

Jewish Museum Vienna

Memory is one of the keywords of every culture. Where memory is missing there is no historical consciousness. So that memory is not lost places where it can be institutionalised such as museums, memorials or archives are created.

The guided tour treats two major places of memory of the history of the Austrian Jews and shows two different ways of commemoration. On one side there is the Memorial for the 65.000 Austrian Jewish victims of the Shoah from the British artist Rachel Whiteread, on the other the installation Remembrance/Renewal from the American artist Nancy Spero.

Meeting point: Memorial on Judenplatz, Mai 6th, 10 a.m.

Duration: 1h

Installation of Memory by Nancy Spero in the Jewish Museum Vienna

Remembrance/Renewal by Nancy Spero consists of pictures and texts relating to Vienna's Jewish history and religious life, stamped on the walls in the form of block prints. The fresco is in the central area of the Jewish Museum and runs up through the entire height of the building. The stamps can be seen from the galleries in the first and second floor. Depending on where one is standing, one will see different elements: persons, objects or past events. In the same way that memory is never complete, the fresco-like recollections on the white wall are also fragmentary. Nancy Spero herself hoped with this work to "bring memories to life".

Nancy Spero was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1926. In the late 1940s she studied art in Chicago. Her style evolved initially in a figurative, expressive form, with a dark, existential note, influenced by a five-year stay in Paris. On her return to the USA in the mid-1960s her artistic expression took on a new form. Shocked by the political climate and the Vietnam war, she became involved in the burgeoning civil rights movement, addressed social issues and became a protagonist of the feminist art scene in New York. Since the 1970s women of different eras have been the dominant theme in her work. In 1978 she developed a stamp technique that she has employed ever since. As a basis she uses photographs, which she sometimes modifies. During the 1980s she started to incorporate her figures directly in their architectural surroundings, using her stamp technique. The fresco on the white walls of the Jewish Museum in Vienna is one such project.

Spero's Jewish identity is marked by the Holocaust. In the early 1990s she completed a number of pieces dealing with the fate of Jewish women during the Nazi era. In 1993, for example, she had an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York featuring photographs of women from the Warsaw Ghetto.

In the Jewish Museum of Vienna, Remembrance/Renewal deals for the first time with the Jewish religion and spirituality.

Nancy Spero died on October 18th, 2009 in New York.

Memorial for 65.000 Austrian Jewish victims of the Shoah

In October 2000, the Museum Judenplatz was opened and the memorials for the 65,000 Austrian Jewish victims of the Shoah was unveiled. This realisation of an ideas of Simon Wiesenthal has created a unique place of memory on Judenplatz in Vienna. The memorial designed by British conceptual artist Rachel Whiteread is a hermetically sealed library turned inside out. The shelves of the library are filled with apparently innumerable copies of the same book that stands for the large numbers of victims and their histories. The contents of the books remain concealed from the viewers. The empty space behind the double doors that suggest an entrance recall the victims of Nazi annihilation. At the same time the books also refer to a Jewish tradition of entering dead persons an martyrs an a Yizkor (or memorial) book to keep alive the memory of those who have no grave, no place of mourning or memory. As it partly stands on the site of the destroyed mediaeval synagogue the memorial also functions as a symbolic memorial book for the victims, the dates of their deportations and the places of their death.