

EXHIBITION FEATURING NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN IMAGES OF CHINATOWN BY PHOTOJOURNALIST EMILE BOCIAN LAUNCHES ONLINE

[New York, NY] December 14, 2020 – The Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) is pleased to announce its new exhibition *An Unlikely Photojournalist: Emile Bocian in Chinatown*, presented and co-curated by MOCA and the Center for Jewish History (CJH), has launched online at <https://exhibits.cjh.org/bocian>.

This highly anticipated online exhibition explores the work of **Emile Bocian**, who became a photojournalist in the 1970s and '80s for *The China Post*, a Chinese-language daily in Manhattan's Chinatown. Bocian's images comprise MOCA's largest collection of photographs in its archive of 85,000+ historical artifacts that were nearly destroyed in the January 23, 2020 fire at 70 Mulberry Street and have since been recovered.

On **Thursday, January 28, 2021 at 4 P.M. EST**, the exhibition's co-curators **Kevin Chu**, Assistant Director of Collections at MOCA, and **Lauren Gilbert**, Senior Manager of Public Services at the Center for Jewish History, will share a behind-the-scenes look into Bocian's life, his collection, and the genesis of the exhibition. Bocian's grandniece and nephew will also be in attendance to share their memories. A registration link for the event will be sent to the public closer to the date.

In 1972, the Pagoda Theater in Chinatown hired then-Midtown press agent Bocian (1912-1990) to run a publicity campaign for the U.S. premiere of the Bruce Lee film, *Fist of Fury*. This chance encounter began Bocian's nearly two-decades-long relationship with the community that lasted for the remainder of his life.

Born in New York to Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Bocian was a self-proclaimed "expert on Chinatown." Though he was an outsider and never learned Chinese, over his long residency and photojournalistic career, Bocian and his camera became familiar fixtures on the streets of Chinatown. As a Polish Jew, he shared an immigrant's status with his neighbors. This commonality made Bocian a fitting ambassador and bridge-builder between the two communities.

"As we traverse through life, we may miss the beauty of the everyday, we may avoid the challenge of the unknown, but Bocian and his work gifted both elements back to Jewish and Chinese American communities in Chinatown, New York. His images connected people living in overlapping place," said **Nancy Yao Maasbach**, President of the Museum of Chinese in America. "This online exhibition is a natural extension of MOCA's collaboration with the Center for Jewish History, an organization whose

values align closely with ours as we continually seek new and innovative ways to build bridges between communities.”

“While many of the stories that have dominated the news in 2020 have revolved around division and mistrust, this exhibition offers a rare glimpse into how an outsider, Emile Bocian, who was Jewish, became widely accepted and ultimately gained the trust of the community in Chinatown,” said Center for Jewish History President and CEO **Bernard Michael**. “Through his images Bocian was able to capture the struggles and successes of the daily lives of the residents of the area. We are proud of our partnership with MOCA and our ability to jointly spotlight our shared histories.”

During his time in Chinatown, Bocian befriended Chinese American actress Mae Wong. She would rescue over 120,000 photographs, negatives, and contact sheets from his apartment after his death in 1990, donating them to MOCA in the mid-1990s.

Bocian’s photographs of protests, celebrations, and crime scenes, as well as storefronts and streetscapes, provide a glimpse into a vanishing New York. These images are on exhibit for the very first time, along with shots of local luminaries and Chinatown visitors like Terence Cardinal Cooke, Muhammad Ali, and even the Sesame Street character Big Bird.

“Bocian’s photographs manage to capture the frenetic energy of a growing Chinatown during a time when the community saw an influx of new immigrants from Guangdong province and Hong Kong,” said **Kevin Chu**, MOCA’s Assistant Director of Collections and co-curator of the exhibit. “While he served mainly as a silent documentarian, many longtime Chinatown residents recall seeing him with his iconic bowties around the neighborhood.”

“This exhibit is a fascinating look into an under-documented period in Chinatown’s history. It is also a nostalgia trip for those of us who were alive at the time, and an eye-opening glimpse into the near past for those who weren’t, allowing a peek into NYC in the era of pay phones, hula hoops, mom and pop shops, and some interesting fashion choices,” said **Lauren Gilbert**, Senior Manager for Public Services at CJH and co-curator of the exhibit.

The unique partnership between CJH and MOCA reaches beyond this shared exhibit. In 2019, the two organizations were jointly awarded a grant from the **Council on Library and Information Resources** for a three-year project to enable both museums to digitize and showcase understudied intersections of the Jewish and Chinese immigrant and refugee experience in NYC. It was out of this collaboration that the idea for this exhibition was born.

The online launch of this exhibition is MOCA’s latest successful pivot to providing its curatorial, collections, and educational content via digital, online and social media platforms. Since the onset of the global coronavirus pandemic in mid-March 2020 that forced museums across the U.S. to temporarily shutter their physical operations, MOCA has been offering live-streamed tours of its



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exhibitions, public programs, family festivals and educational workshops, and masterclasses to thousands of virtual attendees.

This year, MOCA also has been named one of 20 “**America’s Cultural Treasures**” through an extraordinary initiative led by the **Ford Foundation** in partnership with other leading U.S. foundations and philanthropists, and has been awarded a transformative grant of \$3 million to provide much-needed support to ensure the continued sustainability of MOCA as a significant national anchor for artistic and cultural diversity in America.

On January 23, 2020, a devastating fire consumed the Chinatown building housing MOCA’s archive along with a host of other cultural and community organizations. The preliminary batch of Bocian’s photographs and artifacts chosen for this exhibition had been brought to CJH one week before the fire, sparing this small selection from potential ruin. More than 85,000 items were salvaged from the fire-torn building and are now undergoing conservation at **The MOCA Workshop**, the Museum’s newly opened temporary Collections and Research Center at 3 Howard Street, one block from the Museum’s main space at 215 Centre Street.

This exhibition has been made possible in part by The David Berg Foundation’s creation and support of The David Berg Rare Book Room, a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the Human Endeavor, public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and a Humanities New York CARES grant.

For media inquiries, email press@mocanyc.org.

Browse the Center for Jewish History’s collection of unique gifts inspired by the exhibition, *Emile Bocian: An Unlikely Photojournalist*, and shop online at <https://exhibitionsalj.wixsite.com/bocian/shop>

Email oneworld@mocanyc.org to submit a story, images, videos or text to the **MOCA OneWorld COVID-19 special collection** documenting stories of Chinese Americans and the Chinese diaspora resisting coronavirus-fueled hate with incredible acts of compassion, generosity, and creative and artistic expression.

Stay up to date at MOCA’s website www.mocanyc.org or [sign up](#) for MOCA’s monthly e-newsletter.

Follow MOCA on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok at @mocanyc; and WeChat at MOCANYC_USA.

About the Center for Jewish History

The Center for Jewish History illuminates Jewish history through archival preservation, public engagement, and digital access to the largest archive for the Jewish experience in the world outside Israel. The collections of the Center’s five in-house partner organizations – the American Jewish Historical Society, American Sephardi Federation, Leo Baeck Institute, Yeshiva University Museum, and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research – comprise over five miles of archival documents in dozens of

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languages and alphabet systems, over 500,000 volumes of books, 6 million digital items, and thousands of artworks, ritual objects, textiles, and recordings, all spanning 5,000 years. The Center opens these collections to the public and activates the stories they hold. www.cjh.org

About the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA)

The Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) aims to engage audiences in an ongoing and historical dialogue, in which people of all backgrounds are able to see American history through a critical perspective, to reflect on their own experiences, and to make meaningful connections between: the past and the present, the global and the local, themselves and others.

Hours

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, MOCA's main museum space at 215 Centre Street is temporarily closed until further notice.

The MOCA Workshop: Collections and Research Center

The MOCA Workshop is the Museum's new Collections and Research Center, which was previously located at 70 Mulberry Street. Nine months after a devastating five-alarm fire at 70 Mulberry Street in January 2020, MOCA has opened a new home for its extensive archive of over 85,000 artifacts that document the Chinese experience in America. Designed by the multi-disciplinary concept and design firm **Atelier Cho Thompson** and located at 3 Howard Street one block away from the Museum, The MOCA Workshop is a publicly accessible research space that invites hands-on engagement with MOCA's Collections.

The MOCA Workshop's storefront space serves as a reading room featuring the Museum's extensive library of Chinese and Asian American history and literature. The remainder of the ground floor and The MOCA Workshop's second floor house MOCA's Collections and institutional archives, which were retrieved from 70 Mulberry Street after the fire. Additionally, The MOCA Workshop is equipped with a triage space to conserve materials, a digitization station, and an oral history recording station.

Hours

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, The MOCA Workshop at 3 Howard Street is currently open by appointment only. Please contact info@mocanyc.org to make an appointment.