

NEWS RELEASE

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Contact:

Ilana Blumenthal

215.391.4662 / iblumenthal@nmajh.org

267.294.8425 (c)

National Museum of American Jewish History Exhibits Paintings Created During the Great Depression

The National Museum of American Jewish History is ushering in the New Year with a new temporary exhibition, **Jewish Artists in America 1925-1945: Selections from the Collection of Steven and Stephanie Wasser**, opening on January 29, 2013. The exhibition will feature 21 paintings and prints, including work by American Jewish artists who participated in the WPA in the 1930s and 1940s.

In the first half of the 20th century, American artists turned away from European influences to focus on the “American scene.” From rural fields to city streets, American Jewish artists of the social realist movement depicted life in the United States without romanticizing the hardship and struggle they saw. They recognized that layoffs, food shortages, housing crises, dustbowls, and escalating antisemitism meant their American dreams might be farther off than expected. These passionate and political artists took advantage of the freedom their homeland offered to celebrate and critique America. Whether working independently or as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a Depression-era program that supported artists and other workers in troubled times, they chronicled the city streets, labor conditions, and private moments that made up the realities of life in America.

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Among the paintings and prints featured are Julius Bloch's *The Emigrants*, Aaron Berkman's *Subway*, Louis Ribak's *City Rooftops*, and Raphael Soyer's *Woman Knitting*.

These graphic works have been loaned to the Museum by Steven A. Wasser who has assembled a collection that celebrates the work of American Jewish artists from the 1920s to the 1950s.

"This collection primarily depicts Americans performing their everyday activities," Wasser notes in an essay that will appear in the exhibition's catalogue. "When I look at the red-headed waitress in Anna Meltzer's *End of a Day*, I see my Grandma Margaret, another red-head. When I view the parade of immigrant men wearing hats in *The Emigrants*, by Bloch, I see my father, who always wore a hat during the winter...I am grateful that I have been able to assemble this collection and share it with you."

In addition to the paintings in this special exhibition, Mr. Wasser previously loaned *Ida at the Easel*, a painting by Moses Soyer, currently on display on the 3rd floor of the Museum's core exhibition.

"The Wasser collection brings a tumultuous period in our history to life in vivid and evocative detail," says Dr. Josh Perelman, the Museum's chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections. "The paintings feature the iconic style and vitality of the social realist movement while illustrating how challenging times can inspire artistic creativity and innovation."

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The exhibition will be on displayed on the Museum's Concourse level and is part of an initiative to present new artifacts and exhibitions throughout the Museum that highlight aspects of the American Jewish experience for new and returning visitors.

Also at the Museum

Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars At Black Colleges: A special exhibition running through June 2, tells the little-known story of the remarkable period of inter-racial cooperation that took place in the 1930s at historically black colleges. The exhibition shows how Jewish refugees and African-American students navigated the challenges of life in the segregated south and supported one another as they searched for freedom and opportunity, efforts that informed and inspired the early years of the Civil Rights movement.

The National Museum of American Jewish History, located on historic Independence Mall in Philadelphia, brings to life the 350-year history of Jews in America. Tracing the stories of how Jewish immigrants became Jewish Americans, the Museum invites visitors of all heritages to share their own stories and reflect on how their histories and identities shape and are shaped by the American experience. An open door for all, NMAJH honors the past and contributes to a better future by sharing the power of imagination and ideas, culture and community, leadership and service, in ways that turn inspiration into action.

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Contact Ilana Blumenthal, iblumenthal@nmajh.org, for art and coverage.

101 South Independence Mall East, Philadelphia, PA 19106-2517 (215) 923-3811