



MUSEUM
OF JEWISH
HERITAGE

A LIVING
MEMORIAL
TO THE
HOLOCAUST

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Project Mah Jongg **A Nostalgic Exhibition Honoring the Memories and Meanings of the Game** *Opening this Spring at the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*

New York, NY— Tiles clacking, players chatting and laughing, exclamations of “Two bam!” “Three crack!” and “Four dot!” ... these are the memories shared by women who gather together to play the Chinese game of mah jongg. On **May 4**, the **Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust** will open ***Project Mah Jongg***, an exhibition exploring the traditions, history, and meanings of the game of mah jongg in Jewish-American culture. The exhibition will be on view through January 2, 2011. Following the run in New York, the exhibition is slated to travel throughout the country.

To capture the beauty, fantasy, and whimsy inherent in the game, renowned designer **Abbot Miller, a partner at Pentagram Design**, whose projects have included *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy* at the Metropolitan Museum and *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama* at the Jewish Museum, is designing an exhibit that highlights the intriguing objects and imagery surrounding the game. As Miller says, “Mah jongg is a visual universe unto itself, one governed by dragons, directional winds, and cocktails. It was--and still is--social media with a heavy dose of style and history.”

Exhibition curator Melissa Martens points out that “each game of mah jongg—with its beautiful rituals and wide-reaching cultural associations—is a performance of identity, fantasy, and memory. It is much more than a game, it is a powerful and multi-faceted expression of community.”

In conjunction with the exhibition, 2wice Arts Foundation will produce an issue of *2wice* magazine on the theme of “Mah Jongg.” Fashion icon **Isaac Mizrahi**, and illustrators **Maira Kalman**, **Christoph Neimann**, and **Bruce McCall**, have contributed drawings that re-interpret the game’s meanings and its influence on fashion and design. These imaginings will also be on display in the exhibition, illustrating how mah jongg continues to be a muse for contemporary artists and designers. The companion volume of *2wice* will include an essay on the history of mah jongg and a bevy of compelling and evocative images celebrating the game. The mission of the 2wice Arts Foundation is to document, promote, and celebrate performance and photography through its publishing and philanthropic activities. The Foundation has produced award-winning publications that are conceived as performances-in-print.

A Brief History of Mah Jongg in the U.S.

Since the 1920s, the game of mah jongg has ignited the Jewish-American imagination in living rooms and gathering spots around the country. Introduced to American audiences by Joseph P. Babcock who began importing sets *en masse* around 1922, the game delighted players with its beautifully adorned tiles, associations with other lands, and mysterious rules. Companies such as Abercrombie & Fitch, Milton Bradley, and Parker Brothers further popularized the game by selling affordable sets across America, setting a craze in motion.

Yet even at the height of the first fad for mah jongg, commentators debated the game’s image as a “vice”—a gambling game, a time waster, and a potential vehicle for rebellious flapper behavior. Introduced to America

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during a peak in immigration restrictions, the game's foreign associations stirred both consumer intrigue and stereotypes in the press.

Yet mah jongg was—more than anything—a community builder. It was the perfect complement to women's gatherings and fundraisers, and it quickly became a fixture in the Jewish communal world. Mah jongg games offered relaxation, companionship, and a way to raise money for worthy causes. By 1937, the National Mah Jongg League was formed to standardize the rules of American mah jongg. Funds realized from the sale of the League's annual rule cards were earmarked for charitable organizations. With thousands of rule cards sold each year, mah jongg became a leading device in Jewish women's philanthropy. The game spread throughout organized circles in Jewish communities far and wide.

In the post-war years, the game was embraced enthusiastically throughout circles of Eastern European Jewish women and became a favorite activity of bungalow colonies of the Catskills. Mah jongg became an entertainment ritual in suburban Jewish homes—where it has been lovingly transfixed in the memories of the contemporary generation. Today, hundreds of thousands of people play mah jongg, and it continues to be a vital part of communal, personal, and cultural life.

Highlights of the Exhibition

Project Mah Jongg will illustrate the game's role in community, in the home, and in the relationships formed by Jewish-American women. In the intimate setting of the Museum's beautiful hexagonal Rotunda Gallery, visitors will see why it remains popular to this day, passed down from generation to generation—from grandmothers to hipsters and from baby boomers to bohemians.

Highlights of the exhibition include images and items from the mah jongg craze of the 1920s, including vintage advertisements, Chinoiserie, and a colorful array of early game sets distributed by companies such as Milton Bradley and Parker Brothers. Artifacts from the 1930s include an instructional booklet by Dorothy S. Meyerson, a pioneer of mah jongg within the Jewish community, and images of early members of the National Mah Jongg League. When many Jewish families moved into the suburbs, the game became a popular social activity. 1950s-era mah jongg lent itself to mah jongg-themed aprons, travel sets, and images of women in the Catskills enjoying the game. A multitude of vintage tiles, boxed sets, rulebooks, and related material culture will populate the exhibition on a rotating basis.

In the exhibition, visitors will encounter an ambient soundscape, created by sound designer **Timothy Nohe**, echoing the clicking of the tiles, the din of the gossip, spoken memories, and exclamations of "Crack!" "Bam!" and "Dot!"

A game table at the core of the exhibition space will encourage players and non-players alike to take part in a game of mah jongg and a continuing tradition.

Credits

Project Mah Jongg is made possible through the generosity of the National Mah Jongg League. Additional support is provided by Sylvia Hassenfeld. *New York* magazine is the exhibition's media partner. Research and program assistance provided by the Museum of Chinese in America (www.mocanyc.org).

Related Programming

The Museum will present *The Future Mah Jongg Players of Majestic Isles* on Sunday, May 16 at 2:30 P.M. This afternoon of stories and comedy about Mah Jongg and the people who are crazy about it will feature comedians Cory Kahaney and Jessica Kirson, and will be hosted by self-proclaimed "Oriental Yenta" Esther Goodhart. Tickets are \$15, \$12 students/seniors, and \$10 for Museum members.

On Wednesday, October 27 at 7 P.M., join Abbott Miller, partner at Pentagram Design, and exhibition curator Melissa Martens for ***Mah Jongg as Muse***. Since its introduction in the 1920s, mah jongg has served as inspiration for fashion, jewelry, music, food, parties, and pageants. Leading contemporary designers and artists will discuss the role of mah jongg as ongoing muse. Ticket price TBA.

On Sunday, November 7 at 1 P.M. the Museum will present ***Jews and Chinese Food***, co-sponsored by the Museum of Chinese in America. A panel of leading food experts will discuss Jews have a yen for Chinese food and how it continues to be a family ritual. Following the discussion, guests are invited to go on a walking tour of Chinatown led by the Museum of Chinese in America. Discussion tickets are \$5, free for MJH and MOCA members; walking tour tickets are \$15 adults, \$12 students/seniors, \$10 MJH and MOCA members.

A variety of mah jongg-themed gifts for everyone from the aficionado to the novice will be carried by the Museum's Pickman Shop, including snack plates, rule card holders, and even kosher fortune cookies. For more information, go to www.pickmanmuseumshop.com.

About the Museum of Jewish Heritage

The Museum's three-floor Core Exhibition educates people of all ages and backgrounds about the rich tapestry of Jewish life over the past century—before, during, and after the Holocaust. Special exhibitions include *The Morgenthau: A Legacy of Service*, on view through December 2010 and *Traces of Memory*, on view through August 15. The Museum offers visitors a vibrant public program schedule in its Edmond J. Safra Hall. It is also home to the new *Keeping History Center*, a ground-breaking interactive visitor experience, and Andy Goldsworthy's memorial *Garden of Stones*. The Museum receives general operating support from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

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