

# The Power of Jewish Women's

by Susan Weidman Schneider

**H**osting a “salon,” and participating in one, is for many of us an unrealized (and often unacknowledged) fantasy. More free-flowing than a book club, not spiritual like a rosh hodesh group, nor as democratic as the PTA, or as frontal as a lecture, the salon I envisioned featured great company, a relaxed setting, a mixture of witty repartee and serious discussion about arts and politics, with enough food and drink to keep the proceedings sufficiently lubricated. Held regularly, but never routine. Intimate, but at the same open to new people.

At every talk I've given recently, when I mention that Lilith is planning to launch salons in selected cities, the room starts to hum, then buzz. It seems that salons, with their mix of close friends and “persons of renown,” are a shared fantasy. You, too?

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It turns out that Jewish women have been the gifted creators of these magical (and powerful) gatherings for centuries. The Jewish Museum in New York has just opened the exhibition “The Power of Conversation: Jewish Women and Their Salons.” Isn't the title alone enough to pull you through the museum's doors from March 4 to July 10? “The Power of Conversation” highlights 14 women who hosted these salons, from the first Jewish salonières, Henriette Herz and Rahel Levin Varnhagen in 1780s Berlin, to the salon of Salka Viertel in 1930s Los Angeles.

On at least two evenings—April 7 and 14, when the Jewish Museum is open free—Lilith hosts real-life, real time salons at the museum. Much like the salons of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries featured in this exhibition, the Lilith salons will feature a brief reading (among them, Nessa Rapoport and Shana Penn on April 7; Francine Klagsbrun and Faye Moskowitz on April 14) followed by lively conversation. You'll be able to join in similar salons in other locations, I hope. Watch this space, visit our website for details, and sign up for Lilith's e-newsletter to find out when and where and how. Lilith magazine, independent, Jewish and frankly feminist, has been the print “salon” for Jewish women's conversations for nearly three decades, so creating live salons feels like a perfect fit.

Salons, we are told by the exhibition co-curators, Emily



# Conversation

Bilski and Emily Braun, were “private gatherings that influenced the public world of arts, music, letters, and politics.” They fostered social change, we learn, by bringing together people who otherwise might never meet. “Face-to-face conversation in the drawing room had the power to erode stereotypes and class privilege,” the curators say, giving rise to “a new dynamic of egalitarian sociability. Central to the development of modernity, salons shaped the reception of new cultural movements and advanced early feminism and Jewish assimilation.”

The salon also provided an alternative route to learning, politics and power for women, many of whom could not attend university, vote, or hold public office. The salonières took the opportunity not only to nurture the groundbreaking work of the men who participated, but also to compete with them. The domestic space of the home became a base of influence both for the women who hosted salons and for the guests who attended. For Jewish women, who had been excluded because of their gender and religion, the salon was doubly liberating. Jewish women today have far more access to the public sphere. But some of the same motivation drives those of us who want to create twenty-first-century salons: good company, lively talk, and a chance to mull over new thinking in the arts, science and social change (though the stars in this show were not all progressive—Margherita Sarfatti, for example, was Mussolini’s lover).

The salon women fostered the careers of Felix Mendelssohn, Marcel Proust, Gustav Klimt, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Greta Garbo, and others. Geneviève Straus’s Paris salon was the launching ground for the defence of Dreyfus, and Ada Levenson in London welcomed Oscar Wilde to her salon even after his arrest, and fetched him home from prison. Some of the women are familiar to us—Gertrude Stein, for one, and Rahel Varnhagen, about whom Hannah Arendt wrote a dissertation. But of several others I knew nothing. Salka Viertel, for example, came to Hollywood from Poland in 1928, had been an actress on the German stage, reinvented herself as a screenwriter specializing in screenplays for her close friend Greta Garbo, and held weekly salons in Hollywood for “actors, directors, musicians, and intellectuals—European émigrés and refugees, and Americans as well—mixing European sophistication and Hollywood glamour. After the Nazis were defeated, Viertel and many of her guests were suspected of communist sympathies, and her salon fell victim to the inquisition of the Hollywood community by the House Un-American Activities Committee.”

Who knew? ●

To find out more about Lilith events at the Jewish Museum and updates on plans for Lilith salons in other cities, please visit [www.Lilith.org](http://www.Lilith.org). For more details about the exhibition and its compelling catalog, go to [www.jewishmuseum.org](http://www.jewishmuseum.org)



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1 “Florine Stettheimer’s *Soirée* (1917-19) catches the viewer looking in through the picture window and extends an invitation to join the party. The salons held by the ‘Stetties’—Florine and her sisters Ettie and Carrie—were distinctive in post-World War I New York for their aristocratic politesse and over-the-top Dada flair.” Oil on canvas. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven

2 *Henriette Herz as Hebe*, 1778, oil on canvas, by Anna Dorothea Therbusch. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

3 Greta Garbo and Salka Viertel in the German-language version of *Anna Christie* (1931). “Seated in the women’s section of the run-down bar, Marthy [Viertel] and Christie [Garbo] regard each other warily, in a profound moment of on-screen communication that mirrored the off-screen affinity between the two actresses.” Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

4 *Portrait of Amalie Beer*, Johann Karl Kretschmar, ca. 1803, oil on canvas. Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin, Hans-und-Luise-Richter-Stiftung.

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