



A Landmark Synagogue Story **MUSEUM AT ELDRIDGE STREET**

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**MUSEUM AT ELDRIDGE STREET COMMISSIONS  
ARTIST KIKI SMITH AND ARCHITECT DEBORAH GANS  
TO CREATE NEW, MONUMENTAL EAST WINDOW FOR  
1887 ELDRIDGE STREET SYNAGOGUE**

*21<sup>st</sup> century artwork will restore original interior atmosphere  
of this 19th century National Historic Landmark*

**New York, November 19, 2009**—The Museum at Eldridge Street has commissioned artist Kiki Smith and architect Deborah Gans to create a new monumental east window for the 1887 Eldridge Street Synagogue, a magnificent National Historic Landmark located on New York’s Lower East Side. The new window will parallel the original in its stained-glass medium, replacing a clear tablet-shaped glass-block design that was introduced in 1944-45 after the original window was irreparably damaged and removed. The commission marks the final significant component of the Museum’s 20-year restoration. The Museum at Eldridge Street will unveil the permanent, stained-glass artwork in the late spring of 2010.

The Eldridge Street Synagogue is the first great house of worship built by Eastern European Jews in America. The synagogue’s exuberant neo-Moorish interior has a soaring 50-foot ceiling, 68 luminous stained-glass windows, and intricately faux-painted and stenciled walls and ceilings — a sharp contrast to the dark tenements and sweatshops in which most of its 19<sup>th</sup>-century congregants lived and worked. By introducing a 21<sup>st</sup>-century design that pays tribute to the original 19<sup>th</sup>-century stained glass, the Museum’s commission will add to the architectural grandeur that continues to embody the aspirations and “American dreams” of the synagogue’s early immigrant founders.

Bonnie Dimun, Executive Director of the Museum at Eldridge Street comments: “It was imperative that with this commission we return a sense of grandeur to the interior. After a long and considered selection process, we chose Kiki Smith and Deborah Gans’ design — not just for its beauty but because it was so respectful of what was already there. Smith and Gans intuitively created a design that is both strikingly contemporary but surprisingly in keeping with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century interior — its history, aesthetics, and enduring spiritual quality. Here old world embraces new. By establishing that continuum we ensure that this historic structure continues to be vital and relevant for new generations.”

## **The Design**

The site of the commissioned window is the focal point of the sanctuary. It is 16 feet in diameter and occupies nearly the entire top half of the building's eastern wall. Smith and Gans believed that the synagogue's high-Victorian interior had an abundance of visual elements and did not need a new addition to its visual vocabulary. Instead, they chose to extend the use of the painted decoration that featured prominently on the east wall and in the domes of the sanctuary interior. The design, a galaxy of golden stars against an undulating blue firmament, recreates in stained-glass the blue and gold star pattern painted on the walls immediately surrounding the new window.

For Smith and Gans the east window provides an opportunity to collaborate and unite their backgrounds in art and architecture. The two spent time reflecting on the space from the women's gallery and created a design that aligns with both their contemporary oeuvre and the synagogue's preexisting interior. Smith, whose own spiritual awareness led her to feel an immediate connection with the space, was excited by "the unique opportunity to work within this historic environment." Gans, similarly, was intrigued by the project and the possibility to bring together her interests in architecture, art, and history.

According to Smith and Gans' artist statement, "The new stained-glass window will use the features and motifs of the existing synagogue in a new way so that the mind and eye reflects back on the interior space as they are drawn into the space of the window. The wall pattern of five pointed gold stars against a blue sky will be extended across the window. The ribs of the window will radiate from a Star of David at the center. In pattern and shape, this window will be similar to the existing ceiling domes of the synagogue and also the trompe-l'oeil windows to either side of the arc. The current technology of flash glass makes it possible to etch the yellow stars into a blue field without any outline or leading so that they will appear as more intense sources of light within the glow of the window. The translation of the traditional motif of the synagogue with this material and structure will intensify the floating qualities of the synagogue space and surfaces."

## **Selection Process**

With no visual documentation of the original glass window, the Museum at Eldridge Street proceeded with an extensive review process. The Museum's evaluation engaged an illustrious committee of leading figures from the art, architectural and preservation communities.

## **President of the Public Art Fund, Susan Freedman comments on the selection process:**

"Kiki Smith and Deborah Gans were an inspired choice for the East Window at the Museum at Eldridge Street. Kiki is one of the most important visual artists working today and her poetic and powerful work beautifully compliments the historic setting in a transcendent way. This fantastic collaboration with architect Deborah Gans is a jewel in the collection of sacred and contemporary art in New York City."

Once it was determined that a new commission merging the synagogue's story of past and present would offer a respectful solution to the irreplaceable original, the Museum at Eldridge Street reached out to artists of diverse backgrounds and experiences, and included established artists of international stature, emerging contemporary artist, artists working with Jewish themes, and those who specialized in stained glass. After an extensive and rigorous review, the Kiki Smith-Deborah Gans proposal was selected by the Museum's full board for its strong aesthetics and sensitive response to the cultural, historic, and architectural identity of the Eldridge Street Synagogue as a National Historic Landmark.

## **A Preservation Challenge**

In addressing the East Window, the Museum at Eldridge Street was charged with a preservation challenge: How do you restore an element that no longer exists and for which there is no documentation? Early on it was determined that it would be inappropriate to create an imitation of a rose window and present it as original to the space when no visual documentation existed to corroborate such a move.

After an extended decision-making process, the Museum opted for a new commission which would return an inspiring interior and would offer a respectful solution to the irreplaceable original. It was also determined that the glass blocks would be carefully removed and reused to create a Memory Wall in the building's lower level Family History Center. Through this, the Museum could preserve the part of history exemplified by the glass blocks.

New York City Landmarks Commissioner Bob Tierney comments, "With the installation of Kiki Smith and Deborah Gans' extraordinary window in this sacred landmark, Eldridge Street's evolution now spans three generations — built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, preserved in the 20<sup>th</sup>, and renewed in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Moreover, the window represents a solution to a classic preservation dilemma: restoring an element that no longer exists and for which there is no documentation."

### **Museum at Eldridge Street's Cultural Programming**

In conjunction with the launch of the new permanent east window design, the Museum at Eldridge Street will present a dynamic program of cultural and educational events. Viewers will be able to explore the new window and its landmark site and view other Museum highlights, including our Limud Center, with award-winning interactive exhibits on the history of the Lower East Side and Jewish practices; the Gural-Rabinowitz Family History Center; and the Lise and Jeffrey Wilks Gallery with an exhibit on the synagogue restoration. The Museum will also introduce a new architectural tour, offered daily at 1 pm, in conjunction with the launch of the Kiki Smith-Deborah Gans commission. The tour will place Eldridge Street within the context of important architectural and preservation projects around the country and is being developed in partnership with the preservation programs of Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania and Pratt Institute.

### **Funding for the East Window Commission**

The Museum at Eldridge Street East Window commission is being funded, in part, by the David Berg Foundation, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

### **About the Artist and Architect**

Kiki Smith is a leading figure among artists addressing philosophical, social, and spiritual aspects of human nature. Since 1982, Smith's work has been the subject of nearly 150 solo exhibitions worldwide, and she has participated in hundreds of significant group shows, including the Whitney Biennial (1991, 1993, 2002) and Venice Biennale (1993, 1999, 2005). Kiki Smith has received numerous accolades throughout her career, and her work is included in forty prestigious public institutions around the world. In 2005, The Walker Art Center organized *Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980–2005*, a major retrospective that traveled to four additional venues in the United States and Mexico. This February, The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum will present a major installation entitled *Kiki Smith: Sojourn*, which is part of the traveling exhibitions *Her Home* and *Her Memory*. The exhibition will remain on view through September 12, 2010. Kiki Smith has been represented by PaceWildenstein since 1994, and her new stained glass work will be the subject of her next exhibition at the gallery (on view at 545 West 22<sup>nd</sup> Street from March 26 through May 1, 2010).

Deborah Gans is the Principal of Gans studio. Their design work has been widely exhibited, including presentations at IFA Paris, RIBA London, The Architectural League of New York,

the Guggenheim Museum and the United States Pavilion of the Venice Biennial (2008). Gans studio's executed works of industrial design and architecture include many private commissions and a series of projects that explore forms of social engagement, ranging in scale from a patented school desk for the New York City School Construction Authority (in the permanent collection of the New York Historical Society), to community based planning for New Orleans and temporary housing for the homeless. Deborah Gans has taught at Columbia and Yale Universities and is a professor of architecture at Pratt Institute. Among her publications are *The Organic Approach* and *Extreme Sites*.

### **Museum at Eldridge Street**

Based in the 1887 National Historic Landmark Eldridge Street Synagogue, the Museum at Eldridge Street presents the culture, history, and traditions of the great wave of Jewish immigrants to the Lower East Side, drawing parallels with the diverse cultural communities that have settled in America. The 120-year-old landmark, now nestled in the current heart of New York City's Chinatown, continues both as an active place of worship, but also as a vital cultural and educational center on Jewish life in America and the broad immigrant experience. Most recently, the building has grown in recognition as the subject of a 20-year, \$18.5 million restoration, spearheaded and implemented by the Museum at Eldridge Street. The Museum has also been acknowledged for its stellar tours, exhibits, and public and educational programs which tell the story of the generations that contributed new religious and communal customs to the American context of diverse cultural traditions. The Museum welcomes thousands of visitors annually, of all cultural backgrounds, and from around the city, nation and world. The award-winning restoration was completed in December 2007 with the exception of the building's pivotal East Window.

### **Restoration Awards**

The Museum at Eldridge Street restoration has received a score of preservation awards including the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2008 Preservation Honor Award, Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America Restoration Award, Municipal Art Society's Masterwork Award for New York City's Best Restoration Project, New York Landmarks Conservancy Lucy G. Moses Preservation Award, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Project Achievement Award, Preservation League of New York's Restoration Award, and American Association of Museums' 2008 Gold MUSE Award for Interactive installation. In 2008 the Eldridge Street Synagogue was included in *New York Magazine's* list of "2008 Top Ten Designs" and named one of "Architecture's Ten Best of 2008" by *The New Yorker*. The installation of the east widow will mark the last significant component of the Museum's acclaimed restoration.

### **Museum Hours & Information**

The Museum at Eldridge Street is open Sunday–Thursday from 10 am to 5 pm. Guided tours are offered every half hour until 4 pm. Admission is \$10 for adults; \$8 for students and seniors, and \$6 for children and students 5–18. Children under 5 are admitted for free. Preservation Detectives Family Tour ever Sunday at 1pm. Concerts, lectures, festivals and school programs are offered throughout the year. More information at [www.eldridgestreet.org](http://www.eldridgestreet.org)

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