

ADAM ROLSTON

American, born Los Angeles, CA, 1962

Untitled (Goodman's Egg and Onion Matzos), ca. 1993

Acrylic on canvas, 24 3/16 x 24 3/16 inches

Gift of Norman L. Kleeblatt, 2019.16

In the early 1990s, Adam Rolston began painting matzo boxes in a bold, bright style that references iconic works of Pop Art, such as Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes and Campbell's soup cans. While Rolston faithfully copies the simple graphic design of a Goodman's matzo box, he enlarges it and emphasizes the brushstrokes. Rolston translates the familiar box of flatbread mass-produced by such immigrant-founded companies as Goodman's, Streits, and Manischewitz in a way that suggests complex questions about place, history, and identity.

A Jewish ritual food closely tied to the observance of Passover, matzo is a symbol of freedom. It is eaten at the holiday and serves to remind Jews of the unleavened bread their ancestors ate while fleeing slavery in Egypt. Every spring Jews throughout the world participate in rituals and food preparation centered on matzo in order to reflect on the idea of freedom. By nature, matzo is a sign of observing tradition and participating in a practice connected to several thousand years of Jewish history.

While Rolston's painting refers to the history recalled each year at the Passover Seder, a ceremonial meal that is part of the holiday, he has enlarged the box and emphasized its loud colors and commercial design in order to draw attention to its other status as a commodity. In focusing on the box alone, Rolston's painting has us reflect on the role of religion in late twentieth-century American life, where Judaism may be practiced not only through prayer, ritual, and reflection, but by purchasing a product. The matzo box becomes an ambiguous expression of Jewish identity or possibly assimilation. It also speaks to nostalgia; through the dated design one connects to the past and is reminded of the Jewish diaspora—not only Jews who were slaves in Egypt thousands of years ago, but European Jews who came to the United States for refuge and a better life in the early twentieth century. In the artist's words, "The paintings are at once generic documentary, personal history, and an unpacking of consumer identity."

—Corinne Granof
Academic Curator