

WHAT: *Project Mah Jongg*

WHEN: March 30 – June 29, 2014

WHERE: The Jewish Museum of Maryland, 15 Lloyd Street, Baltimore, MD 21202

COST: Adults: \$8; Seniors: \$6; Students: \$4; Free for members!

WEB: <http://jewishmuseummd.org/single/project-mah-jongg/> or <http://jewishmuseummd.org/>

CONTACT: Rachel Kassman, Marketing Manager, rkassman@jewishmuseummd.org 410-732-6400 x225

Project Mah Jongg

A Nostalgic Exhibition Honoring the Memories and Meaning of the Game Opening at the Jewish Museum of Maryland

The wildly popular exhibition created by the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York City is touring across the country

Baltimore, MD— 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. *Project Mah Jongg*, an exhibition exploring the traditions, history, and meaning of the game of mah jongg in Jewish-American culture, was created by the Museum of Jewish Heritage — A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York City. The exhibition will be on view from *March 30th to June 29th* at the Jewish Museum of Maryland in Baltimore, with special opening events on March 30th, including a talk by exhibit curator Melissa Martens Yaverbaum at 12:30pm. Visit www.projectmahjongg.com for more information.

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, has designed an exhibit that highlights the intriguing objects and imagery surrounding the game. Original works by fashion icon Isaac Mizrahi, and renowned illustrators Maira Kalman, Christoph Niemann, and Bruce McCall pay homage to the influence mah jongg has had on design and contemporary artists. 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 Yaverbaum 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.”

“How did a game played by Chinese men become a pastime for Jewish women?” asked JMM director, Marvin Pinkert. “We are very pleased to be able to present an exhibit that not only answers this question, but delivers the answer in a truly exquisite setting. On top of that, it’s fun! Every visitor will be tempted to sit down and play a game of mah jongg at one of our game tables.”

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

In spite of these questions about the game, 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 affixed 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 illustrates the game's role in community, in the home, and in the relationships formed by Jewish-American women. 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. Nineteen-fifties-era mah jongg lent itself to mah jongg-themed aprons, travel sets, and images of women in the Catskills enjoying the game.

In the exhibition, visitors hear an ambient soundscape, created by Baltimore sound designer Timothy Nohe, echoing the clicking of the tiles, the din of the gossip, spoken memories, and exclamations of “Crack!” “Bam!” and “Dot!”

Additional memories and photos can be found on the exhibition website www.projectmahjongg.com.

Game tables at the core of the exhibition space encourage players and non-players alike to sit down and take part in a game of mah jongg — and a continuing tradition.

Comment [ARS1]: Game tables encourage; game table encourages

Companion volume

In conjunction with the exhibition, 2wice Arts Foundation has produced an issue of *2wice* magazine on the theme of “Mah Jongg.” Fashion icon Isaac Mizrahi, and illustrators Maira Kalman, Christoph Niemann, and Bruce McCall have contributed drawings that re-interpret the game’s meanings and its influence on fashion and design. These imaginings are also on display in the exhibition, illustrating how mah jongg continues to be a muse for contemporary artists and designers. The companion volume of *2wice* includes an essay on the history of mah jongg and a bevy of compelling and evocative images celebrating the game. Jennifer 8. Lee and Wendy Goodman have also contributed essays to the publication. 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 variety of mah jongg-themed gifts for everyone from the aficionado to the novice will be carried by the museum shop, including custom designed mah jongg sets, tile mixers, note cards, cocktail napkins, and tote bags.

Credits

Project Mah Jongg is made possible through the generosity of the National Mah Jongg League. Additional support is provided by Sylvia Hassenfeld and 2wice Arts Foundation. *New York* magazine is the exhibition’s media partner. Research and program assistance was provided by the Museum of Chinese in America (www.mocanyc.org).

The exhibition is supported at the Jewish Museum of Maryland by gifts from Carol Sandler, Greif Family Fund and Irene and Robert Russel.

RELATED PROGRAMMING

There is also a great line up of programs to go with the exhibition. Here are just a few of the offerings in our first month:

March 30: Opening Day, exhibit curator Melissa Martens of the Museum of Jewish Heritage will speak on *Mah Jongg Mania*.

April 13: The JMM will host a Mah Jongg Marathon led by Lois Madow, founder of the American Mah-Jongg Association

The exhibition will be on display through June 29th and more program announcements will be forthcoming. Contact Trillion Attwood, tattwood@jewishmuseummd.org/ 410-732-6400 x215 for program information.

About the Jewish Museum of Maryland

The Jewish Museum of Maryland, at 15 Lloyd Street, Baltimore, MD, 21202 is America's leading museum of regional Jewish history, culture and community, located in downtown Baltimore, blocks from the Inner harbor. At the JMM, visitors can uncover the roots of Jewish history in changing exhibitions and landmark historic sites – the Lloyd Street Synagogue, built in 1845, now the nation's third oldest standing synagogue, and B'nai Israel Synagogue, built in 1876 and home to a vibrant congregation.

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