

The Museum of Jewish Art and History



The museum is housed in the Hôtel of Saint-Aignan. This hotel was built between 1644 and 1650 for Claude de Mesmes, comte d'Avaux, a diplomat under Louis XIII and Louis XIV who served Richelieu and Mazarin in the negotiations for the 1648 Treaties of Westphalia. The principal architect was Pierre Le Muet, who was also involved in the construction of the Val-de-Grâce. The hôtel features architectural characteristics typical of the period: a paved cour d'honneur accessible via a porch that allowed carriages to drive up to the main entrance, ashlar facades, with cornices and pilasters. Before it became the Museum, the Hôtel had a number of owners and uses, including the establishment in the 19th century of a brief silk stocking factory.

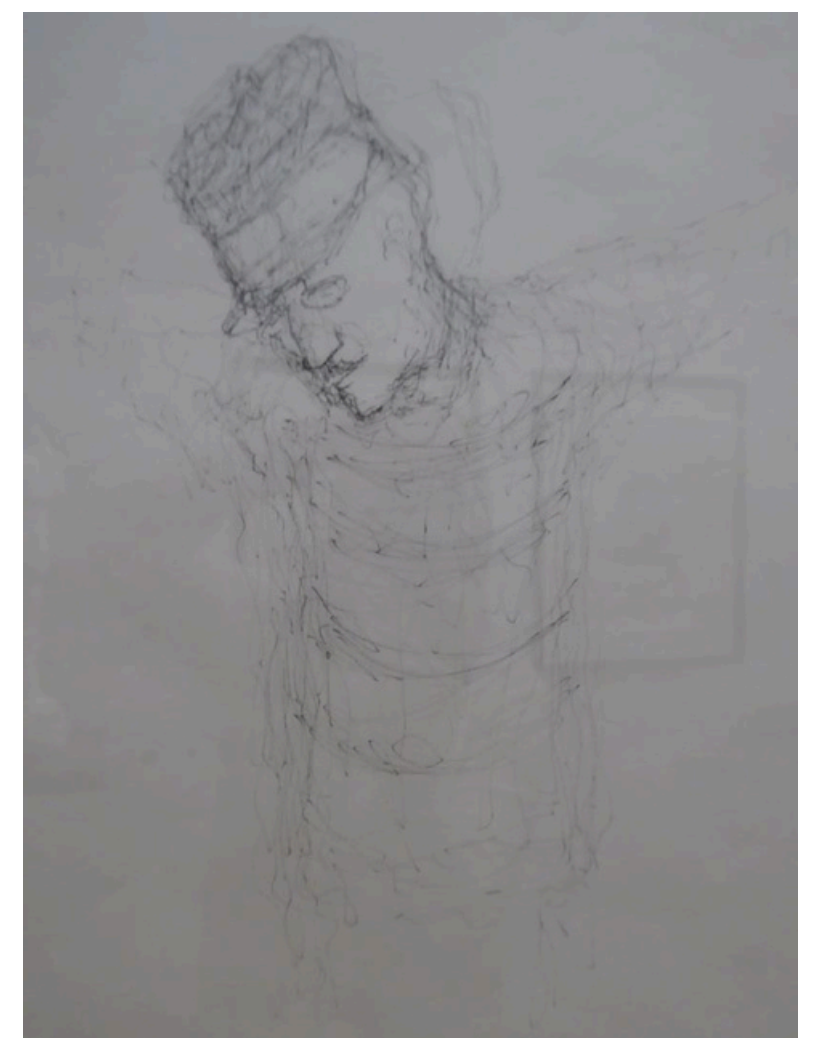


Since 2003, the courtyard of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme (MAHJ) has housed a resin copy of Tim's statue of Dreyfus. Commissioned by Jack Lang, then Minister of Culture, the work was created by Tim—the pseudonym of Louis Mitelberg, a cartoonist and editorialist for L'Express, as well as a painter and sculptor. Tim first produced a model, followed by a 3.5-meter-high bronze statue of Captain Dreyfus, depicted standing and holding his broken saber halfway in front of his face—a powerful symbol of injustice and humiliation. The location of the statue sparked debate: the artist proposed the courtyard of the École Militaire, while the Ministry of Defense preferred the gardens of the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, once home to the École Polytechnique. Ultimately, Jack Lang decided to inaugurate the statue in the Tuileries Gardens.

The Museum of Jewish Art and History is located in the Marais district of Paris. This district is historically linked to the Jewish presence in the French capital. Indeed, as early as the Middle Ages, a Jewish community settled in the Marais. Its presence came to an end in the 12th century with the expulsion of Jews from France under the reign of Philippe II Auguste. Until the mid-17th century, the Marais district was the place where the aristocratic elite built hotels and mansions. After the Court moved to Versailles and out of the Louvre, in 1680, aristocrats gradually left the Marais to be closer to the King. After the French Revolution and the emancipation of the Jews in 1791, a new community was re-established in the 19th century with the arrival of Jews from Alsace, then from Eastern Europe following pogroms and poverty. The Jewish quarter, the Pletzl ("little square" in Yiddish, a mixture of German and Hebrew spoken by Jews) is the heart of this community. After the Second World War and the Holocaust, in the 1960s and 1970s the district became home to Jews from North Africa. The museum is the heir to the collections of the Musée d'Art Juif on rue des Saules, which was established in 1948 by survivors of the Shoah. It was born out of a desire to preserve and transmit the richness and diversity of France's threatened Jewish heritage. In the 1980s, the Hôtel de Saint-Aignan, then owned by the City of Paris, was selected as the future home of the museum. Baroness Alix de Rothschild was one of the key figures behind the museum's creation. She had a very clear vision of what the museum should be: "a living place, accessible to all, and not just an accumulation of dusty objects." From the very first planning meetings, she emphasized the importance of pedagogy and storytelling, hoping that every visitor would be able to "connect emotionally" with Jewish history and culture. She became personally involved in the search for the museum's first objects, actively reaching out to families and collectors to help enrich the initial collection. She even proposed the integration of reconstructions of daily life scenes, aiming to make the visitor experience more immersive and engaging. Her deep commitment and influence were instrumental in securing essential funding for the project. Historian Zosa Szajkowski scoured archives and libraries around the world in search of documents and objects that bear witness to the history of French Jewry. It is said that he had an "incredible flair" for unearthing forgotten treasures. For example, he discovered a collection of previously unpublished letters from an 18th-century Jewish family, offering a unique insight into their daily lives and their relations with the surrounding society. These letters subsequently enriched the first collections of the museum. Similarly, Dr. Israël Lévi, curator of the Consistoire, mobilized his network across France to identify and collect objects and documents of historical and cultural value. Last but not least, a specialist in medieval Judaism, Bernhard Blumenkranz, played a crucial role in the scientific legitimization of the museum project.



The Museum of Jewish Art and History devotes a room to the Dreyfus affair. A letter from Alfred Dreyfus to his wife Lucie can be found from Devil's Island in 1896. Anti-Semitic caricatures, press articles, letters and personal objects linked to the Dreyfus affair and its repercussions on the Jewish community are on display in the museum. These cartoons depict Alfred Dreyfus and Jews in a stereotypical way, with physical features considered "typically Jewish" such as the hooked nose and thick lips. Numerous drawings depicting Dreyfus are on display. They were created by TIM, a French press cartoonist, caricaturist, illustrator and sculptor of Polish-Jewish origin.



One section of the museum features elaborate ritual objects, such as silver menorahs (Hanukkah candlesticks), siddurim (prayer books), tefillin (phylacteries) and mezuzot (cases containing scrolls). The museum preserves an ancient silver Hanukkah menorah from the early 18th century, which came from the Lehmann family of lace merchants from Alsace. During the Second World War, this menorah was hidden by non-Jewish neighbors to protect it from seizing. Also on display is a ketubah, a marriage contract. Among the museum's most precious manuscripts is a medieval calligraphic commentary on the Torah. This manuscript bears marginal annotations in Old French, proof of the cultural and linguistic exchanges between Jewish communities and their environment.



Another interesting thing is Édouard Vuillard's painting Madame Jean Bloch et ses enfants (Madame Jean Bloch and Children), which depicts an upper-middle-class Israelite family of the interwar period. Jean André Bloch had commissioned Vuillard to paint a portrait of his wife Gilberte and her children in early 1927. The one in the Museum of Jewish Art is the first version, featuring three of the couple's four children. Completed in 1929, this portrait of an established, wealthy Jewish family may echo the Dreyfus family.



In the Museum's inner courtyard is a wall featuring a work by artist Christian Boltanski, created in homage to the Jewish inhabitants of the Hôtel de Saint Aignan living in Paris in 1939. Most of them were craftsmen. On this wall, Boltanski has inscribed their names, occupations and dates of deportation. This work is a reminder of the presence and diversity of Jewish lives in the world.

