About Our Building

Designed by the award-winning, Chicago-based Krueck + Sexton Architects, the environmentally sustainable Spertus Institute building opened here, at 610 S. Michigan Avenue, in November 2007. Like the surrounding buildings—many of which were constructed in the period of tremendous architectural innovation that followed the Chicago fire—this building is forward-looking in its design and use of materials, while maintaining respect for its important setting. The Spertus building has won numerous architectural awards including honors from the Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Chicago Architecture Foundation, and the Commission on Chicago Landmarks. And it isn’t just architectural experts who appreciate the building; in 2008, readers of the Chicago Reader voted Spertus “Best Building Built This Century.”

1 | Begin your tour in the vestibule.

Abraham’s Wagon... The Stable

In a 2012 interview Petlin discussed the uniquely Chicago roots of his work. He recalled how, while the wave of Abstract Expressionism in New York was generating worldwide attention, Chicago offered an alternative model. He explained, “In Chicago there was much more of an interest in the human form because many of the earliest of the Chicago artists in the 1950s were veterans returned from World War II who had seen some horrible things. Their art was filled with a kind of powerful energy and imagery about the destruction and the terrible costs that war inflicts on populations and civilizations.” He went on to explain that despite the vibrant art scene in Chicago, making a living from sales of art here was nearly impossible at that time. Many artists relocated to New York or Paris after art school. Petlin left for Paris on a fellowship where he reconnected with the Chicago group that had gone there, including June Leaf, Leon Golub, and Nancy Spero.

2 | Walk over to the second set of entrance doors closest to the guard. Before you enter into the lobby, look on the doorpost of the right door for a beautiful and unusual mezuzah.

Apollo Mezuzah

This mezuzah case was hand-crafted in Israel by silversmith Laura Cowan. Inspired by a film she’d seen about space exploration, Cowan began designing cases for mezuzot (plural of mezuzah) in the shapes of the moon and space shuttles. Cowan’s work came to the attention of friends of Jewish-American astronaut Gregory Chamitoff, who had been chosen to be part of the Space Shuttle Discovery crew. Chamitoff received two of Cowan’s pieces as gifts and brought both with him, even though astronauts are allowed a very limited number of personal items. To him, they represented two important elements in his life: space and the Jewish faith.

A mezuzah is a parchment on which verses from the Torah have been inscribed. (The word is also sometimes used to refer to the case that holds the parchment.) A mezuzah is a marker of Jewish identity and the fulfillment of a mitzvah or commandment. The passages on the scroll are Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. Together they create a centerpiece of Jewish prayer, the Shema which begins “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” In the following passages of Deuteronomy, God commands the Israelites to write the Shema on the doorposts of their homes and gates so they will think of the words as they leave and when they return. The earliest reference to the use of a mezuzah dates from the fourth century BCE.

Written on the back of the parchment is Shaddai, a name for God that is an acronym for Shomer d’latot Yisrael, or Guardian of the Doors of Israel. When the scroll is rolled up and placed in the case, the first letter of Shaddai, the Hebrew letter Shin, is visible. Today, it is common for the letter Shin to be written on the outside of the mezuzah case as well. This mezuzah case is an example of hiddur mitzvah, the concept of taking the time and effort to create or acquire the most beautiful ceremonial objects possible in order to enrich one’s religious observance with aesthetic and creative dimensions.
4 | Walk up the stairs or take the elevator to the 2nd floor. At the top of the stairs, you’ll see a large work of art by Ken Aptekar.

Artwork by Ken Aptekar

All of the artists on this tour note that their quest to understand their Jewish identity impacts them as artists and as contemporary citizens of the world. Ken Aptekar’s paintings examine Jewishness, masculinity, autobiography, identity, and the slippery history of art. Taking paintings from Western art history, Aptekar repaints them on wood panels and covers them with autobiographical narration.

This work, *I am seven years old*, was commissioned for Stephen and Ruth Durchslag and provided to Spertus as a long-term loan. Stephen Durchslag has an extensive collection of *haggadot* (texts that retell the Passover story of slavery and celebrate freedom) and Passover is particularly meaningful to his family.

Before creating this piece, Aptekar had a number of conversations with the Durchslags. He discovered they shared a deep connection to the ritual of the Passover seder and that they shared significant relationships with their grandparents. Choosing to focus his work on grandparents and the difficulties immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe had assimilating into American culture, Aptekar looked to find a painting that would be appropriate to the theme. Artist Isidor Kaufman’s work suited the piece perfectly and Aptekar chose Kaufman’s painting *The Son of the Miracle-Working Rabbi of Belz*.

Kaufman, who painted during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, marketed his paintings to newly affluent Viennese Jews who were anxious about losing their connection to what they considered to be “more authentic” Jewish culture. Kaufman found his portrait subjects in the poverty-stricken *shetlts* (towns) of the Russian Pale of Settlement, one of the areas of Russia where Jews were legally allowed to live through the late 19th century.

By enlarging the young boy’s head to such proportions, I hoped to suggest the monumental task so many of our ancestors in America faced trying to make it in the new world. I chose to fracture the image both into panels and various color tints to echo the fragmentation of the hybrid identity of a Jewish immigrant in the new land. — APTEKAR

Aptekar’s text explores his relationship with his grandfather and his impressions of his grandfather’s death. It says:

*I am seven years old and they won’t let me see him. Of my two Russian grandfathers named Abraham he was the one who didn’t change his name. Abraham Molodofsky, my mother’s father. Everything about him was thick: the hands, the hair, the accent. His lap was the safest place in the world; he’d smile and scoop me up and hold me there. One time, when we stopped by his bicycle store on Vernor Highway, he said, Pick out any one you want. I never thought about what he wanted, eighteen years old and leaving his hometown of Motol forever. Recently, I learned he never got over his son quitting rabbinical school and that when he had to face a small claims judge in Detroit he collapsed from a heart attack on the floor of the courthouse. They think a seven-year-old is too young to go to a funeral. I didn’t know enough to ask.*

The text ends with a reference to a section in the haggadah titled *The Four Sons*. The youngest, or fourth son, is referred to as *she’eino yode’a lish’ol* (the one who does not know how to ask a question) and the responsibility is on the leader and the others at the seder to make sure the child understands the story to the best of his capability.
A Wall of Windows

The building’s windows are patterned with ceramic dots called frits that are baked onto the glass. These—aalong with a high-performance coating for the glass and a system of internal shades—serve to control heat gain and glare as part of Spertus Institute’s commitment to environmental sustainability. This commitment is embodied in the Jewish tenets of bal tashchit (do not destroy or waste) and tikkun olam (repair of the world). Through sustainable design and energy-efficient operations, Spertus honors these concepts as well as Chicago’s green initiatives. The windows are just one of many reasons Spertus was awarded the Silver Level of the US Green Building Council’s LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). A 6,700-square-foot green roof manages storm water, absorbs air pollution, and helps keep the building cool in the summer.

The fritted windows serve another environmental purpose. Spertus, close to the shores of Lake Michigan, sits in the path of a major migratory flyway. An estimated one billion birds die annually in the United States because they fly into buildings and other manmade constructions. The frits on the glass make the interior of the building visible to birds, rather than reflecting trees or the open sky. Being able to see the inside and the patterns of the frits help birds avoid the building, minimizing bird strikes.

If you step back a few feet from the windows, you’ll notice that the dots become less visible and the view outside more clear.

Paintings by Nicole Gordon

Chicago-based artist Nicole Gordon is known for anachronistic and whimsical paintings that often combine encaustic or “hot wax painting” with oil paints. Her love of vibrant colors, mixed media, and multiple textures can be seen in these two works. She often says her images are “meant to be beautiful and uncomfortable at the same time.”

The two works on view here, A Good Place to Begin and The Inward Journey 1, were created by Gordon in 2000 of oil paint and beeswax on canvas. A Good Place to Begin depicts a faceless girl in a floral print red dress who stands slightly left of center. Notice the heavy texture of the painting and how the girl is surrounded by an arrangement of blackened circles overlaid on a background of grass and sky. In The Inward Journey 1, the outline of a girl appears on an abstract background of color, shapes, and mosaic-like texture. Her shadow falls toward the bottom right corner. Notice the extensive use of dripped, running paint.

Works by Yaacov Agam

Israeli artist Yaacov Agam has been praised for introducing the notion of time and movement in art. His pioneering work in optic and kinetic art began with his 1951 Paris exhibition, Paintings In Movement, a show that shocked spectators because the “paintings” were not limited to two dimensions.

Born to a rabbi in Rishon LeZion in 1928, the teenage Agam broke away from his small town and the orthodoxy of his family to attend Jerusalem’s Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design. There he worked under the tutelage of Mordechai Ardon, a former student of the Weimar Bauhaus.

Since Agam’s artistic debut and later designation as the “father of kinetic art,” his work has been shown in major exhibitions at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and the Art Institute of Chicago. His musical fountains can be found in Tel Aviv’s Dizengoff Square and Paris’ La Defense Esplanade. Because he was a close friend of Herman Spertus, Spertus Institute holds a sizable collection of works by Agam.

Shown here: Artist Yaacov Agam in 2015 signing his work Complex Vision outside of the Callahan Eye Hospital in Birmingham, Alabama. (Photo by Mark Almond for al.com)

Take the elevator to the 8th floor.
Painting by Peter Freudenthal

Abstract artists consider form and color their visual language just as composers use music to convey their ideas. The subject matter may or may not be immediately recognizable, as abstract artists tend to emphasize mood and impressions over recognizable objects.

Peter Freudenthal’s work is defined as geometric abstraction as he works primarily with geometric forms. Geometric abstraction has been used by artists in many cultures throughout history. Early Jewish and Islamic artists, concerned about the worship of images, often used geometric forms as decorative patterns and art. Early Islamic art in particular has been cited as one of the primary influences on the twentieth-century western geometric abstraction movement.

Freudenthal spent his early years painting portraits and landscapes until he met his mentor, the artist Olle Baertling, and began to change his approach to the more geometrical style. In 1962, Freudenthal worked in Wadi-Halfa as an archaeologist and, inspired by Sudanese architecture he found there, created his first abstract paintings. Although Baertling advised Freudenthal not to create art on Jewish themes, Freudenthal, believing that art was a spiritual expression, instead went out of his way to create art inspired by Jewish history and culture. Spertus has 24 works of art donated by Freudenthal. Mount Moriah, for which this artwork is named, has acquired an aura of sanctity and has been associated with many biblical stories, including Abraham’s binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), King David’s altar to God (2 Samuel 24), and Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 8:6-9). Some say the mountain may have played a sacred role even earlier as the home of the Canaanite god El Elyon.

Notice the large rectangular forms that crowd the canvas, almost obstructing the view of the small red diamond at the top. Freudenthal’s title Towards Moriah could refer to many ideas. Here are a few to contemplate:

- a geographic location that is difficult to reach
- the difficulties in trying to understand our own history
- the stumbling blocks that make it difficult to connect with God in modern times

My intention was to show the old Abraham, the right hand part of the composition with its darker warm colors in contrast to the young boy Isaac in the left lower part with its brighter younger colors. Both forms are striving towards the red square in the distance. Abraham is tilted to the right, old and tired, Isaac is young and bright and looking forward to the goal he is not aware of. But your interpretation is as valid as mine. We are all individuals and see things according to our own personalities. —FREUDENTHAL

During or After Your Visit

Explore Treasures of our World-Class Collection From Your Computer, Tablet, or Phone at collection.spertus.edu

To learn more about art at Spertus Institute, check out our Collection Highlights website. There you will find detailed descriptions, engaging multimedia clips, and resources for further study. To limit your search to art currently on display check the box labeled Currently On View.

We hope that you will return to Spertus to take advantage of programs, exhibits, and classes that explore facets of the Jewish experience. If you are interested in learning more about Spertus or would like to receive information about upcoming programs, visit spertus.edu and sign up to receive emails or our calendars of events.