holocaust on art. One room, dedicated to the artistic expressions of prisoners in the Theresienstadt ghetto, showcases a bracelet of personal charms and badges that Greta Perlman gathered from her fellow inmates. Nearby, a watercolor by an unknown artist in the ghetto, "New Arrivals," shows a huddled line of Jews on a snowy night,

awaiting instructions from the faceless soldier in a doorway. Given the millions of words written about the place of art after the Holocaust, it's laudable that the curators give attention to the art made *during* the Holocaust, art that served a purpose: to preserve the identity and humanity of those trapped by total evil. "Scenes from the Collection" lets us discover a link between these pieces and post-war works like Morris Louis' "Man Reaching for a Star" (1951), which depicts a thin, white Star of David amid a swirl of shapes and up against a backdrop of charred blackness. Out of all that misery and darkness, an old figure emerges.

The best example of post-Holocaust art in the show is *Subject Matters* (1990) by Deborah Kass (pictured at the top of this article). Kass's work often touches on the intersection of gender, sexuality and Jewishness, and she painted *Subject Matters* while reading about the Holocaust and questioning the limitations of abstract painting. Abstraction wasn't enough, she realized; the subject matters. On the left, the silhouette of a headless cartoon girl repeats nine times across a black background, while the right panel is divided in two: atop, a man's lips open and close behind a critic's eyeglasses and, below, Kass has painted the famous photograph of the abandoned eyeglasses at Auschwitz, painted them like a heap of bodies fallen from the sky. In the central panel, between commercial repetition and unspeakable horror, stands a giant capital I, half in gold, half in black. There's no solution to this painting, no clear way to link the assertive I with either the Warholian repetition on the left or the dual images of eyeglasses on the right, yet the matrix of images presents an evocative meditation on history and identity.

At the center of *Subject Matter* is text, and many works throughout "Scenes from the Collection" blur the line between text and artwork, both in the ritual artifacts and in contemporary pieces. Near the start of the exhibition, you'll find a large 1981 canvas by William Anatasi consisting of the word "jew" in black font on white canvas. When I first saw it, it struck me as brash and somehow blasphemous, which is likely what Anatasi intended. Together, the *jew* of Anatasi's painting and the *I* at the center of Kass' *Subject Matters* make for compelling bookends to this must-see exhibition. Between *jew* and *I*, "Scenes from the Collection" offers visitors a sweep of dynamic encounters that are global, fascinating and very much alive.

"Scenes from the Collection" opened on January 21 at The Jewish Museum.

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