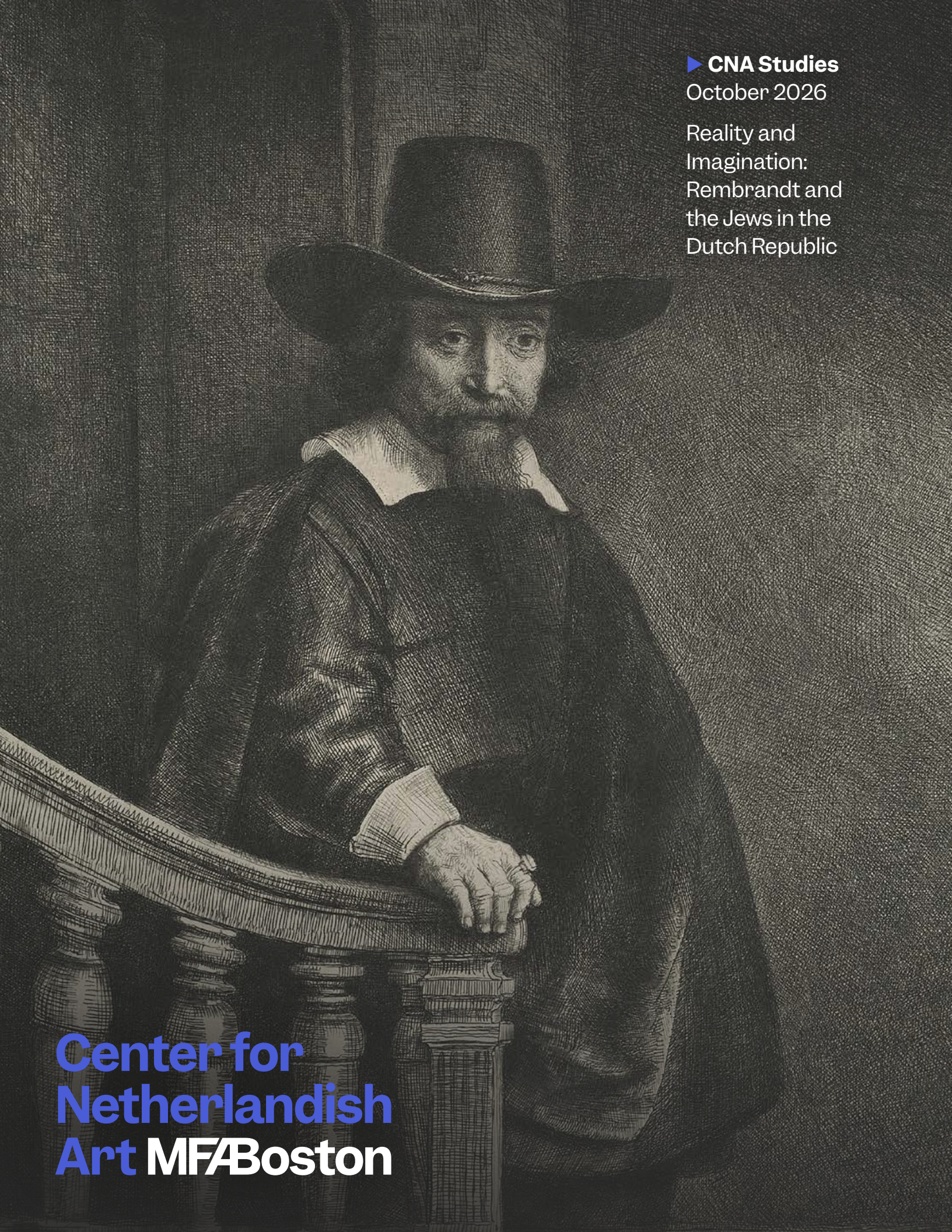




► **CNA Studies**

October 2026

Reality and
Imagination:
Rembrandt and
the Jews in the
Dutch Republic

**Center for
Netherlandish
Art MFA Boston**

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Reality and Imagination: Rembrandt and the Jews in the Dutch Republic

► **Editors**

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► **Credits**

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The Founders of the Center for Netherlandish Art
are Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo and Susan and
Matthew Weatherbie.

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► About This Publication

The “Reality and Imagination: Rembrandt and the Jews in the Dutch Republic” exhibition and this publication are part of the Center for Netherlandish Art’s Innovation Gallery program, which provides a platform to academic partners to share cutting-edge scholarship with broad audiences in Boston. Future museum professionals, professors, and art historians, guided by the expertise of MFA staff, learn the practical and scholarly skills required to create exhibitions and work in cultural institutions. In the process, the MFA shares and promotes its collection and welcomes fresh perspectives.

This fifth exhibition in the program was a collaboration with graduate and undergraduate students in Boston University’s Department of the History of Art and Architecture: Sophie Cassarino, Romina Fernández Riviello, Megan Hinckley, Michelle Kelley, Hailey Manlowe, Jailei Maas, Hannah McIsaac, Bailey Pekar, Avrie Slocumb, Caroline Spurr, Ella Strayer, Jenna Wendler, and Scarlett Wills. Cocurators Simona Di Nepi, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Curator of Judaica, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Michael Zell, professor of History of Art and Architecture at BU, together with Christopher Atkins, Van Otterloo-Weatherbie Director of the Center for Netherlandish Art, led the team through a semester-long seminar taught every week in the Center for Netherlandish Art.

Hannah McIsaac served as primary editor of the essays after the seminar ended in May 2025, expertly revising and refining student papers originally written collaboratively by graduate students paired with undergraduates. Michael Zell served as secondary editor with assistance from Jenna Wendler. Because many of the papers directly engage Zell’s work on Rembrandt and the Jews, certain passages are taken from his publications “Eduard Kolloff and the Historiographic Romance of Rembrandt and the Jews” (*Simiolus*, 2001) and especially *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (University of California Press, 2002). Jenna Wendler and Nadia Avdiu meticulously sourced the illustrations and permissions.

► Acknowledgments

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► Preface by Hannah McIsaac

The last several years have seen multiple exhibitions and publications about Rembrandt and the Jews, including “The ‘Jewish’ Rembrandt: The Myth Unraveled” at the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam (2006), “Rembrandt and the New Jerusalem: Jews and Christians in Amsterdam’s Golden Age” at the Musée d’art et d’histoire du Judaïsme in Paris (2007), and the volume *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist’s Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours* (Routledge, 2024), edited by Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz, which was originally intended to accompany an exhibition at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Though each project approached the topic in different ways, they all to varying degrees aimed to interrogate the romanticized notion that Rembrandt was a “friend to the Jews,” an interpretation that was first popularized in the 19th and 20th centuries. Our examination sets aside the question of whether Rembrandt felt a special affinity for Jewish people, which is essentially unknowable; instead, we focus on the interaction of

Amsterdam’s Jews with the vibrant visual culture of the 17th-century Dutch Republic—through objects of Judaica and the works of Rembrandt and his pupils—with Jews serving as patrons, collectors, and subjects of art. Our examination of this legacy is not unique, nor is positioning Rembrandt’s biblical scenes with Jewish figures and his character studies of Jewish models alongside artifacts from Dutch-Jewish life; however, like the 2025 exhibition “The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt” at the Jewish Museum in New York and the North Carolina Museum of Art, and on view at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston from August 6, 2026, through January 18, 2027, the “Reality and Imagination: Rembrandt and the Jews in the Dutch Republic” exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, benefits from recent research into multiculturalism and ethnic diversity in Amsterdam, using an inclusive lens to tell the story of Jewish migration and resilience in the 17th century. The recent rise in antisemitism and other forms of discrimination makes the reevaluation of this subject urgent and pertinent to modern audiences.

Introduction

by Hannah McIsaac and Ella Strayer

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) lived on or in close proximity to the Sint Antoniesbreestraat for more than two decades, with one short interruption when he lived in a nearby part of Amsterdam. In the mid-17th century, the Sint Antoniesbreestraat and adjoining Vlooienburg neighborhood were associated with both the artist and the city’s growing Jewish population. By 1634, visitors referred to Sint Antoniesbreestraat as the “Jews’ Broad Street” (Jodenbreestraat).¹ A decade later, in 1645, the artist Adriaen van Nieulandt attested that he lived across from Rembrandt’s house, suggesting that it was a well-known feature of the neighborhood.²

Whereas in other parts of Western Europe, Jews were segregated in ghettos, required to wear distinguishing marks, or forced to practice their faith in secret, on the Jodenbreestraat, Jews of varying ethnicities and social classes were able to live, work, and worship in peace and security. Two distinct groups settled in this quarter: the Sephardim (Spanish and Portuguese Jews) fleeing the Inquisition in the Iberian Peninsula and Iberian-controlled territories, and the Ashkenazim (Central and Eastern Europe Jews), who, beginning in mid-century, came to Amsterdam en masse, fleeing pogroms (anti-Jewish riots).³ Sephardi Jews first settled in Amsterdam at the end of the 16th century. They had been living in Spain, Portugal, or the Iberian territories as *conversos*, suspected hidden Jews who came from families expelled or forced to convert generations earlier. Relocation to Amsterdam ultimately became a way to reclaim their Jewish religion and heritage. At the time of

Rembrandt’s move to the Breestraat, the Sephardim outnumbered the Ashkenazim nine to one; however, this dynamic was gradually shifting. As Ashkenazi Jews were increasingly dispossessed by pogroms and the Thirty Years’ War, they settled in the Dutch Republic’s urban centers—especially Amsterdam—in large numbers.⁴ By the early 1670s, the Jewish presence in Amsterdam had multiplied significantly to approximately 3,200 Sephardim and 1,800 Ashkenazim, who had become a prominent aspect of life in Vlooienburg.⁵

Despite sharing the same neighborhood, the Sephardim and Ashkenazim differed in their religious backgrounds, social class, and economic status. Whereas members of the Sephardim were former Catholics who had only recently returned to Judaism, the Ashkenazim had consistently practiced and studied the Jewish faith. The two communities operated autonomously with different languages and

rites, worshipping in separate synagogues, and with their own governing authorities. The acculturated Sephardim also took pains to distinguish themselves from the Ashkenazim, whom they considered social inferiors.⁶ Regulations severely restricted the occupations available to Jews living in Amsterdam, though many had successful careers outside the guild system. The Sephardim formed part of the city's thriving merchant economy, working in related industries like sugar refining, tobacco pressing, and the textile trade. Inventories of wealthy Sephardi homes reflect their role in international commerce and their high social standing, including items like Turkish tapestries, Chinese porcelain, and dresses made of flowered silks. Working-class Sephardim and the newly arrived Ashkenazim were more likely to be laborers, artisans, and small-scale traders, though they also worked as domestic servants in the homes of the wealthy.⁷

Jews were not the only minority religious group living in the 17th-century Dutch Republic. Though the Dutch Reformed or Calvinist Church had been the principal Christian denomination since the late 16th century, Catholics, Mennonites, and Jews were able to live peacefully due to the "freedom of conscience" guaranteed in the 1579 agreement, known as the Union of Utrecht.⁸ As a result of the 1579 agreement, residents were not required to attend Protestant services, and they could not be legally prosecuted based on their beliefs.⁹ Outside this framework of tolerance, however, individual Dutch cities guaranteed different freedoms and enforced varying levels of regulation. As a result, cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam, where Jews were allowed a certain level of self-governance, developed substantial Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities.¹⁰

Compared to the forced conversions of the Iberian Peninsula and the pogroms of Eastern and Central Europe, the Dutch Republic was a haven for the Jewish people; however, antisemitic sentiment was still frequently reflected in contemporary discourse. Even in Dutch cities where Jews and Christian minorities were allowed to practice their faith, this tolerance relied on a culture of privacy, with worship taking place in domestic residences among members of the same extended family. Historian Benjamin Kaplan estimates that there were at least 26 *schuilkerken* (concealed churches used for Catholic and Mennonite worship) located in

Amsterdam by the year 1700.¹¹ When the Sephardim first settled in Amsterdam at the end of the 16th century, they also worshipped discretely. Their early synagogues were located in converted warehouses along the Houtgracht canal, indistinct and inconspicuous to an outside observer.¹² This would soon change, however, as synagogues became more and more conspicuous. By contrast, Catholics, who were always suspected by Protestant authorities, were still required to hide their communal worship, gathering in domestic or other buildings.

► Synagogue Exteriors and Public Perception

During Rembrandt's lifetime, the changing population of the Breestraat shaped the design and appearance of the surrounding urban landscape. While the city's Jewish population had originally practiced privately—their houses of worship indistinguishable from other industrial and commercial buildings on the same street—by 1675, the Portuguese and High German synagogues on the Houtgracht had become recognizable features of the neighborhood. Permission for a dedicated German Jewish synagogue was granted in 1670, reflecting the growing size and increasing status of the city's Ashkenazi population.¹³ A new Portuguese Jewish synagogue, known as the Esnoga, was built around the same time and was ultimately unveiled in 1675.¹⁴ In 1671, just two years after Rembrandt's death, the Englishman John Walker traveled to Amsterdam and wrote, "This town affords [the foreign visitor] a relish of all religions amongst which is a famous synagogue."¹⁵ At the time of Walker's visit, both major synagogues were under construction.

An 18th-century print by Abraham Rademaker (Fig. I-1) shows the open space between the two synagogues. Both the Portuguese synagogue, on the left, and the High German synagogue, on the right, visually dominate the immediate area. The central position of the two imposing buildings demonstrates the sense of security and confidence felt by Jewish residents in Amsterdam at large.¹⁶ The prominence of this site is further emphasized through the sheer number of people present. Groups travel in carriages or on horseback, men and women on the street stop to overlook the canal, and children chase after running dogs—all contributing to the sense that we are overlooking a bustling urban space. While some visitors stop to admire the surrounding architecture,



Figure I-1. Abraham Rademaker, *View of the Portuguese and High German Synagogues in Amsterdam*, about 1752–1775, etching, Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Collectie Atlas Dreesmann.

others are shown actively engaged in their work, hauling livestock or carrying long, wooden beams. These figures, with their lack of distinguishing characteristics, could be Jews, Dutch Christians, or others, demonstrating the variety of interactions that took place in Rembrandt's neighborhood.

Because Jews were banned from most guilds and professions, Sephardi and Ashkenazi community leaders turned to a Christian builder. Both the Esnoga and the High German synagogue were constructed by the mason Elias Bouman, using designs from Amsterdam city planner and architect Daniël Stalpaert.¹⁷ Despite being a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, Bouman worked on a variety of projects for members of Amsterdam's Jewish communities, constructing residences for the Sephardim in addition to the two synagogues.¹⁸ Bouman's proposal for the Esnoga was selected from a larger body of submissions, revealing that the building committee, which was comprised of influential members of the Sephardi congregation, had the final say in the design of the building.¹⁹ The facade, with its proportional arrangement and

unadorned brick pilasters, was characteristic of the Protestant Baroque style, which was popular with wealthy Amsterdam patrons at the time of the building's construction.²⁰ Its grandeur was conveyed through its monumental scale rather than through exterior decoration with the synagogue, as Saskia Coenen Snyder writes, "towering over the surrounding buildings, dominating the Jewish neighborhood from almost every angle."²¹ The building presented the city's Sephardi population as elegant, refined, and cosmopolitan to anyone passing through the area.

Although conforming to Dutch architectural aesthetics of the 17th century, the structure remained recognizably Jewish. The slanting buttresses and tall, arched windows, which emphasize the building's height, would have also served as a conscious parallel to the model of Solomon's Temple on display nearby in the home of Jacob Jehuda Leon.²² The Hebrew inscription above the entryway, which reads "And I, in Your abundant kindness, enter Your house," also explicitly communicates the building's function as a place of Jewish worship.²³

► Synagogue Interiors and the Christian Audience

Claude Du Bosc's hand-colored etching and engraving (Fig. I-2), which were copied from earlier prints by Bernard Picart and Romeyn de Hooghe, provides a glimpse into the interior of the Portuguese Jewish synagogue at its inauguration in 1675. In all three print representations, the viewer is positioned at one end of the synagogue, looking down the entire length of the building along the central aisle, separated from the side galleries by six Neoclassical pillars. This design, as stated by

Ronnie Perelis, “allows for maximum visibility—the worshiper is able to see and be seen, the service is harmoniously orchestrated and decorous just as the space is rationally organized along straight lines.”²⁴

In all three views, male congregants participating in the dedication are shown wearing hats covered by *tallitot*, or prayer shawls, as they participate in the dedication, while well-dressed men and women in the foreground watch the unveiling of the *Esnoga*. Men and women would have been separated during services, with the women assigned to the upper galleries. Many, if not all, of the foreground figures



Figure I-2. Claude Du Bosc, *Dedication of the Portuguese Jews Synagogue in Amsterdam*, 1733–1738, etching and engraving, hand colored, gift of Rabbi Howard A. Berman, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

are probably visitors—either Christian residents of Amsterdam or the Republic, or travelers from abroad. As Michael Zell observes: “Two women at the far left look directly out at the viewer, drawing us in, while one of their escorts gestures towards the interior as if to invite us to watch.”²⁵ Accounts from foreigners like John Walker, mentioned earlier, demonstrate that while the architecture of the synagogue could be a draw for guests, others if not most were primarily interested in the unfamiliar aspects of Jewish religious rituals.

In the bottom left corner of the image, one of the congregants leans over the barricade in conversation with a visitor who has turned to face him. Their body language, with the listener bowing his head and the Sephardi celebrant gesturing with one hand, suggests that the visitors are being asked not to disturb the service.²⁶ This small exchange represents how the spectators shaped the behavior of congregants. Rabbis encouraged conduct that would be seen as respectable and civilized, restricting talking during the service and the banging of hammers during Purim.²⁷ Although Jewish residents of Amsterdam are known to have attended Christian services as visitors, the *mahamad*, or the Sephardi governing body, eventually advised against the practice. Different and contrary definitions of respectful behavior sometimes led to conflict between the two groups, with, in one instance, a fight breaking out when Jewish visitors refused to remove their hats when entering the church.²⁸ As seen in Du Bosc’s print, wearing head coverings—either hats, prayer shawls, or both—was customary within the synagogue as a sign of respect. But the Sephardi authorities encouraged Christian visitors to their services, hoping that these guests would, in the words of Yosef Kaplan, “leave with a favourable impression of the dignified atmosphere which they sought to maintain in their sanctuary.”²⁹

Positioned at the front of the synagogue, with the spectators guiding the viewer’s access into the scene, we assume the role of external audience member. This dynamic is partially informed by the original function of the prints. Picart’s version of the print was used as an illustration in the first volume of *Ceremonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (Religious Ceremonies and Customs of all the People of the World), published

in 1723, and Du Bosc’s hand-colored print was extracted from the English edition of 1733. The book included the rituals of Amsterdam’s Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews alongside the religious customs of far-removed places like China and the Americas.³⁰ Picart takes an ethnographic approach to these images, assuming that these practices are unfamiliar and thus need to be carefully cataloged and described. However, representations of the synagogue interior did not only appeal to a curious Christian audience. In 1667, the Sephardi merchant David de Abraham Cardozo (d. 1668) owned one of the three synagogue paintings created by Dutch artist Emanuel de Witte. The painting held enough emotional value for Cardozo that it was explicitly mentioned in his will, with instructions that it be passed down to a dear friend.³¹

► Personal Success

Portrait prints of notable Sephardi sitters demonstrate how personal success and public visibility were achieved by members of Amsterdam’s Sephardi community and the important role played by printmaking in this phenomenon. Ephraim Bueno, who was depicted by Rembrandt in an etching and a preliminary oil sketch in 1647 (Figs. I-3 and I-4), as well as by his contemporary Jan Lievens (1607–1674) in a print of about 1650 (Fig. I-5), was a renowned physician who was allowed to practice despite regulations restricting Jews from competing with Christians in most professions and crafts. Medicine was one of the few practices open to Jews; between 1655 and 1685, 11 Sephardim from Amsterdam received doctorates in medicine from the University of Leiden.³² The existence of multiple prints and one painting documenting Bueno’s likeness indicate just how visible he was within the city and beyond. Both images are laudatory, acknowledging his achievements in the medical field. Lievens’s print has a written attestation to his skills as a doctor, comparing him to Avenzoar, a famous medieval surgeon and physician from Bueno’s native Andalusia.³³

Although Jews were excluded from Amsterdam’s Guild of St. Luke (the painters’ and printmakers’ guild), some exceptions were allowed. Shalom Italia (about 1619–1655) became an accomplished and recognized printmaker after arriving in the city from Italy in 1641.³⁴ With his background as son of a print publisher in Mantua, Italia built a career



Figure I-3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Ephraim Bueno (Bonus), Jewish Physician*, 1647, etching, drypoint, and engraving, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure I-4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Ephraim Bueno (Bonus)*, 1647, oil on panel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure I-5. Jan Lievens, Dr. Ephraim Bonus (Bueno), about 1640–1650, etching, bequest of Washington Irving Jenkins, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

working for Jewish patrons and specializing in Jewish objects—for example, creating illustrations for parchment Esther scrolls, or *Megillot*, read during the Jewish holiday of Purim, and designs for marriage contracts, or *ketubot* (see Simona Di Nepi's chapter in this publication for further information). He also engraved portraits of two Sephardi rabbis: Jacob Jehuda Leon in 1641, and again in around 1640 to 1649 (Fig. I-6) and Menasseh ben Israel in 1642 (Fig. I-7), which the sitters commissioned to promote their intellectual projects and reputations within and beyond the Jewish community. Leon used the image to advertise his model of Solomon's Temple, both when it was on display in his home in the Dutch Republic and when he brought it abroad to England.³⁵ The scroll with Hebrew text at the bottom of the print alludes to both the physical model and Leon's popular and widely circulated description of the building.³⁶ Menasseh used his printed image "as a calling card for his contacts," contributing personally in the print's wide-ranging distribution.³⁷ An etched portrait of a bearded man by Rembrandt has also traditionally been identified as Menasseh Ben Israel, though the resemblance with the portrait by Italia is not especially compelling. Michael Zell explores Rembrandt's relationship with the rabbi in another chapter of this publication.

The portrait prints show Bueno, Menasseh, and others in attire consistent with Dutch fashion, which accurately reflects how prosperous Sephardim dressed in daily life. All the prints also include an explanatory text or, in the case of Rembrandt's etching, a reserved space at the bottom of the print where an inscription could be added at a later date,

though no surviving impression includes one. This implies that the identity of the sitter was important, either adding value to the image or naming the subject for a potentially unfamiliar audience. Whereas painted portraits conveyed a certain level of status, due to the cost associated with their completion, portrait prints were inherently reproducible and easy to circulate, making them ideal for conveying the sitter's values, accomplishments, and rank to a broad audience.³⁸ Although Italia's portraits of Leon and Menasseh include markers of their Jewish identity, the Latin inscriptions along the outer edges indicate that they were intended for an audience of Christians, as well those Jews familiar with this language of educated and religious Christian elites.³⁹

Rembrandt's prints, paintings, and architecture were shaped by the Jewish communities of Amsterdam but were frequently filtered through the lens of a Christian artist or a Christian audience. The relationship between Rembrandt's artistic imaginings and the realities of Dutch Jewish life is at the center of the "Reality and Imagination" exhibition. Impressive objects of Judaica showcase the agency and visibility of Amsterdam's Jewish residents, who transformed the Jodenbreestraat and adjoining Vlooienburg island into a dynamic site of community building and intercultural collaboration. Work by Rembrandt and his contemporaries, while sometimes relying on stereotypes or employing Ashkenazi Jews as anonymous types in biblical, especially New Testament scenes, can also illuminate the ways that Jews engaged in the Dutch art market as both patrons and collectors, further blurring the line between the real and the imagined.



Figure I-6. Shalom Italia, Portrait of Jacob Jehuda Leon, 1640–1649, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure I-7. Shalom Italia, Portrait of Menasseh ben Israel, 1642, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

- ¹ Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours* (Routledge, 2024), 63.
- ² Knotter and Schwartz, *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes*, 58.
- ³ Van Eeghen, *Over Rembrandt de schilder* (Maandblad Amstelodamum, 1986), 72.
- ⁴ Saskia Coenen Snyder, "A New Mokum: The Jewish Neighborhood in Golden Age Amsterdam," *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 28 (2007): 168.
- ⁵ Snyder, "A New Mokum," 171.
- ⁶ Bart Wallet, "Rembrandt's Other Jews," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 77.
- ⁷ Simon Schama, "A Different Jerusalem: The Jews in Rembrandt's Amsterdam," in *The Jews in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Ruth E. Levine and Susan W. Morgenstein (The Judaic Museum of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington, 1981), 7.
- ⁸ Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt's Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 17.
- ⁹ Benjamin J. Kaplan, "Fictions of Privacy: House Chapels and the Spatial Accommodation of Religious Dissent in Early Modern Europe," *The American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 1042.
- ¹⁰ Snyder, "A New Mokum," 176.
- ¹¹ Kaplan, "Fictions of Privacy," 1036.
- ¹² Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (University of California Press, 2002), 8.
- ¹³ Snyder, "A New Mokum," 171.
- ¹⁴ Snyder, "A New Mokum," 173.
- ¹⁵ C. D. van Strien, *Touring the Low Countries: Accounts of British Travellers, 1660–1720* (Amsterdam University Press, 1998), 35.
- ¹⁶ See Ronnie Perelis, "Jewish Sacred Architecture in the Spanish and Portuguese Diaspora," in *Jewish Religious Architecture: From Biblical Israel to Modern Judaism*, vol. 1, Jews, Judaism, and the Arts (Brill, 2020), 224.
- ¹⁷ Snyder, "A New Mokum," 171.
- ¹⁸ Perelis, "Jewish Sacred Architecture," 228.
- ¹⁹ Perelis, "Jewish Sacred Architecture," 228.
- ²⁰ Snyder, "A New Mokum," 173.
- ²¹ Snyder, "A New Mokum," 172.
- ²² Snyder, "A New Mokum," 173.
- ²³ Perelis, "Jewish Sacred Architecture," 230.
- ²⁴ Perelis, "Jewish Sacred Architecture," 225.
- ²⁵ Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 39.
- ²⁶ Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 40.
- ²⁷ Yosef Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint His Three Pictures of the Sephardi Synagogue of Amsterdam?," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 32 (1998): 139.
- ²⁸ Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint," 141.
- ²⁹ Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint," 138.
- ³⁰ Samantha Baskind, "Bernard Picart's Etchings of Amsterdam's Jews," *Jewish Social Studies* 132 (2007): 44.
- ³¹ Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint," 151.
- ³² That numbered increased in the following decades. See Snyder, "A New Mokum," 177.
- ³³ For Lievens's print and the inscription, see most recently Stephanie S. Dickey in *Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. et al. (Yale University Press, 2008), 224–25.
- ³⁴ Shelley Perlove, "Judaism and the Arts in Early Modern Europe: Jewish and Christian Encounters," in *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art*, ed. Babette Bohn and James M. Saslow (Wiley, 2013), 48.
- ³⁵ Perlove, "Judaism and the Arts in Early Modern Europe," 49.
- ³⁶ Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 26.
- ³⁷ Quotation from Mirjam Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture in Rembrandt's Time," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 30. In 1643, Menasseh sent an impression of the print to Abraham von Franckenberg, a Protestant theologian in Silesia with whom he had corresponded. See Cecil Roth, *A Life of Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi, Printer, and Diplomat* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945), 158.
- ³⁸ Stephanie S. Dickey, *Rembrandt: Portraits in Print* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004), 12.
- ³⁹ Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 29.

Chapter 1

Chased in Silver, Cast in Brass, and Engraved on Parchment: Jewish Ritual Art in “Reality and Imagination”

by Simona Di Nepi, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Curator of Judaica, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The “Reality and Imagination” exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) is the fruit of the close collaboration between the Center of Netherlandish Art (CNA), the Judaica initiative at the MFA, and Boston University. For this project, we have found shared and fertile ground in the widely popular subject of Rembrandt and the Jews. Although this topic was often centered on the depiction of Jews in the artist’s oeuvre in the past, for this exhibition, it has been of fundamental importance also to present Jews as active players—as patrons and collectors, both of works by Rembrandt and his contemporaries, and of Jewish ritual art.¹

This is not the first time that the CNA and MFA Judaica have joined forces. As two relatively recent museum initiatives, we have had the opportunity to shape our vision together. In 2021, the launch of the CNA prompted Judaica curators to focus on Dutch works as a collecting priority. It is thanks to the extraordinary generosity of one half of the CNA’s founding donors, Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, that the Museum has been able to make three major Dutch Judaica acquisitions: a pair of silver Torah finials from Rotterdam, a silver Hanukkah lamp from Amsterdam, and a hanging gilded Shabbat lamp from The Hague. Their display in different museum locations embodies the multipurpose nature of the MFA’s Judaica endeavor, with the finials shown in “Reality and Imagination,” the Hanukkah lamp in the permanent Dutch galleries nearby, and the hanging Shabbat lamp in the Museum’s first dedicated Judaica gallery (“Intentional Beauty: Jewish Ritual Art from the Collection”).

In this chapter, I focus on the Judaica items shown in the “Reality and Imagination” exhibition—on their style, iconography, history, and value for the exhibition. First, however, it is vital to provide some context, both on the meaning of “Judaica” and on its use in the 17th- and 18th-century Dutch Republic.

“Judaica” is the word used to refer to Jewish ceremonial items (e.g., metalwork, textiles, furniture, books) made for use both in synagogue and in the home. According to the Talmud (the foundational text of Rabbinic Judaism), the function of these objects is *Hiddur Mitzvah*, or beautification of the commandment—that is, the glorification of God through beautiful forms and materials. The Spanish and Portuguese “New Christians,” or *conversos*, who returned to Judaism after their arrival to the Netherlands, embraced and practiced *Hiddur Mitzvah* through ceremonial items of various types and materials.² This emerges from the treasure

In her essay on Amsterdam's Sephardi material culture, Mirjam Knotter cites English traveler John Evelyn, who after visiting the Portuguese synagogue in 1644, stated, "The ceremonies, ornaments, lamps, law, and schools afforded matter for contemplation."⁴ Similarly, prints depicting synagogues and Jewish homes by Romeyn de Hooghe (1645–1708) and Bernard Picart (1673–1733) shed light on the richness

While the city of Amsterdam has long been the object of attention, the literal and figurative centerpiece of this exhibition—the exceptionally rare silver Torah finials of 1649—comes from Rotterdam (Fig. 1-2). When the MFA purchased them in 2020, it secured for its collection the earliest pair of Torah finials in the United States, and one of the earliest Dutch pairs anywhere in the world.⁵ Since their acquisition, they have starred in a range of galleries, exhibitions, and educational platforms. They have been shown in the “Religious Silver” display of the MFA’s renovated permanent Dutch galleries; they have travelled to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, for the exhibition “Dutch Art in a Global Age: Masterpieces from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston”; they have been the protagonists of the popular “Smarthistory” video series; and they are one of the highlights of the “Reality and Imagination” exhibition.⁶ In all these



Figure 1-1. Claude Du Bosc, *Dedication of the Portuguese Jews Synagogue in Amsterdam*, 1733–1738, etching and engraving, hand colored, gift of Rabbi Howard A. Berman, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 1-2. Torah finials, Rotterdam, 1649, silver, partially gilded, Museum purchase with funds donated by Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

contexts, their discussion has always begun with a look at their original function, their use, and their reason to be. Like all liturgical objects, they play an active role in religious rituals. More specifically, they decorate the Torah scroll, which is the single most treasured object in Judaism, handwritten on parchment with the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. When, just before the weekly Torah reading, the parchment scroll with its ornaments is carried around the synagogue hall, the finials' tinkling bells and shimmering silver theatrically direct the congregation's attention.

Their Hebrew name, *Rimonim*, means pomegranates, which are a symbolical biblical fruit and a common motif of Jewish iconography. Torah finials were originally fruit-like in shape, and it was only in Europe from the 15th century that they started to evolve into the tower structure that we see in the Rotterdam pair.⁷ This set is one of the two earliest surviving examples of the architectural Dutch design that would be imitated for more than two hundred years across Europe and beyond, as demonstrated by the MFA's pair of 1688 from Hamburg (Fig. 1-3).⁸ Tall and slender, the Rotterdam



Figure 1-3. Jurgen Richels, Torah finials, 1688–1689, silver, partially gilded, gilt, Museum purchase with funds donated by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation and Jetskalina H. Phillips Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

finials are shaped around three tiers that grow smaller in size as they rise up. Inside the arched openings are gilded bells—some probably later replacements, as is often the case with Torah finials that have been used, thus fulfilling their intended function.⁹ Stars, quatrefoils, and circles pierced in the silver enliven the body's straight form, and so do the brackets extending to the sides, with curious beasts stretching their necks and, on the upper tier, minuscule women's heads. One of the most singular features are the staves with plants and flowers engraved in a sketch-like fashion—a subtle reminder of Dutch enthusiasm for still lifes.

What do we know about the history of these Torah finials? In 2020, they were consigned at auction in New York by United Synagogues, an organization comprising 60 British congregations; however, there is no doubt that they are Dutch in origin. Just below the largest tier is the city mark for Rotterdam, with a date letter "E" for 1649 (or possibly 1667).¹⁰ These two silver marks are compatible with Rotterdam's Jewish history as it emerges from the city's records.¹¹ Along with Amsterdam and The Hague, during the 17th century, Rotterdam too

became an important destination for Spanish and Portuguese Jews seeking to build a Jewish life in the Republic. Records attest that, in 1610, a small number of Portuguese Jewish merchants were already living in the city. However, two years later, when local Church authorities protested against the Jews' rights to freely worship and trade in the city, some Jewish families left for Amsterdam. A second group of Portuguese Jews returned in 1647, thanks to the renewal of a favorable policy, which allowed them to build a synagogue. The MFA's *rimonim* date of only two years later strongly suggests that they were commissioned for the newly built Rotterdam synagogue.

We do not know when the MFA Torah finials left Rotterdam for London. Interestingly, the first date placing them in London is offered by the replacement bells, which are marked 1900. It is also possible to advance some hypothesis as to their earlier journey. The Sephardi communities in Amsterdam and Rotterdam were closely tied, through both family and trade, with their counterparts in London, Hamburg, and Venice. In 1656, a Jewish community was allowed to settle in London for the first time since its expulsion in 1290 under King Edward I.¹² At any point after this time, the *rimonim* may have reached London in one of two possible scenarios: as a gift sent from Rotterdam's community to their "sister congregation," or with a Dutch Jewish merchant who immigrated to England.

Unlike the Rotterdam finials, the Hanukkah lamp in the "Reality and Imagination" exhibition is on public view for the first time (Fig. 1-4). It was donated to the museum in 2013, as part of the 120 objects from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Collection. Like all Hanukkah Menorahs, it was made to celebrate the victory of the Hasmoneans over the pagan Seleucids Syrian army in 164 BCE, and the subsequent purification of the Jerusalem Temple from pagan worship. The wicks floating in its eight oil reservoirs were once lit to celebrate the miracle, described in the Talmud, of a tiny jar of sacred oil lighting the Temple Menorah for eight consecutive days.

This MFA lamp is of the brass back-paneled type with oil pans, which was common in the Netherlands. It is decorated with stylized fleurs-de-lis elements, a somewhat crooked Star of David, and, in the center, the Hebrew letters for "Hanukkah." At the bottom is



Figure 1-4. Hanukkah lamp, Netherlands, 18th or 19th century, brass, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

a drip pan designed to catch the oil spilling from its eight reservoirs, while the servant light (*shamash* in Hebrew) is attached in the center. The hook at the top shows that, like most Dutch lamps, this too was made to be hung; however, establishing when and where is a different matter. Brass lamps were far more common than costly silver ones, and numerous examples were made as late as the 19th and even the 20th century. Dating them is extremely difficult because they do not bear marks with the date, place, or silversmiths' initials; however, thanks to a nearly identical earlier example, we are able to establish that the style of the lamp in "Reality and Imagination" goes back to at least 1629. The early Hanukkah lamp in question is in the collection of Amsterdam's Sephardi congregation (Fig. 1-5).¹³ It is inscribed in Portuguese: "Abraham Pharar gave this Hanukkah lamp" and in Hebrew: "Because the candle is the commandment and the Torah is the light, 5390 (1629/30)." The latter is a verse from the Book of Proverbs (6:23) that rabbis have traditionally associated with Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. Pharar, a physician born in Porto, donated this lamp to Beth Jacob (House of Jacob), the first Sephardi congregation in Amsterdam.¹⁴ For centuries to follow, his lamp became the prototype



Figure 1-5. Hanukkah lamp, Amsterdam, 1629, copper; Collection Foundation for the Cultural Heritage of the Portuguese-Israelite Community, Amsterdam.

for countless examples, including another one in Amsterdam’s Jewish Historical Museum, which bears the monogram of Mozes Henrique de Castro and the date of 1752.¹⁵ Although these rare dated examples are all connected to Sephardim, these brass lamps were so widespread that they would also be used by Ashkenazim.

In contrast, only few wealthy individuals could afford the far more costly silver Hanukkah lamps. As a result, these are now scarce and highly sought after in the Judaica market. Only a dozen late 17th- and 18th-century silver lamps are known to have survived, including examples in the Rijksmuseum and the Royal Collection in the Netherlands. In 2021, the MFA became one of only three museums in the world to own one, with the purchase of a Hanukkah Menorah made in Amsterdam in 1730 by Johannes Winter, on display in one of the permanent Dutch

galleries (Fig. 1-6). The shells and scrollwork that fill this lamp’s shiny backplate remind us that Judaica spoke the artistic language of the period and region of its production—in this case, the stylistic idiom of Dutch Rococo silver.

So far, we have examined object types—the architectural Torah finials and the brass Hanukkah lamp—that, although deriving from the Sephardi world, were also used in Ashkenazi synagogues and homes. There is one Judaica item in the exhibition, however, that is unequivocally and exclusively Sephardi: a marriage contract engraved along the borders with flowers, insects, and birds. In compliance with the MFA’s conservation practice, two examples of this contract type have been rotated in the one-year run of the exhibition. A 1659 example from Amsterdam was replaced, after six months, by a close “descendant,” the MFA’s own contract from The Hague, 1742.¹⁶



Figure 1-6. Johannes Winter, Hanukkah lamp, 1730, silver, Museum purchase with funds donated by Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Hebrew name for marriage contract is *ketubbah*, the feminine form for “written.” This word refers to the bride, who is “written” as wife in the legal document that lists her rights within the marriage. This ancient custom is intended to protect the woman and to guarantee her shelter, food, clothing, and money in case of death or divorce by the husband. Although the *ketubbah* is an ancient document shared across the entire Jewish world, this discussion focuses on the unique Dutch Sephardi engraved type that emerged in mid-17th-century Amsterdam. One of the earliest examples of this form is the 1659 *ketubbah* in the exhibition, which records the wedding between Abraham Mende Cotino and “Abigail, daughter of Abraham Aboab,” on loan from a private collection (Fig. 1-7).¹⁷ The names are handwritten in the central text

enclosed by two leafy columns, along with the date, the duties of the husband toward his wife, and the signatures of the witnesses. The Sephardi script is in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, the traditional language of this ancient custom. What distinguishes this *ketubbah* from most marriage contracts of the period is the use of engraving, which is a true innovation and a radical departure from the hand-painted decoration in use at the time.

The most striking features of the engraved design are the neoclassical vases overflowing with flowers, birds, and butterflies that fill the borders. Like Dutch still life paintings, these are rendered with remarkable precision. At the top, two winged putti hold a cloth with the traditional *B Siman Tov* (Hebrew for “under the good sign”).



Figure 1-7. *Ketubbah* (marriage contract), Amsterdam, 1658, engraving with handwritten inscriptions in brown ink on parchment, private collection.



Figure 1-8. Shalom Italia, *Ketubbah* (marriage contract), Amsterdam, 1648, ink, etching and engraving on parchment, Amsterdam City Archives, Archief van de Portugees-Israëlitische.

On the top corners, newlyweds hold hands and a bare-breasted woman holds two children. This female figure, it has been shown, derives from the Christian allegory of *Caritas*, but here it is intended as a personification of motherhood.¹⁸

This design merges a number of artistic sources: Dutch still lifes for the flower borders, the frontispieces of Hebrew books for the architecture framing the text, and Italian Renaissance art for the putti and the allegorical figure.¹⁹ The Italian and Dutch iconographic influences are not surprising if one considers that the unknown creator of this *ketubbah* borrowed its flower-filled borders and the allegorical *Caritas* figure directly from a 1648 marriage contract signed by Shalom Italia, a Mantuan Jewish engraver working in Amsterdam (Fig. 1-8).²⁰

Whatever the exact “formula” of the 1659 Amsterdam *ketubbah* in “Reality and Imagination,” the popularity of its design quickly spread to Sephardi communities in other cities. This is shown by the identical MFA *ketubbah* (Fig. 1-9), which records the wedding between Avraham Teixeira de Andrade, son of the late Yitzchak Teixeira de Andrade, with Sarah, daughter of Yitzchak Yisrael Suasso, that took place in “The Hague, the capital of Holland,” on Wednesday, August 15, 1742 (stated in the Hebrew date of 15th of Av, 5502).²¹ The MFA’s 18th-century *ketubbah* replicates the engraved motifs of the 1659 Amsterdam contract in detail, including the couple’s by then outdated mid-17th-century costume in the top corner.²² As shown by numerous later marriage contracts from Sephardi hubs such as London, Hamburg, New York, and Curaçao, this



Figure 1-9. Ketubbah (marriage contract) for Sarah Suasso and Avraham Teixeira de Andrada, The Hague, 1742, engraving with handwritten inscriptions in brown ink on parchment, Museum of Fine Arts, J. Paul Getty Center, Los Angeles.

ketubbah's iconography was replicated for weddings across Europe and the Americas for more than two hundred years. On rare occasions, minor variations were introduced, usually to reflect the change in fashion and location. While the engraved decorations made reproduction far easier than hand-painted ones, the enduring success of this *ketubbah* across time and place among the Sephardim should be also ascribed to something more profound: the desire of Spanish and Portuguese Jews in different communities to forge their multifaceted identity through the repetition of familiar artistic motifs and a recognizable visual culture.

No exhibition of Dutch Jewish visual and material culture would be complete without bibles and prayer books. Two examples in “Reality and Imagination” are a Pentateuch and a women’s prayer book. Both items testify to Amsterdam’s leading role as the capital of Hebrew printing at the time. In 1627, the Sephardi rabbi and scholar Menasseh Ben Israel was the first Jewish printer to establish a Hebrew press in Amsterdam. He is represented in the exhibition with Rembrandt’s etched illustrations for his messianic book *The Glorious Stone* of 1655.²³ Another item in the exhibition pointing to Amsterdam’s emergence as the center of Hebrew publishing is the earliest known map of the Holy Land in Hebrew (Fig. 1-10), which is a rare item on loan to the MFA. It was conceived, commissioned, and translated into Hebrew in 1620/21 by the

Amsterdam Sephardi merchant Jacob ben Abraham Zaddick.²⁴ This rare map, which merits its own separate discussion, testifies to the explosion of Hebrew printing in Amsterdam. By the mid-17th century, the city had even surpassed Venice, until then the unrivaled center of Hebrew publishing through major Christian presses such as that of Daniel Bomberg. The two volumes in the “Reality and Imagination” exhibition were instead produced by the Proops, a Jewish Ashkenazi family of printers, publishers, and booksellers, who from 1704 operated Amsterdam’s best-known Hebrew printing press, aside from Menasseh’s.²⁵ It was founded by Salomon ben Joseph Proops, who in 1677 had been admitted to the Amsterdam guild of booksellers, printers, and bookbinders—an exception to the Dutch craft and professional corporations that excluded Jews.

In 1714, Salomon published the prayer book (*siddur* in Hebrew) shown in “Reality and Imagination.”²⁶ It contains two sections bound together: the *Seder Tefilot Mekol Hashanah* (the prayers for the whole year) and the *Seder Techinot* (prayers for women, especially for pregnancy and childbirth).²⁷ This book once belonged to a young bride, Gittel, who left her handwritten notes in Yiddish. The opening of the volume has a brief annotation attesting her name as “daughter of Abraham” with the date 1718 and, on the final pages, a personal prayer (Fig. 1-11).²⁸ Gittel would have closely observed the scenes of biblical heroines (Eve, Rebecca, Leah, Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah),



Figure 1-10. Abraham Goos and Jacob ben Abraham Zaddick, Map of the Holy Land, Amsterdam, about 1620, engraving on paper, private collection.

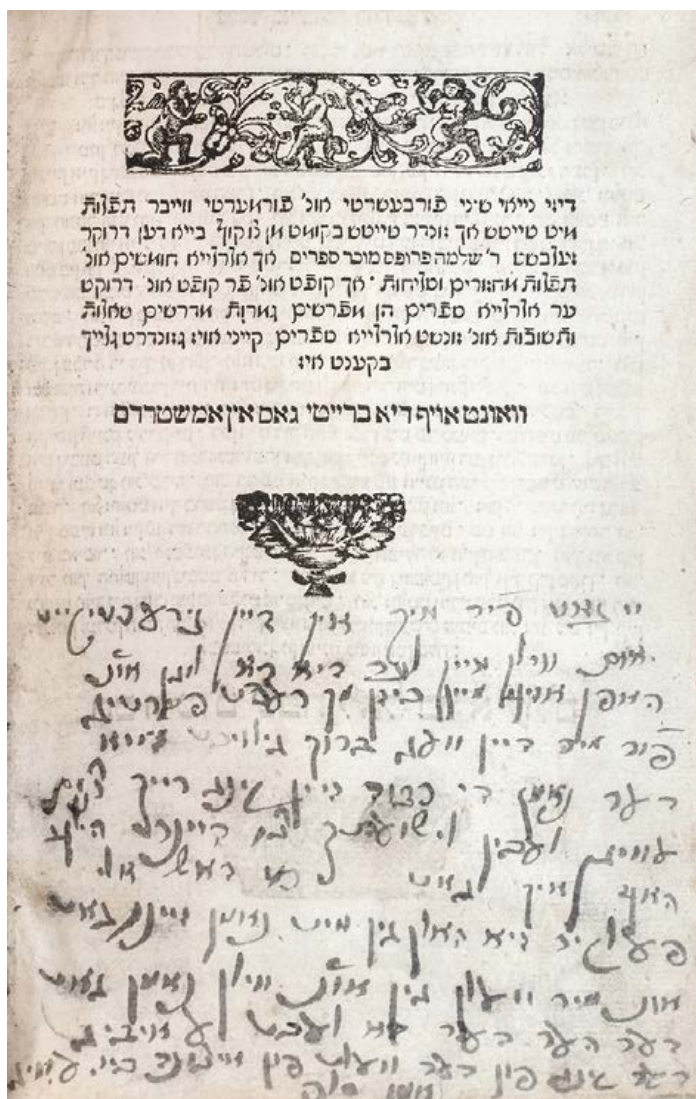


Figure 1-11. Prayer book (*siddur*), Amsterdam, Proops' Hebrew Press, 1714, sewn binding with leather-wrapped wooden boards and silver covers, purchase with funds donated by Diane and Marc Homer, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

who are engraved on the book's frontispiece by Johannes Lamsvelt (1664–1725) (Fig. 1-12). Below these vignettes is the Talmud teaching that honors women in the Exodus story: "In the merit of righteous women were our fathers redeemed from Egypt."²⁹

The cover is as fascinating as the book inside it. It is an original wooden binding, covered in leather and decorated with pierced silver chased with a large crown, lions holding a heart-shaped medallion, and floral motifs (Fig. 1-13). The crown and rampant lions are especially common in Jewish ritual art—on paper, textiles, metalwork—and symbolize, respectively, the Torah and the tribe of Judah. The central medallion is engraved in Hebrew with "Hayyim son of / Uri Cohen / of blessed memory. 5477 [1717]" on one side, and "Gittel daughter of /



Figure 1-12. Prayer book (*siddur*), Amsterdam, Proops' Hebrew Press, 1714, sewn binding with leather-wrapped wooden boards and silver covers, purchase with funds donated by Diane and Marc Homer, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Rabbi Abraham / may he live for many long years 5477 [1717]" on the other. These were the names of a groom and bride, and it has been reasonably suggested that the book was donated by the man to the woman, according to the custom of gifts newly engaged couples made to one another.³⁰ Although we know that the book was published in Amsterdam, the absence of the city and maker's marks on the silver binding makes it of more uncertain origin. The style of the chasing—in particular, the lions with outstretched tongues—might point toward Eastern Europe. This opens the distinct possibility that the book was exported outside the Dutch Republic and aligns with the information available to us about the large numbers of Hebrew books made in Amsterdam for use abroad, including those in Yiddish.³¹



Figure 1-13. Prayer book (*siddur*), Amsterdam, Proops' Hebrew Press, 1714, sewn binding with leather-wrapped wooden boards and silver covers, purchase with funds donated by Diane and Marc Homer, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

It is, in fact, important to stress this Hebrew book's translation in Yiddish, which is the Jewish German language of Ashkenazi Jews. The prayers are according to the Jewish rite from Central and Eastern Europe, and the handwritten notes are also in Yiddish. The book's Ashkenazi origin and ownership history are worthy of attention. In the discussion of 17th- and 18th-century Amsterdam, Ashkenazi Jews have often been overshadowed by the generally more affluent and cosmopolitan Spanish and Portuguese Jews. While the earliest Jews to arrive in Amsterdam at the beginning of the 1600s were Iberian *conversos*, in the following decades, Central and Eastern European Jews joined in very large numbers. They fled pogroms that killed tens of thousands of people (like the Polish Khmeltsky massacres of 1648) and, by the 1670s, formed the majority of the Jewish population. Their history and traditions were enormously important to the cultural flourishing of Jewish Amsterdam.³² The MFA's women's prayer book in the exhibition is a tangible expression of this rich culture.

Almost 50 years after Salomon Proops published the women's *siddur*, his children—Joseph, Jacob, and Abraham—printed the Pentateuch shown in the exhibition (Fig. 1-14). The book is bound in brown leather and tooled in gold with two putti holding a crown, a symbol of the *Keter Torah* (the Crown of the Torah). The publishers' names appear on the Hebrew inscription of the illustrated frontispiece: "Five Books of the Torah. With scribes' corrections. Proops, in Amsterdam. Printed by the sons of our teacher and Rabbi Solomon Proops. The righteous Kohen (Temple's priest), may the memory of the righteous be a blessing." The open hands with the priestly blessing shown in the center are the logo of the Proops family.³³ On the sides are Moses holding the Tablets of the laws and his brother Aaron, first high priest of Israel. Aaron is shown with the priestly garments described in detail in Exodus 28, such as the breastplate with the stones of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the robe's hem alternating golden bells and pomegranate-shaped tassels.³⁴ He is holding the censer that, according to the Book of Numbers, was filled with incense and coal to make atonement for the Israelites.³⁵ At the top and bottom of the page are engravings with Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai and the Temple of Jerusalem.

The pairing of Aaron and Moses on the frontispieces of Hebrew books is part of a well-established tradition. Interestingly, its origin has been traced in a Christian bible, *Icones Biblicae* (biblical pictures), which is also known as the Merian Bible, produced by the Swiss engraver Matthaeus Merian in 1630. As historian Rachel Wischnitzer first argued, his title page and other images were incorporated by Abraham bar Jacob, a German Christian pastor who converted to Judaism, in his hugely influential *Amsterdam Haggadah* of 1695 (Fig. 1-15).³⁶ Thanks to its several editions circulating throughout Europe, Bar Jacob's *Haggadah* would inform the iconography of Moses and Aaron on a wide range of Hebrew books—both printed and hand-illuminated—for more than two centuries.³⁷ This image became so popular that, in the late 18th century, it even found its way on a number of silver Torah breastplates, such as the MFA's stupendous Galician example of 1781–1782 (Fig. 1-16).³⁸ There is also, however, a far more direct connection between the German Abraham Bar Jacob and the Proops family. Following his move to Amsterdam and his conversion, Bar Jacob married the sister of Salomon ben Joseph Proops.³⁹ It is not surprising that Salomon issued a reprint of Bar Jacob's *Haggadah* in 1712, and later also adapted his brother-in-law's work on the title pages of other liturgical books. One of them was the *Neviim and Ketuviim* (Prophets and Writings), the closest model for his children's bible shown in the MFA exhibition.⁴⁰

It is fitting that this chapter should conclude with the Amsterdam's Pentateuch and women's *siddur*. These two books represent the whole arc of the Judaica journey at the MFA: the former as one of the very first items to enter the collection in 1917, and the latter as one of the newest additions to its holdings, purchased at auction in 2024. The Hebrew bible is representative of what could be called, for lack of a better term, an "accidental Judaica acquisition." These were objects that entered the MFA collection as part of far larger gifts that encompass different cultures and media. The 1762 Amsterdam Pentateuch was one of eleven thousand objects donated to the MFA by Harvard art professor and collector Denman Waldo Ross (1853–1935) over the course of 40 years. Although it became part of the MFA's holdings more than a century ago, this is the first time that it has been displayed. In contrast, the women's *siddur* was on public view for more than 40 years—from 1983 to



Figure 1-14. Hebrew Bible: Pentateuch, Amsterdam, 1762, engraving on paper, Denman Waldo Ross Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 1-15. Abraham bar Jacob, Amsterdam Haggadah, 1695, engraving on paper, New York Public Library.



Figure 1-16. Elimelekh Tzoref, Torah shield, 1781–1782, silver, partially gilded, with enamel, niello, and stones, Museum purchase with funds donated by the Phillip Leonian and Edith Rosenbaum Leonian Charitable Trust, Jacques Aaron Preis, Trustee, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

2024—at the Jewish Museum of Switzerland in Basel, as a loan from a private collection. Labels stuck on its back cover testify that the same Jewish owners had also loaned it to London’s Whitechapel gallery for the 1906 “Exhibition of Jewish Art and Antiquities” and, in 1951, to Glasgow’s Festival of Jewish Art. This private collection was formed by Frankfurt-born Salomon D. Schloss (1815–1911), an observant man whose interest in Jewish ritual objects was propelled by his own religious beliefs.⁴¹ Like other pioneering 19th-century Judaica collectors, such as Philip Salomon and Reuben Sassoon, Schloss lived in England. Before lending to the 1906 exhibition, he had contributed

many items to the seminal Anglo-Jewish historical exhibition on view at the Royal Albert Hall in 1887.

A significant change has occurred since the dawn of Judaica collecting in late 19th-century Europe. Major encyclopedic museums like the MFA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the British Museum now display their Judaica and, when everything aligns, are able to place it in fruitful conversation with their wider collections. We hope that “Reality and Imagination: Rembrandt and the Jews in the Dutch Republic” offers our audiences an illuminating dialogue.

- ¹ I am grateful to Christopher Atkins, Van Otterloo-Weatherbie Director at the CNA, for extending the generous invitation, and to Professor Michael Zell and his students for the stimulating teamwork.
This approach is in line Michael Zell's seminal book *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (University of California Press, 2002), as well as with *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), and A. Rapoport, *The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt* (Yale University Press, 2025), which accompanied the exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York.
- ² From the biblical verse "This is my God and I will glorify Him" in Exodus 15:2, and the related rabbinic commentary in Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 133b.
- ³ Julie-Marthe Cohen, "The Inventory of Ceremonial Objects of the Portuguese Jewish Community of Amsterdam of 1640," *Studia Rosenthaliana: Jewish Ceremonial Objects in Transcultural Context* 37 (2004): 225–307.
- ⁴ Cited by Mirjam Knotter in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes* (Routledge, 2024), 28.
- ⁵ The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston purchased the Rotterdam finials at Sotheby's "Important Judaica sale" in New York on December 17, 2020. See auction catalogue, lot 107. The purchase was possible thanks to the generosity of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, who donated funds in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art.
- ⁶ See exhibition catalogue of the Kimbell Art Museum exhibition: Christopher Atkins, *Dutch Art in a Global Age* (MFA Publications, 2023), 100–103; and Smarthistory video at <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/baroque-art1/holland/v/early-dutch-torah-finials>.
- ⁷ For a summary of the history and evolution of Torah finials, see Simona Di Nepi, "Itinerant Sephardic Judaica: From Dutch Ports to the Harbors of Europe and the Americas," in *The Routledge Companion to Global Renaissance Art*, ed. Stephen J. Campbell and Stephanie Porras (Routledge, 2024), 551–59. See chapter on Rimmonim in Rafi Grafman, *Crowning Glory: Silver Torah Ornaments of the Jewish Museum* (Godine, 1996), 9, 41–45.
- ⁸ The Hamburg pair was lot 79 at Sotheby's "Important Judaica sale" in New York on June 5, 2019 (see pp. 72–73 of the auction catalogue); see Di Nepi, "Itinerant Sephardic Judaica," 553–54.
- ⁹ The ewer and bud at the top also are also later replacements, probably 19th century. By comparing with similar *rimonim* pairs, it is most likely that gilded crowns were the originally top component.
- ¹⁰ The letter "E" was used for Rotterdam in both 1649 and 1667. The worn condition of the finials' silver marks makes it difficult to establish with absolute certainty if they were made in 1649 or 1667. I am grateful to Dirk Jan Biemond, curator of metalwork at the Rijksmuseum, and Emiel Aardewerk, silver specialist and director of A. Aardewerk, for lending their expertise on the matter. At any rate, only three other known mid-17th-century pairs survive, all originating in Amsterdam: a 1650 set formerly in a private collection in Tel Aviv, a 1653 pair at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and a 1672 (or 1641) set from the collection of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam (inv.0498).
- ¹¹ Rotterdam in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. XIV (Keter Publishing House, 1972), 349–50.
- ¹² It was thanks to Rabbi Moshe Ben Israel's diplomatic efforts with Oliver Cromwell that Jews were readmitted in the country in the mid-17th century.
- ¹³ On loan to the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, object number MB018832. See Julie-Marthe Cohen, *Gifts from the Heart: Ceremonial Objects from the Jewish Historical Museum* (Jewish Historical Museum, 2004), 66, 77.
- ¹⁴ The donation to Beth Jacob appears specifically in the 1640 inventory of the Talmud Torah congregation. See Cohen, *Gifts from the Heart*, 301 ("Some large Chanukah lamps donated by Abraham Pharar to the holy community of Beth Jacob"). Interestingly, in 1627, Pharar wrote *The Book of Commandments*, where he described himself as "judeudo destero de Portugal," a Jewish exile from Portugal. In *Spiritual Heritage, Shimmering Treasures: Unknown Collections of the Portuguese Synagogue* (Brill, 2004), 13–14.
- ¹⁵ Cohen, *Gifts from the Heart*, 170.
- ¹⁶ This section on the *ketubbah* is a summary of an in-depth discussion of these marriage contracts. See Simona Di Nepi, "Itinerant Sephardic Judaica: From Dutch Ports to the Harbors of Europe and the Americas," in *The Routledge Companion to Global Renaissance Art*, ed. S. J. Campbell and S. Porras (Routledge, 2024), 547–51.
- ¹⁷ Lot 324 in Sotheby's Judaica auction, Tel Aviv, April 4, 1996, p.3. The long, handwritten text also records two later weddings, in 1721 and 1734. The *ketubbah* must have been kept in the family and passed through generations.
- ¹⁸ The allegory of *Caritas* is found in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1611. See Shalom Sabar, *Ketubbah: Jewish Marriage Contracts of the Hebrew Union College Skirball Museum and Klau Library* (Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 267. Also see Edgar Wind, "Charity: The Case History of a Pattern," *The Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1:4 (1938): 322–30.
- ¹⁹ While the direct model for the architectural framing was the "gateway" motif on the title pages of Hebrew books, its origin may also be traced back to Italian Renaissance art (both in paintings and books).
- ²⁰ Shalom Italia's 1648 contract is in the Amsterdam City Archives, Archief van de Portugees-Israëlietische Gemeente, entry no. 334, inventory no. 412. See Shalom Sabar's essay "The Golden Age of Ketubbah Decoration in Venice and Amsterdam," in *The Ghetto in Venice: Ponentini, Levantini e Tedeschi* (Gravenhage, 1990), 97–99.
- ²¹ These two Sephardic families were in fact already related, as the groom's father, Yitzchak Teixeira de Andrade, had married the granddaughter of Antonio Lopez de Suasso, one of the wealthiest merchants in Holland in the second half of the 17th century.
- ²² The only difference is the addition of two engraved inscriptions at the bottom corners, memorializing the name and date of death (April 4, 1693) of Isaac Aboab (da Fonseca the III), chief rabbi of the Amsterdam Sephardic community for 40 years.
- ²³ See the chapter by Michael Zell in this publication. For another recent discussion of Rembrandt and Ben Israel collaboration on *Piedra Gloriosa*, see S. Nadler, "Rembrandt, Menasseh Ben Israel and Spinoza" in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 111–21.
- ²⁴ M. Garel, "La première carte de terre sainte en Hébreu," *Studia Rosenthaliana*, 21, no. 2 (1987): 131–39.
- ²⁵ Raphael Posner and Israel Ta-Shema, *The Hebrew Book: An Historical Survey* (Leon Amiel Publisher, 1975), 159.
- ²⁶ Lot. 7, pp. 45–47 in the auction catalogue *The Solomon David Schloss Collection*, Auction 97, part, 1, Kedem, Jerusalem. For a similar item, formerly Gross Family collection, Tel Aviv, item no. 025.001.007 (Center for Jewish Art website, item no. 23636).
- ²⁷ Chava Weissler, "The traditional piety of Ashkenazic women," in Arthur Green, *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present*. Vol. II (Crossroad, 1987), 245–75.

- ²⁸ I would like to thank Shneur Hertz of Kedem auction house in Jerusalem for the translation of these long-handwritten notes from Yiddish, which are now kept in full in the MFA object file. The brief ownership note reads: "This prayerbook belongs to Gutl daughter of R. Avraham shlita... [5]478 (1718)."
- ²⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 11b.
- ³⁰ Auction catalogue *The Judaica Collection of Solomon David Schloss*, Kedem, Jerusalem, May 8, 2024, Kedem catalogue, 47.
- ³¹ See Shlomo Berger, "Yiddish Book Production in Amsterdam Between 1650–1800: Local and International Aspects," in Yosef Kaplan, *The Dutch Intersection* (Brill, 2008), 205.
- ³² Bart Wallet, "Rembrandt's Other Jews: The Amsterdam Ashkenazim in the Seventeenth Century," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 71–88.
- ³³ This is a reference to the Proops's descent from the Kohanim, the Temple priests.
- ³⁴ Aaron's dress and ornaments are described from the beginning of Exodus 28, including the verse: "on its hem make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all around the hem, with bells of gold between them all around." (Exodus 28:33–34)
- ³⁵ "...take your censer and put incense in it, along with burning coals from the altar, and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them." (Numbers 16:46–48)
- ³⁶ Rachel Wischnitzer, *From Dura to Rembrandt: Studies in the History of Art* (IRSA Verlag, 1990), 29–54. For an introduction, with illustrated pages, of the 1695 Amsterdam Haggadah see Yosef Yerushalmi, *Haggadah and History* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1997), 43–47.
- ³⁷ For the popularity of the Moses and Aaron iconographic type on illuminated manuscripts, see the Haggadah painted in Darmstadt in 1733 by scribe-artist Joseph ben David Leipnick in Sharon Lieberman, Elka Deitsch, and Havva Charm Mintz, *Precious Possessions, Treasures from the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary* (Commonplace Publishing, 2001), 35.
- ³⁸ For some, this defied the second commandment's ban "thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." See Alfred Grotte: *The Depiction of the Human Figure and the 2nd Mosaic Commandment*, Summary and Analysis by Sabine Bergler, Jewish Museum Vienna, and Daniela Schmid, Muzicant Collection, Vienna. On Rabbi Moses Sofer's (1732–1839) judgement on this question, see Vivian Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 128–29.
- ³⁹ See Shalom Sabar on the visual sources for Abraham Bar Jacob in "Abraham Bar Jacob and the Creating of the Copper-Engraved Childbirth Amulet from Amsterdam," in *Windows on Jewish Worlds: Essays in Honor of William Gross, Collector of Judaica*, ed. Emile Schrijver, Falk Wiesemann, and Shalom Sabar (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 115–22.
- ⁴⁰ This bible was published in 1724. See object number B175 in the Williams Gross collection, Tel Aviv, on the website of Center for Jewish Art Jerusalem.
- ⁴¹ See introduction on Solomon Schloss in the auction catalogue *The Solomon David Schloss Collection*, Auction 97, part, 1, Kedem, Jerusalem, 12–16.

Chapter 2

Jews as Patrons and Collectors of Dutch Art

by Bailey Pekar and Avrie Slocumb

In Romeyn de Hooghe's (1645–1708) *Circumcision Scene* (Fig. 2-1), a group of finely dressed Amsterdammers are gathered to celebrate the *berith milah*, or circumcision ritual, of a newborn son.¹ The highly finished drawing records the unknown Sephardi Jewish family and community members in detail, with special attention given to the luxurious furnishings of the home. Paintings with identifiable scenes from the Hebrew Bible, known in the Christian tradition as the Old Testament (*Ezekiel and the Vision of the Wheel* on the left and *Elijah Fed by Ravens* at the right), are displayed on the walls, and elegant furniture, like the French bed in which the new mother reclines, is carefully rendered.² Commissioned by one of Amsterdam's prominent Sephardi families, this elaborate drawing, likely considered comparable to a painting by both the patron and the artist, preserves in precise visual form the importance of the circumcision ceremony to ex-Christian *conversos* living outside Iberia.³ The image can also serve as a window into the home of a Sephardi Jewish family in Amsterdam. Inventories recording the contents of wealthy Sephardi households corroborate De Hooghe's depiction and provide compelling insight into the collecting habits of affluent members of the Portuguese-Jewish community in the Dutch Republic.



Figure 2.1. Romeyn de Hooghe, *Circumcision Scene*, 1665–1668, black chalk, point of the brush and grey and black ink, over traces of graphite, on vellum, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Members of the Sephardi elite sought to position themselves alongside their Dutch peers, presenting themselves as a cultured people.⁴ The stately homes of the wealthiest Sephardim would even become sites of cultural exchange, as discussed by historian Yosef Kaplan, where “distinguished visitors” were shown collections “that included valuable manuscripts, rare printed books, ritual objects, and works of art.”⁵ Despite the Second Mosaic Commandment prohibiting representational imagery, inventories show that many Sephardim collected and displayed paintings ranging in subject from biblical histories and portraits of family members and political figures to landscapes and still lifes.⁶ In the home, these paintings joined the clothing, furniture, and ritual objects that were

either imported from the Iberian peninsula or commissioned or purchased from contemporary Dutch artists. In this way, patronage, collecting, and identity were closely intertwined for the Sephardim.

As the Ashkenazim arrived in Amsterdam in increasing numbers over the course of the 17th century, they were similarly able to define a new identity through these cultural practices; however, because they were generally less affluent and acculturated, and tended to adhere more strictly to the second commandment, the cultural and social tone of the Jewish community was still largely dominated by the Sephardim.⁷ Nevertheless, the Ashkenazim were able to carve out a cultural space for themselves, for example, through their

involvement in the thriving printing press industry in Amsterdam, which became a hub of Yiddish book production for the entire Ashkenazi diaspora.⁸ Although the Ashkenazim would outnumber the Sephardim by nearly a factor of five following the turn of the 18th century, for most of the 17th century, the story of Jewish art collecting follows the Sephardim.⁹

► The Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

As De Hooghe's *Circumcision Scene* illustrates, paintings depicting scenes from the Hebrew Bible, alternatively known as the Old Testament, frequently featured in affluent Sephardi households, though they were not the most popular picture type recorded in inventories of Sephardi collections. Although the Sephardim and the Calvinists were aligned in rejecting religious imagery in their houses of worship, members of both groups privately collected paintings of biblical history.¹⁰ The production of Old Testament paintings in the Dutch Republic was prodigious, creating a distinctive cultural space in which both Jews and Christians participated. This phenomenon offers an opportunity to explore the shared appeal of Old Testament works, including a shared interest in lesser-known biblical stories, as well as the nuanced differences of scriptural interpretation between Jewish and Christian audiences.

The Dutch trend of portraying these stories more frequently than in other European artistic centers

originated in the generation before Rembrandt (1606–1669), known anachronistically as the Pre-Rembrandtists. This grouping includes Rembrandt's teacher, Pieter Lastman (1583–1633), and other, mostly Catholic, painters.¹¹ Art historian Christian Tümpel describes how, following the proliferation of Protestant picture bibles after the Reformation, a more literal interpretation of Old Testament narratives replaced the previous medieval typological interpretations of the Old Testament as prefiguring the events of the Christian New Testament.¹² Tümpel also explains that as a whole the Pre-Rembrandtists “turned their attention to those quieter and more emotional scenes,” and thus gravitated to “very unusual, unknown themes, or treated various scenes from scarcely noticed parts of a story.”¹³ The emotional resonance found in both familiar and less familiar scenes would have been appealing to a wide audience of both Christians and Jews. As art historian Xander van Eck observes in a study of paintings commissioned for the clandestine Catholic churches of the United Provinces: “Painters were businessmen, who painted what the public wanted and sold their art to anyone who would pay the right price.”¹⁴ Although it is unclear if any works by Lastman, or other so-called Pre-Rembrandtists, made their way into Jewish collections in the 17th century, this group of painters established the practice of frequently depicting Old Testament narratives and were the first to paint many obscure Old Testament episodes.



Figure 2-2. Pieter Lastman, *Wedding Night of Tobias and Sarah*, 1611, oil on panel, Juliana Cheney Edwards Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Lastman's *Wedding Night of Tobias and Sarah* of 1611 (Fig. 2-2), included in the "Reality and Imagination" exhibition, exemplifies the type of picture that set a precedent for Rembrandt and his school and profoundly shaped art collecting among both Christians and Jews. Lastman depicts a scene from the Book of Tobit, which was included in the Dutch Calvinist Bible as an apocryphal part of the Old Testament. Although excluded from the canonical Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh, the story was still popular among Dutch Sephardi Jews. Rembrandt's Sephardi neighbor, Salvador Rodrigues (d. 1654), owned a painting of a scene from the Book of Tobit in 1654, among other Old Testament paintings.¹⁵

Especially at the beginning of his career, Rembrandt looked to Pre-Rembrandtist Old Testament paintings. One of Rembrandt's earliest surviving paintings, *Balaam and the Ass* of 1626 (Fig. 2-3), pays homage to his teacher Lastman's painting of the same relatively obscure Old Testament subject, which Rembrandt likely saw as a student in Lastman's studio in 1622. The picture is also the earliest biblical painting by Rembrandt known to be in a Jewish collection—that of Sephardi Alfonzo Lopez (1572–1649), who was a jeweler and French emissary who never lived openly as a Jew, given the restrictions imposed by the French crown.¹⁶ In the story, Balaam is a prophet hired by King Balak to curse the Israelites. He has a change of heart once confronted with an angel, leading him to bless the Israelites rather than curse them. In Lastman's iteration of 1622 (housed at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem), Balaam is facing the viewer, with the angel isolated at the far right. Although Rembrandt copies the pose of the braying donkey in his own version, he also experiments with figure placement, color, and setting, concentrating the relevant figures in a tight group in the center of the panel. *Balaam and the Ass* was purchased during one of Lopez's extended stays in the Dutch Republic, when his principal aim was to secure supplies for the French navy, either between 1627 and 1629, or 1636 and 1640. During his second stay, Lopez and Rembrandt attended the same auction, during which Lopez bought two additional artworks by the Italian masters Titian and Raphael. By purchasing and collecting paintings and other artworks, such as Italian and Dutch painting, wealthy Sephardim like Lopez could demonstrate their social standing and acculturation.



Figure 2-3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Balaam and the Ass*, 1626, oil on panel, Musée Cognacq-Jay, Paris.

The Sephardi art dealer Samuel d'Orta (b. 1618) purchased Rembrandt's etching plate depicting the Old Testament scene of *Abraham Casting Out Hagar and Ishmael* (Fig. 2-4) in 1637.¹⁷ As recounted in a legal dispute of the same year, d'Orta accused Rembrandt of violating their agreement by selling the impressions that the artist kept for his own use.¹⁸ D'Orta is described as both an artist and an art dealer, and he must have intended to sell his own impressions made from the purchased plate.¹⁹ D'Orta was quite young at the time of the dispute—around 19 years old.²⁰ Rembrandt and d'Orta's interaction, even if contentious, documents Jewish involvement in the 17th-century Dutch art market and, specifically, with Rembrandt, and in roles varying from buyer and collector to dealer and negotiator.

Rembrandt's pupils, such as Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680), created large-scale Old Testament paintings, sometimes of subjects with erotic allure,²¹ which could have appealed to both Christian and Jewish collectors. Bol's monumental *Judah and Tamar* of



Figure 2-4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Abraham Casting Out Hagar and Ishmael*, 1637, etching and drypoint, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 2-5. Ferdinand Bol, *Judah and Tamar*, 1644, oil on canvas, Robert Dawson Evans Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1644 in the MFA (Fig. 2-5), on display in the “Reality and Imagination” exhibition, depicts a story from the Book of Genesis, distilled to one charged glance between two people. Tamar is dressed in white silk, her face half concealed by a veil. Twice widowed and childless, she is desperate to produce the heir God has promised her, leading her to disguise herself as a prostitute in order to seduce her father-in-law, Judah. Bol depicts the moment when Judah, unaware of Tamar’s true identity, offers her his signet ring as part of her payment, which she will use as proof of their union after she becomes pregnant with twins.²² The erotic tension underscoring the encounter is palpable through Tamar’s décolletage, Judah’s leering, and Bol’s depiction of flushed skin and sensuous fabrics, as well as the verdant landscape surrounding them, complete with a suggestive gourd. The painting’s eroticism would have appealed to some Jewish buyers, as pictures of erotic subjects are listed among 17th-century Sephardi household

possessions: Actaeon with the nude Diana, Neptune with naked women, paintings with “some nude images,” and even “a courtesan” and “a brothel.”²³ A painting of “Tamar and Judah” is also recorded in 1695 among the belongings of the deceased Isaac Oeb (alias Isaacq Brandon) and his widow Hester Mendes Gama.²⁴

To a Protestant audience, this incestuous encounter carried extra significance as an exploration of Christ’s heritage, as Judah and Tamar, according to Luther, count among his direct ancestors in the line of King David.²⁵ For a Jewish audience, the significance of the story might have been more complex. As scholar Rachel Adelman explores, Tamar, as a non-Israelite, “risks all, against all odds—biological, social, legal—to insert herself into the machinations of biblical history, becoming the grand matriarch of the monarchy.”²⁶ Might Sephardi conversos returning to the faith have found a parallel between themselves and Tamar as

outsiders intent on (re)integration into Jewish life? The ability of Old Testament scenes to take on new meanings and associations—one of the reasons why they were so popular among both Christian and Jewish collectors—makes such an interpretation possible.

Although most paintings recorded in Sephardi collections are unattributed, a painting by the Dutch artist Jan Victors (1619–1679) of *Jacob and Esau* was listed in the 1677 bankruptcy inventory of the Sephardi Isacq Delmonte alias Del Sotto.²⁷ A contemporary of Rembrandt (and perhaps his student), Victors specialized in biblical scenes of remarkable size, though he never once depicted Christ or a scene from the New Testament, nor an anthropomorphic depiction of God.²⁸ Victors's strict Calvinist conviction prevented him from painting any form of divinity, which would have restricted his repertoire and, with it, the potential clientele interested in his work.²⁹ Because of this, it has been proposed that Victors could have painted for wealthy Jewish clients like Delmonte, especially as the costly production of such large-scale works presupposes a commission rather than production for the open market. Victors's *Jacob Seeking the Forgiveness of Esau* of 1652 (Fig. 2-6) may not be Delmonte's painting, but it shows a similar if not the same subject matter.

In Victors's composition, Esau is not depicted, and Jacob is seen pleading with a hand over his chest. Art historian Eric Jan Sluiter considers how Victors's buyers understood his works could not match Rembrandt's in skill or emotive quality, but that his presentation of the figures as a *tableau vivant* with a “matter-of-fact” quality would still have appealed to patrons as they clarified and distilled the narrative to be easily understood in that large scale.³⁰

► Portraiture

A 1654 legal dispute between Rembrandt and the Sephardi Jew Diego d'Andrade (1608–1660) reveals that the artist received a commission to paint a portrait of a young Sephardi woman before she left for Hamburg, which was another Jewish center in Northern Europe.³¹ D'Andrade provided a down payment of 75 guilders for the portrait's completion. Ultimately, however, he was unsatisfied with Rembrandt's likeness of the young woman and demanded an alteration, requesting the money be otherwise refunded.³² In response, Rembrandt, who was notoriously stubborn when it came to altering his work for patrons, stated he would only compromise if d'Andrade paid for the changes; otherwise, Rembrandt would sell it on the open



Figure 2-6. Jan Victors, *Jacob Seeking the Forgiveness of Esau*, 1652, oil on canvas, Martha Delzell Memorial Fund, Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.

market. He insisted the final decision should be left to Amsterdam's Guild of St. Luke, the governing body of painters, to determine the justification of both parties' requests.³³ Though the outcome of the dispute is not recorded, the portrait may be the painting labeled "Jewess by Rembrandt van Rijn" in the possession of the art dealer Gerrit Uylenburgh in 1675.³⁴ As art historian Jaap van der Veen suggests, the woman may have been Beatriz (Rachel) Nunes Henriques, who married Manuel (Isaac Haim de Abraham) Teixeira in Hamburg in the same year.³⁵ If the identification is correct, she may have been an ancestor of Abraham Texeira de Andrade, whose 1742 *ketubbah* or marriage contract with Sarah Suasso, signed in 1742 in The Hague, is included in the "Reality and Imagination" exhibition.³⁶

Inventories reveal just how prevalent portraits were in the Sephardim's Amsterdam homes. According to art historian Mirjam Knotter, of 1,110 paintings listed in 62 collections, 226 are portraits, the most common picture type.³⁷ Although the act of commissioning a portrait was rarely as fraught as the interaction between Rembrandt and d'Andrade, this episode

reveals the importance the Sephardim placed on preserving likenesses of family members. Portraits of Sephardi rabbis were also displayed in the offices of the congregation. By the end of the 17th century, the *mahamad*, or governing board of the community, apparently regularly commissioned portraits of the men who served as *hakham*, or rabbi, with identifying inscriptions in both Hebrew and Spanish.³⁸

The Sephardim also commissioned portraits in print. Dr. Ephraim Bueno (1599–1665), a prominent Sephardi physician, had his portrait etched twice: first by Rembrandt in 1647, and from some years later, by Jan Lievens, Rembrandt's former colleague and another former Lastman pupil. Rembrandt created both the etching (Fig. 2-7) and a small painted portrait (Fig. 2-8), for which the etching served as a preliminary study. Bueno had a successful career as a physician and philanthropist, giving him the public standing that warranted the circulation of multiple portrait prints. Bueno's success also allowed him to buy his rented family home in 1652, which was located on the edge of the Houtgracht, around the corner from Rembrandt's



Figure 2-7. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Ephraim Bueno (Bonus), Jewish Physician*, 1647, etching, drypoint, and engraving, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 2-8. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Ephraim Bueno (Bonus)*, 1647, oil on panel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

house and in the heart of what was known as the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam.³⁹ Rembrandt's introspective, intimate portrayal of Bueno as he pauses at the bottom of a staircase with hat and cloak (presumably, as he is about to leave his home) contrasts with Lievens's more formal and conventionally posed depiction of the famous Jewish doctor (Fig. 2-9). While some of Rembrandt's other Jewish sitters are unconfirmed, such as in the supposed etching of Menasseh ben Israel, or are only documented in the written record, like d'Andrade's commission, Bueno is a concrete example of a Sephardi Jew commissioning a portrait from the artist.

Other Sephardim with professional and social ties beyond the Jewish community also had themselves

portrayed in portrait prints. The two most famous rabbis in 17th-century Amsterdam, Menasseh ben Israel and Jacob Jehuda Leon, known as "Templo" for his reconstruction and studies of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, commissioned the Jewish printmaker Shalom Italia to engrave their portraits in the 1640s (Figs. 2-10 and 2-11). The prints served to reinforce and deepen the rabbis' reputations within broad networks of affiliation, and Latin inscriptions were included for the benefit of their non-Jewish audiences.

► Synagogues

Depictions of the Sephardi synagogue were popular both within and outside the Jewish community, as discussed in the introduction of this publication. When the Esnoga, the new Portuguese Sephardi



Figure 2-9. Jan Lievens, *Dr. Ephraim Bonus (Bueno)*, about 1640–1650, etching, bequest of Washington Irving Jenkins, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 2-10. Shalom Italia, Portrait of Jacob Jehuda Leon, 1640–1649, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 2-11. Shalom Italia, Portrait of Menasseh ben Israel, 1642, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

synagogue, was unveiled in 1675, Romeyn de Hooghe was commissioned by the synagogue's most important benefactors, who are identified on the print, to depict its interior at the dedication (Fig. 2-12). This print circulated widely outside of the Jewish community in impressions and later copies, including the 18th-century print by Claude Du Bosc (about 1682–1746), which is on display in the “Reality and Imagination” exhibition. Scenes of worship inside the synagogue also became popular as illustrations in books about Amsterdam's city monuments or about world religions.⁴⁰

The Dutch artist Emanuel de Witte (1617–1692), who specialized in church interiors, including the Oude Kerk Amsterdam (Fig. 2-13), also painted at least three views of the interior of the Sephardi synagogue (Fig. 2-14). De Witte's religious interiors play with the

effects of light and atmosphere, and he enlivened recognizable architectural spaces with staffage of thoughtful worshippers and other figures. Remarkably, the wealthy Sephardi merchant David de Abraham Cardozo (d. 1688) owned a painting of the synagogue by De Witte, which was explicitly mentioned in his will, drafted a year before his death. Setting the painting apart from the rest of his extensive possessions, the bachelor Cardozo instructed that it be bequeathed to his “good friend” Jacob Nunes Henriques.⁴¹ Though it is not possible to determine which, if any, of the surviving painting of the synagogue belonged to Cardozo, it probably resembled the version currently in the Rijksmuseum, which depicts the interior of the Esnoga during a service in 1680, five years after its dedication.

Whether a church or synagogue, these paintings seem to have carried personal religious meaning



Figure 2-12. Romeyn de Hooghe, *Interior of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam during the Consecration, 1675*, etching and engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 2-13. Emanuel de Witte, *Interior of the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam*, about 1660–1665, oil on canvas, gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 2-14. Emanuel de Witte, *Interior of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam*, 1680, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

for their owners. De Witte's church interiors are thought to reflect the owner's connection to the space where all stages of religious life proceeded and to declare their faith in God, as well as to mark civic pride in these sanctuaries erected in the cities of the Dutch Republic.⁴² De Witte's three known depictions of the Sephardi synagogue suggest that Amsterdam's minority Jewish population was aware of this trend—likely participating in it by either ordering or purchasing a depiction of their own house of worship from one of the most notable painters of church interiors.⁴³ The special consideration for the painting in Cardozo's will speaks to its personal significance, with its Jewish owner ensuring it remained in good hands.⁴⁴ Whether commissioned or purchased by members of the Sephardim, or Christian collectors interested in owning a view of the splendid new Jewish sanctuary, the paintings demonstrate the artistic allure of the synagogue space and a desire to depict it similarly to Christian churches across the Dutch Republic. They were stately and serene and signaling God's presence among the congregants.

► Beyond Paintings and Prints: Jewish Material Culture

Inventories of Sephardi households record Jewish ritual items or Judaica, including Torah scrolls with their adornments, prayer books, Esther scrolls (*megillot*), and Shabbat and Hanukkah lamps, some of which were probably lent to congregations for use in synagogue services. While Simona Di Nepi addresses these objects in another chapter of this publication, here we focus on Jewish collecting and domestic use of ceramics. Like the Sephardim's collecting and patronage of paintings and prints, the collecting of domestic, functional objects illuminate a pattern of acculturation and adaptation over the course of the early modern period. In the 17th century, members of the Sephardim imported Portuguese majolica (earthenware) as an expression of their Iberian heritage, preferring it over Asian porcelain and Dutch Delftware.⁴⁵ This preference for origin does not necessarily reflect a preference for form, as an example of a Portuguese Kraak plate (Fig. 2-15) demonstrates. Painted with birds and swirling natural forms along the rim, the decorations imitate Chinese Wanli porcelain, illustrating the desirability of blue and white Asian

ceramics. Examples of fine Portuguese “red ware” and the more practical “coarse ware” have also been discovered in archeological excavations around the Vlooienburg neighborhood in Amsterdam.⁴⁶ Some of the finer wares are even painted with Spanish and Portuguese family names and coats of arms, intended for display.⁴⁷

Moving into the 18th century, however, Delftware with Hebrew inscriptions starts to emerge, which suggests that members of the Sephardim, or even the Ashkenazim by this point, had assimilated Dutch aesthetic preferences. Produced in Delft by the Porcelain Claw Factory, a Passover plate (Fig. 2-16) combines the Hebrew inscription *Pesach*, or Passover, with blue and white floral decorations and a bright yellow rim. Used during Passover celebrations, this work demonstrates how Jews in the Dutch Republic used Dutch forms to fulfill their cultural practices in the home. Historian Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld recounts how, in 1718, Abraham Henriques Juliao, alias Diego Diaz del Campo (1661–1722), “had enough of his Portuguese majolica and put it in a chest up in the attic; from now on, he preferred Delft for his best room,” showing how Sephardi taste had evolved.⁴⁸ In this way, after the turn of the 18th century, a preference for Delftware demonstrated the furthering development of a unique Dutch Jewish identity.

► Book Publishing

Dutch Jewish identity manifested not only through material goods but also significantly through books printed in Amsterdam and disseminated across Europe. Amsterdam's reputation as the center of Jewish book printing emerged, as author Harm den Boer describes, “almost from the moment” Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1657) founded the city's first Hebrew press in 1627.⁴⁹ While Menasseh was financially supported by prominent members of the Sephardi community, including Ephraim Bueno, the near-immediate achievement of Hebrew printing presses was also due in part to Amsterdam's robust preexisting publishing networks, the quality of available paper, and a “climate of tolerance” that allowed for the publication of many works that would not have been possible abroad.⁵⁰

Further, unlike other avenues of artistic patronage and collecting in which the wealthier Sephardim were dominant, the Ashkenazim were also prominent in



Figure 2-15. Unknown Portuguese craftsman (Lisbon), “Kraak” plate, about 1640–1650, tin-glazed earthenware, The G. Ephes Collection—Museum purchase with funds donated anonymously, Charles Bain Hoyt Fund, John H. and Ernestine A. Payne Fund, Mary S. and Edward J. Holmes Fund, William Francis Warden Fund, Tamara Petrosian Davis Sculpture Fund, John Lowell Gardner Fund, Seth K. Sweetser Fund, H. E. Bolles Fund, and funds by exchange from the Kiyi and Edward M. Pflueger Collection-Bequest of Edward M. Pflueger and Gift of Kiyi Powers Pflueger; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 2-16. Porcelain Claw Factory, Passover plate, 18th century, tin-glazed earthenware, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 2-17. Menasseh ben Israel, *Piedra Gloriosa* open to Rembrandt's *Statue of Nebuchadnezzar Overthrown*, 1655, etching, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

the publishing industry, establishing the production of Yiddish texts alongside Hebrew ones.⁵¹ Author Shlomo Berger investigates how Amsterdam, as the center for the production of high-quality Yiddish books, became a symbol in the Ashkenazi diaspora of elevated Jewish culture.⁵² The subjects published ranged from the religious, initially including prayer books, and other texts intended to educate former Sephardi conversos in the ways of the Jewish faith, secular texts reflecting “the mundane interests of an Iberian merchant community,” and even works aimed at a non-Jewish reader.⁵³ In her chapter, Di Nepi discusses the 17th- and 18th-century Hebrew prayer books included in the “Reality and Imagination” exhibition. From this center of book production, one work emerges as a unique example of collaboration between a Jewish writer and a Dutch artist: Menasseh ben Israel’s theological text *Piedra Gloriosa*, published in 1655, for which Rembrandt etched four illustrations (Fig. 2-17). Perhaps the most famous instance of Jewish patronage of a Dutch artist, the project raises more questions than it answers. But the different states of some of Rembrandt’s illustrations, which were changed to align the compositions more closely with Menasseh’s

writing, are evidence of deeply unusual behavior for Rembrandt. Michael Zell explores Menasseh and Rembrandt’s involvement in another chapter.

► Conclusion

Patterns of collecting and patronage by Jewish people in the Dutch Republic reveals a lively and artistically engaged community. Though only a small subset of the population of Amsterdam, the Sephardim—particularly the elite—adapted to their host culture to define themselves as acculturated European Jews. Members of the Ashkenazim were similarly able to use Amsterdam’s printing press industry to establish themselves as culturally central in the Ashkenazi diaspora, constructing a Dutch Jewish identity that signaled cultural refinement to their peers abroad. Thus, the Dutch Jewish identity that emerged over the course of the 17th century was multifaceted, as can be gleaned through the stories of individuals that have been preserved. From these stories, a broader history of the Jewish people and communities converging in Amsterdam can be pieced together, manifested through their collecting habits, artistic patronage, and material culture.

- ¹ Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (University of California Press, 2002), 12.
- ² William H. Wilson, "'The Circumcision,' a Drawing by Romeyn de Hooghe," *Master Drawings* 13, no. 3 (1975): 255–56.
- ³ Wilson, "'The Circumcision,'" 250; and Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 14.
- ⁴ Yosef Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint His Three Pictures of the Sephardi Synagogue of Amsterdam?" in *Studia Rosenthaliana* 32 (Peeters, 1998), 133.
- ⁵ Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint," 135.
- ⁶ Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 12; and Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld, "Matters Matter, Material Culture of Dutch Sephardim (1600–1750)," in *Mapping Jewish Amsterdam: The Early Modern Perspective*, *Studia Rosenthaliana* (Peeters, 2012), 206.
- ⁷ Simon Schama, "A Different Jerusalem: The Jews in Rembrandt's Amsterdam," in *The Jews in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Ruth E. Levine and Susan W. Morgenstein (Judaic Museum of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington, 1981), 16.
- ⁸ Shlomo Berger, "Yiddish Book Production in Amsterdam Between 1650–1800: Local and International Aspects," in *The Dutch Intersection: The Jews and the Netherlands in Modern History*, ed. Yosef Kaplan (Brill, 2008), 203–12.
- ⁹ Bart Wallet describes a population of 23,000 Ashkenazim to 5,000 Sephardim in the 18th century. Bart Wallet, "Rembrandt's Other Jews: The Amsterdam Ashkenazim in the Seventeenth Century," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 86.
- ¹⁰ Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 29.
- ¹¹ Lastman's brother-in-law Francois Venant (about 1591–1636), Jan Tengnagel (1584–1635), brothers Jan (1582–1631) and Jacob Pynas (1592 or 1593–after 1650), and Moyses van Uyttenbroek (1600–1646) are also considered Pre-Rembrandtists. As described in Astrid Tümpel, *The Pre-Rembrandtists* (E. B. Crocker Art Gallery, 1974).
- ¹² Christian Tümpel, "The Iconography of the Pre-Rembrandtists," in *The Pre-Rembrandtists*, ed. Astrid Tümpel et al. (E. B. Crocker Art Gallery, 1974), 128.
- ¹³ Tümpel, "The Iconography of the Pre-Rembrandtists," 145.
- ¹⁴ Xander van Eck, "The Artist's Religion: Paintings Commissioned for Clandestine Catholic Churches in the Northern Netherlands, 1600–1800," *Simiolus* 22 (1999): 70.
- ¹⁵ Mirjam Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture in Rembrandt's Time," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 35; and Gabriel Pastoor, "Bijbelse historiestukken in particulier bezit," in *Het oude testament in de schilderkunst van de Gouden Eeuw*, ed. Christian Tümpel et al. (Waanders, 1991), 125.
- ¹⁶ Gary Schwartz, "Jewish Collectors Take Rembrandt to Their Hearts" in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 236.
- ¹⁷ Mirjam Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture in Rembrandt's Time," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 31.
- ¹⁸ Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture," 31.
- ¹⁹ Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture," 30–31.
- ²⁰ Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture," 31.
- ²¹ Gina Strumwasser, "Heroes, Heroines and Heroic Tales from the Old Testament: An Iconographic Analysis of the Most Frequently Represented Old Testament Subjects in Netherlandish Painting, ca. 1430–1570," PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1979, 134.
- ²² Arthur K. Wheelock and Laura Yeager-Crasselt, *The Leiden Collection Catalogue* (The Leiden Collection, 2020), 2–3.
- ²³ Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture," 34–35.
- ²⁴ Eric Jan Sluijter, *Rembrandt's Rivals: History Painting in Amsterdam, 1630–1650* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015), 447.
- ²⁵ Strumwasser, "Heroes, Heroines and Heroic Tales," 131.
- ²⁶ Rachel Adelman, "Seduction and Recognition in the Story of Judah and Tamar and the Book of Ruth" in *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 23 (2012): 88.
- ²⁷ Sluijter, *Rembrandt's Rivals*, 373.
- ²⁸ Sluijter, *Rembrandt's Rivals*, 362.
- ²⁹ Sluijter, *Rembrandt's Rivals*, 362.
- ³⁰ Sluijter, *Rembrandt's Rivals*, 368–72.
- ³¹ Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture," 36. For a discussion of the document, see Paul Crenshaw, *Rembrandt's Bankruptcy: The Artist, His Patrons, and the Art Market in Seventeenth-Century Netherlands* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 120–125.
- ³² Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture," 36.
- ³³ Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture," 37.
- ³⁴ The painting is listed as "Een Judin van Rembrant" and "Jodin van Rembrant van Rijn." See Friso Lammertse and Jaap van der Veen, *Uylenburgh & Son: Art and Commerce from Rembrandt to De Lairese, 1625–1675* (Waanders, 2006), 297 and 301; and Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture," 37.
- ³⁵ See Jaap van der Veen, "Faces from Life: *Tronies* and Portraits in Rembrandt's Painted Oeuvre," in *Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact*, ed. Albert Blankert et al. (Waanders, 1997), 77.
- ³⁶ Manuel Texeira moved to Amsterdam in 1698; his son David moved to The Hague between 1703 and 1708. David was the only of Manuel's four sons who added the name d'Andrade to his family name. The other sons were known as Texeira de Mattos.
- ³⁷ Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture," 36.
- ³⁸ See Richard Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, 115–52 (esp. 118–20); and Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint," 141–42.
- ³⁹ Mirjam Knotter, "Rembrandt and His (Jewish) Neighbors: A Stroll Through the Neighborhood," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 53–56.
- ⁴⁰ Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint," 143.
- ⁴¹ Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint His Three Pictures of the Sephardi Synagogue of Amsterdam?," 150–52. The will reads that the testator "bequeaths a painting that is in his possession, which depicts the Portuguese synagogue in this city, which was painted by Emanuel de Wit, to his good friend Mr Jacob Nunes Henriques." In a slightly earlier will, also from 1687, Cardozo bequeathed the painting to his nephew Abraham Nehemia Cardozo, and expressed his desire that it remain in the family after his nephew's death.
- ⁴² Walter Liedtke, "Delft Painting 'in Perspective': Carel Fabritius, Leonart Bramer, and the Architectural and Townscape Painters from about 1650 Onward," in *Vermeer and the Delft School*, ed. Walter Liedtke et al. (Yale University Press, 2001), 103.
- ⁴³ Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint," 153.
- ⁴⁴ Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint," 152–53.
- ⁴⁵ Bernfeld, "Matters Matter," 200.
- ⁴⁶ Marijn Stolk, "Exploring Immigrant Identities: The Link between Portuguese Ceramics and Sephardic Immigrants in 17th Century Amsterdam," *Ex Novo Journal of Archaeology*, 3 (2018): 101–20.
- ⁴⁷ Bernfeld, "Matters Matter," 200–201.

⁴⁸ Bernfeld, “Matters Matter,” 213.

⁴⁹ Harm den Boer, “Amsterdam as ‘Locus’ of Iberian Printing in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *The Dutch Intersection: The Jews and the Netherlands in Modern History*, ed. Yosef Kaplan (Brill, 2008), 87.

⁵⁰ Steven Nadler, “Rembrandt, Menasseh Ben Israel and Spinoza,” in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist’s Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 113; and Den Boer, “Amsterdam as ‘Locus’ of Iberian Printing,” 91.

⁵¹ Den Boer, “Amsterdam as ‘Locus’ of Iberian Printing,” 87.

⁵² Shlomo Berger, “Yiddish Book Production in Amsterdam Between 1650–1800: Local and International Aspects,” in *The Dutch Intersection: The Jews and the Netherlands in Modern History*, ed. Yosef Kaplan (Brill, 2008), 205.

⁵³ Den Boer, “Amsterdam as ‘Locus’ of Iberian Printing,” 92–93, 95.

Chapter 3

Rembrandt and the Rabbi: The Illustrations for the *Piedra Gloriosa*

by Michael Zell

In 1655, Rembrandt etched four illustrations for Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel's messianic treatise *Piedra Gloriosa*, or “The Glorious Stone” (Fig. 3-1). Recently, it has come to light that the Sephardi governing authorities, or *mahamad*, prohibited Menasseh from printing the book, though their reasons for doing so are not recorded.¹ The censorship may well have been related to the permissibility of figural images, which were considered idolatrous according to Orthodox Jewish law. If so, Rembrandt's illustrations may have been implicated in the book's ban. The Sephardi authorities may have had other objections to Menasseh's book. Whatever circumstances brought the artist and the rabbi together and caused concern among the Sephardi authorities, we need to look closely at Menasseh's imagery in the book to grasp fully the intrinsic significance of Rembrandt's prints. The detailed and vivid illustrations of the book's contents represent an exceptional moment of interfaith and intercultural collaboration in early modern Europe.

► Rembrandt and Menasseh

Rembrandt and Menasseh were close neighbors. The artist lived on the Sint Antoniesbreestraat, or Jodenbreestraat (Jewish Broad Street), an upscale boulevard that was home to many painters and art dealers, as well as merchants and trades people, including wealthy Sephardim. Menasseh lived on the adjacent Vlooienburg island, where Jews of more modest means tended to settle.²

Born in 1604 as the *converso* Manoel Dias Soerio, Menasseh fled the Portuguese Inquisition as a young boy after his father had been brutally tortured.³ After time in La Rochelle, France, the family eventually settled in Amsterdam in 1613/14. Although Rembrandt's etching of a man with a goatee of 1636 (Fig. 3-2) has traditionally been identified as Menasseh's portrait, the identification is doubtful.⁴ The man in Rembrandt's unusually informal portrayal bears a resemblance to the rabbi as he appears in



Figure 3-1. Menasseh ben Israel, *Piedra Gloriosa* open to Rembrandt's *Statue of Nebuchadnezzar Overthrown*, 1655, etching, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Salom Italia's engraved portrait of 1642 (Fig. 3-3), but the resemblance is not especially compelling, perhaps because of Italia's comparatively stiff and conventionalized treatment of the engraving. Some scholars have recently suggested that the traditional identification might still be credible.⁵

Rembrandt and Menasseh may have become involved in an earlier artistic project than the *Piedra Gloriosa*'s illustrations. Rembrandt's monumental *Belshazzar's Feast* (Fig. 3-4), of about 1636–1638, features a prominent and highly unusual Hebrew, or more precisely Aramaic, inscription for which the rabbi could have served as an advisor. In this intensely dramatic scene from the Book of Daniel (parts of which are written in Aramaic), the inscription “*Mene Mene Tekel Ufarsin*” is being written on a wall by a disembodied hand as a warning to Belshazzar for defiling gold and silver vessels looted from the Temple at Jerusalem at a drunken banquet. Only Daniel could decipher the cryptic message as a prophecy of this last Babylonian king's demise, fulfilled that night with the king's assassination and the Persian capture of his kingdom. In the painting, the carefully rendered, near-perfect inscription reads vertically from the right in five columns of three characters, rather than horizontally in accordance with Hebrew and Aramaic. Menasseh ben Israel published only this ordering of

the letters as the solution for the bewilderment of the Babylonians in his *De Termino Vitae* (Fig. 3-5), in 1639, never mentioning any of the other rabbinic solutions.⁶

Because conventional portrayals of the scene omit the prophetic warning, it seems very likely that Rembrandt either consulted the rabbi or perhaps another member of the Jewish community who knew Menasseh, or one of Menasseh's many contacts among Dutch Humanists, some of whom he taught Hebrew. Although Menasseh did not publish the formula until a few years after Rembrandt's painting, the calligraphic form of the letters in the picture, which differs from the printed letters in *De Termino Vitae*, suggests that Menasseh or someone acquainted with him had written out the inscription for Rembrandt to copy, and that Rembrandt was not supervised when he slightly and mistakenly changed the last letter from a *ṣ* (zayin) to a *ṇ* (nun), which is correct in the underpainting.⁷ The painting's early provenance is unknown, but it may have been destined for a collector in Menasseh's circle of Christian contacts, as a Jewish collector would not likely have accepted the error in the last letter.⁸

In the 1630s, the rabbi had become the spokesman of Jewish learning for Dutch Humanists, including Gerardus Vossius (Gerard Vos) and his son Isaac



Figure 3-2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of a Man* (Menasseh ben Israel?), 1636, etching, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 3-3. Shalom Italia, *Portrait of Menasseh ben Israel*, 1642, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 3-4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Belshazzar's Feast*, about 1636–1638, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London.

160 *Menasseh ben Israel*
 quam postea etiam obtinuit: hæc
 enim mentis rationalis operatio
 est: quæ in illo non fuisset, si in
 bestiam conversus fuisset. Ratio
 est, quia in uno & eodem subje-
 cto, non potest esse anima irra-
 tionalis, & rationalis.

II I. Balthesare cū optimatibus
 regni sui convivante visa est ma-
 nus scribentis angeli in pariete:

ס	ו	ת	מ	מ
י	פ	ק	נ	נ
י	ר	ל	א	א

Eam sapientes non potue-
 runt legere; multo minus sensum
 ejus rei, quæ scripta erat, asse-
 qui: quia legebant linea recta,
 cum longa debuissent. At Daniel
 ubi accessit, legit scriptum, ut
 oportuit, & interpretans illud
 ait regi, Deum numerasse regnū
 ejus, quod ei dederat, appen-
 sumque

Figure 3-5. Menasseh ben Israel, *De Termino Vitæ*, 1639, page 160, courtesy Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, Allard Pierson, University of Amsterdam.

Vossius (Vos), to whom Menasseh dedicated the *Piedra Gloriosa*, Caspar Barlaeus (Caspar van Baerle), Hugo Grotius (Hugo de Groot), Simon Episcopius (Bisschop), Gerbrand Anslo, and Dr. Johannes Beverovicus (Johan van Beverwijck). In fact, Menasseh's *De Termino Vitæ* resulted from Beverovicus's request to provide the Jewish perspective on a heated dispute among Dutch Calvinists centering on the issue of Predestination. More liberal or Remonstrant Calvinists like Beverovicus, and other Humanists with whom Menasseh was engaged, opposed strict Counter

Remonstrant Calvinists, who embraced an inflexible approach to Predestination, insisting instead that free will plays a role in determining the outcome of human life, not divine predestination alone. Menasseh supported their liberal position and, in the book, refers to the mysterious prediction of Belshazzar's demise, among other revelations, to demonstrate that God's prophecies are deliberately veiled and that their outcome depends upon the exercise of human reason.⁹

► The *Piedra Gloriosa*

The *Piedra Gloriosa* o de la Estatua de Nebuchadnesar (The Glorious Stone or the Statue of Nebuchadnezzar), of 1655, represents a genre of literature fundamentally different from *De Termino Vitæ* or most of Menasseh's publications of the 1630s and 1640s. In this explicitly messianic text, he identifies a miraculous stone that demolishes a colossal statue dreamt by King Nebuchadnezzar in the Book of Daniel as the key to the fulfillment of the prophecy of the destruction of Israel's oppressors and the inauguration of an imminent ideal, messianic era. Menasseh interprets the stone as the Messiah, whom he believes reappears in this form across multiple biblical stories.

Rembrandt etched three scenes featuring this miraculous stone: The statue toppled by the stone in King Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2), Jacob dreaming of angels as he rests on the stone (Genesis 28), and David slaying Goliath with his sling and stone (1 Samuel 17). Rembrandt's fourth and most complex illustration conflates two sequential episodes from the Book of Daniel: Daniel's vision of four terrifying beasts emerging from the sea and the Messiah standing before God enthroned, which Menasseh discussed at length in the conclusion.¹⁰

In the address to the reader, Menasseh describes Rembrandt's small images (each measures only about 10 x 7 cm) as accompaniments to his exegesis ("for greater clarity of what is said, I have made on plates four figures with great precision"), noting that "all this was costly, and [required] even some work and industry."¹¹ Rembrandt apparently based three of the scenes on Protestant biblical illustrations and originally etched all four on one plate (Fig. 3-6).¹² Significant changes in Rembrandt's designs for the first two scenes, the *Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar*



Figure 3-6. Rembrandt van Rijn, Four Illustrations to Menasseh ben Israel's *Piedra Gloriosa*, the uncut plate: *The Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar*, *Daniel's Vision of the Four Beasts*, *David and Goliath*, *Jacob's Ladder*, 1655, etching, drypoint, and burin with plate tone on Japanese paper, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

and *Jacob's Ladder*, reveal that in these episodes the artist struggled to accommodate the rabbi's instructions.

Only 9 of the 23 extant copies of the *Piedra Gloriosa* contain Rembrandt's illustrations, all of which are late states.¹³ Although many of these etchings were likely removed and sold on the art market, the numerous impressions Rembrandt made of the early states indicate that he conceived of them not only as trial proofs but as autonomous artworks that were available for purchase by collectors. This would account in part for the large number of impressions of the illustrations in museum collections today, including eight in the MFA: one impression of *The Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar* (Fig. 3-7), two impressions each of *Jacob's Ladder* (Fig. 3-8) and *David and Goliath* (Fig. 3-9), and three of *Daniel's*

Vision of the Four Beasts (Fig. 3-10). Many were even printed on vellum and Japanese paper, special and expensive supports that would have appealed to connoisseurs or *liefhebbers* (art lovers).

Rembrandt's production of these deluxe impressions is consistent with his focus in these years on cultivating a discriminating, rarefied audience of collectors.¹⁴ The original presentation volume belonging to the Humanist Isaac Vossius, to whom Menasseh dedicated the *Piedra Gloriosa*, still survives with Rembrandt's etchings bound to it at Leiden University Library. In four other volumes, however, his illustrations were replaced by aesthetically inferior engraved imitations, which are sometimes erroneously attributed to the Jewish artist Shalom Italia (Figs. 3-11, 3-12, 3-13, and 3-14). One significant change was introduced: in the engraved



Figure 3-7. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar*, 1655, etching, engraving, and drypoint, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 3-8. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jacob's Ladder*, 1655, etching, drypoint, and engraving, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 3-9. Rembrandt van Rijn, *David and Goliath*, 1655, etching, engraving, and drypoint, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 3-10. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Daniel's Vision of the Four Beasts*, 1655, etching, engraving, and drypoint, gift of Mrs. Lydia Evans Tunnard in memory of W. G. Russell Allen, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

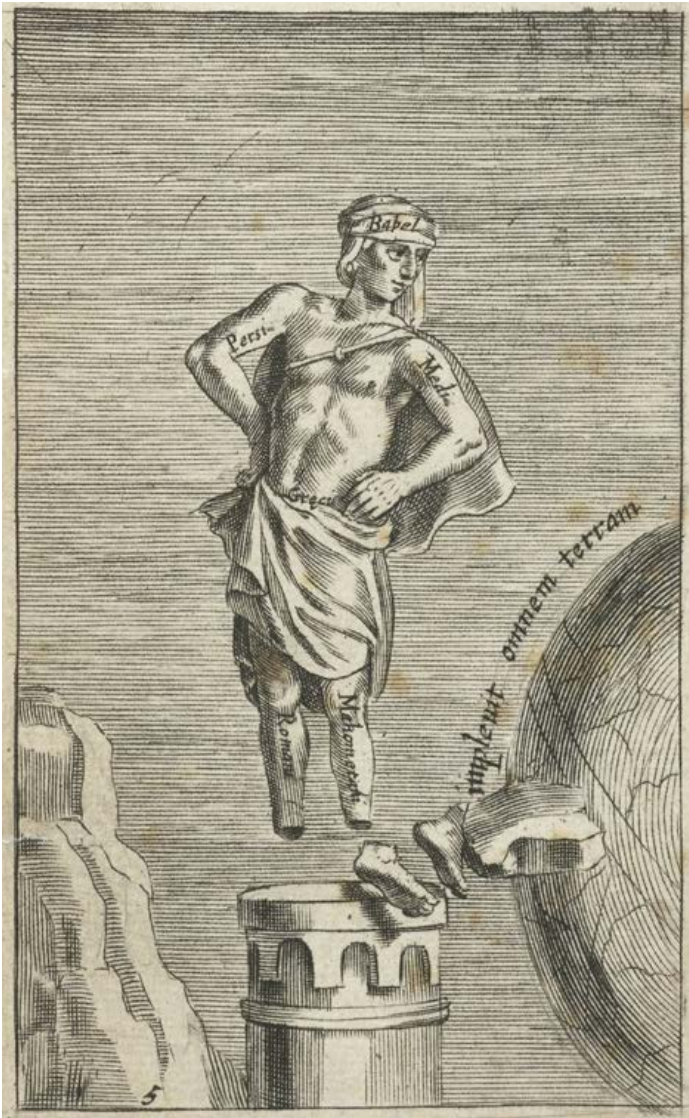


Figure 3-11. Rembrandt imitator, *The Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar*, in or after 1655—about 1665, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 3-12. Rembrandt imitator, *Jacob's Ladder*, in or after 1655—about 1665, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 3-13. Rembrandt imitator, *David and Goliath*, in or after 1655—about 1665, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 3-14. Rembrandt imitator, *Daniel's Vision of the Four Beasts*, in or after 1655—about 1665, engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

version of *Daniel's Vision* (Fig. 3-14), Rembrandt's anthropomorphic rendering of God as an old, bearded man seated on a throne was replaced with a circle of heavenly light or nimbus.

The existence of these engraved imitations has led some scholars to question whether Menasseh accepted Rembrandt's originals and even whether Rembrandt was involved in the book's production at all. The skepticism stems largely from the revised *Daniel's Vision*, which some attribute to Menasseh's presumed objection to Rembrandt's figural representation of God, which ultimately resulted in the substitution of Rembrandt's originals with the engraved imitations. According to this view, someone other than Menasseh—perhaps one of his Christian contacts, such as Isaac Vossius—had Rembrandt's illustrations bound with the text. However, Rembrandt's modification of two of the illustrations to ensure that his images matched the rabbi's interpretations of the scenes demonstrates that he was deeply familiar with the book's contents and probably collaborated closely with Menasseh.

► Rembrandt's Changes to the Illustrations

Successive states of *The Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar* and *Jacob's Ladder* record Rembrandt's adaptation of his work to achieve the clearest visual equivalent of Menasseh's writing. The initial design of *The Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar* (Fig. 3-15) shows the legs of the colossus shattered above and below the knee by the stone, which appears at the left. In the third state of the print, however, Rembrandt redrew the legs, correcting the image to correspond with the biblical text's specification that the statue was struck at its feet (Daniel 2:34). The stone and the globe symbolizing the "filling of the earth" that ensues afterwards were also transferred to the right. In the fourth and fifth states, Rembrandt introduced Latin inscriptions designating the oppressors of Israel that Menasseh identified with the statue's various parts and materials.¹⁵ The only states included in the book are those containing the inscriptions of the names of the monarchies, which match Menasseh's description of the illustration.

In the second and third states of *Jacob's Ladder*, Rembrandt also changed his original idea for the scene (Fig. 3-16) by extending the ladder and adding rungs to align his image with Menasseh's



Figure 3-15. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar*, 1655, etching, drypoint, and burin on Japanese paper, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

assertion that Jacob lay at its center. The rabbi interpreted the ladder as an emblem of Judea and thus Jerusalem, as well as Jacob, at its symbolic center. The result of the change is an odd image of the sleeping patriarch suspended in air. In his willingness to make this odd modification, as well as add incongruous inscriptions to *The Image Seen by Nebuchadnezzar*, Rembrandt was evidently, and very unusually, prepared to compromise his artistic ideals to satisfy Menasseh's stipulations.

Rembrandt's alteration of two of the etchings to align the images more closely with the book's content reflects an exceptional degree of cooperation. Documents relating to disputes with the Amsterdam Sephardi Jew Diego d'Andrade in 1654, the Sicilian nobleman Don Antonio Ruffo in 1662, and the Genoese nobleman Francesco Maria Sauli in 1666, show that the artist could be obstinate with other patrons.¹⁶ The motivation for Rembrandt's anomalous behavior remains a



Figure 3-16. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jacob's Ladder*, 1655, etching, drypoint, and burin, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

matter of speculation, as is Menasseh's decision to hire a notoriously difficult artist to illustrate his text. Whether the rabbi could have afforded the fee that Rembrandt could command is unclear, despite earning a more substantial income in 1654, as was recently discovered.¹⁷

It should be acknowledged that Rembrandt's etchings, especially the complex, delicately etched plates for the three scenes depicting visionary passages—*The Vision of Nebuchadnezzar*, *Jacob's Ladder*, and *Daniel's Vision*—are highly unusual and not especially suitable as book illustrations. Rembrandt exploited the rich effects of drypoint burr to create an atmosphere of dark mystery, which would have been particularly susceptible to wear, yielding only a relatively small number of high-quality impressions. These technically unusual prints suggest that Rembrandt's collaboration with Menasseh may not have been purely transactional, as the rabbi could have hired a specialized, less costly book illustrator. Rembrandt also rarely undertook such work. In 1633, he designed an allegorical plate, *The Ship of Fortune*, to illustrate Elias Herckman's *Der Zeevaert Lof* (In Praise of Sea-Faring, 1634) and, in 1648, he etched a classical scene as a frontispiece for Jan Six's neo-Stoic tragedy *Medea*. The latter project, however, was not a typical commission, because the scene Rembrandt depicted—the abused Medea secretly attending the wedding of Jason and Creusa—does not occur in Six's play. Rembrandt invented the scene to serve as an introductory image for the work of his patron and friend.¹⁸

Later, Rembrandt seems to have run into trouble for using an etching instead of an engraving for a book illustration. In 1664, his son, Titus, recommended Rembrandt for the commission to engrave a portrait of Jan Anthonides van der Linden for the physician's edition of *Hippocrates*, published posthumously. Rembrandt's etching (Fig. 3-17) was never used for the book—probably because the contract with the Leiden publishers specified an engraved portrait.¹⁹

► Conclusion

Rembrandt's prints were clearly satisfactory to Menasseh, and he therefore did not commission the engraved imitations of Rembrandt's illustrations. The anonymous engravings may well have been undertaken due to the objections of Sephardi

authorities who, as historian Victor Tiribás discovered, banned Menasseh from printing the book, perhaps because they considered the bodily representation of God a violation of the prohibition against images.²⁰ It is also conceivable that the *mahamad*, which while never opposed to Menasseh's engagement with Christian scholars and theologians in the 1630s and 1640s, was not as favorably disposed to his active participation in the 1650s in an interfaith dialogue with Christian theologians, which formed a backdrop for his publication of the messianic *Piedra Gloriosa*.²¹ In contrast with his earlier involvement with Dutch Humanists, in this decade, Menasseh cooperated closely, though strategically, with a group of nonsectarian, ecumenical Protestant theologians who shared his belief in the imminent messianic salvation of the world. In their perspective, of course, the Messiah awaited by the rabbi and his coreligionists was Christ, who in his second coming would convert and redeem the entire world, including the Jews. Menasseh never sanctioned his interlocutors' Christian version of the Messianic Era, yet he nonetheless harnessed their attentions in an effort to mediate the rivalries between Judaism and Christianity and forge a common ground to advance the welfare of his people.

The *Piedra Gloriosa* emerged from this moment of Jewish-Christian rapprochement, offering a messianic age of peace and prosperity for all people and emphasizing repeatedly that Christians who receive the Jews with tolerance and empathy will share in an imminent, idealized future. Published in Spanish, the book addresses the Sephardi Jews across the diaspora and *conversos* publicly living as Catholics in the Iberian empire. When Menasseh wanted to address Christian theologians and intellectuals in the republic of letters, he did so publishing, most commonly, in Latin, such as in *De Termino Vitae* (1635) or the *Spes Israeli* (1650), or English, such as the English edition of *The Hope of Israel* (1651) and the *Vindiciae Judaeorum* (Vindication of Judaism) of 1656. Nonetheless, the *Piedra Gloriosa* was shaped in part and responds to the overtures of these ecumenical Protestant theologians, including the chiliast Paul Felgenhauer, who dedicated his messianic *Bonum Nuncium Israeli* (Good News for Israel) of 1655 to Menasseh. In fact, the rabbi's engagement with these theologians, his campaign on behalf of Jewish rights, and the *Piedra Gloriosa*



Figure 3-17. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Jan Anthonides van der Linden*, 1665, etching, drypoint, and burin, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

were profoundly intertwined. Menasseh published the book on the eve of his departure for London to petition for readmission of the Jews to England, from where they had been banished since 1290.

Although we may never know the specific reasons that brought Menasseh and Rembrandt together in this project, the rabbi's decision to provide illustrations "for greater clarity of what is said" aligns with his receptivity to Christians and Christian theology and his commitment to interfaith

cooperation. Whether Rembrandt had an affinity for the Jewish people, which his illustration of Menasseh's text has sometimes taken to confirm, or whether the artist and rabbi were friends, may be unknowable. Still, Rembrandt was intimately familiar with the contents of the *Piedra Gloriosa* and endeavored to create compelling visual translations of the rabbi's interpretations of the Scriptures. The two men were collaborators, which, given 17th-century European religious and social norms, was truly extraordinary.

- ¹ This chapter draws from and updates sections of my book *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (University of California Press, 2002). My thanks to Victor Tiribás for his input.
Steven Nadler and Victor Tiribás, “Rembrandt’s Etchings for Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*: A Mystery Solved,” *Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* (2021), and Nadler and Tiribás, “Jewish Censorship of Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*: A New Document from the Archives,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 111 (2021): 323–34.
- ² Menasseh and his family resided on the adjoining Vlooienburg island, perhaps in the house of his brother-in-law Jonas Abrabanel, Huis Sloterdijk (later Zwanenburgerstraat 61). See Mirjam Knotter, “Rembrandt and His (Jewish) Neighbors: A Stroll Through the Neighborhood,” in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist’s Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 57.
- ³ Menasseh’s place of birth is debatable, with some documents indicating Lisbon but others La Rochelle and even the island of Madeira. See Steven Nadler, *Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi of Amsterdam* (Yale University Press, 2018), 8, 234.
- ⁴ Menasseh was first identified as the sitter by Edmé-François Gersaint in 1751. See Edmé-François Gersaint, *Catalogue raisonné de toutes les pieces qui forment l’oeuvre de Rembrandt* (Paris, 1751), no. 249, 195. It has been argued that this source is too late to be considered reliable. See in particular F. J. Dubiez, “Drie beeldende kunstenaars en drie rabbijnen te Amsterdam in zeventiende eeuw,” *Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* 92 (1992): 23–29, and S. A. C. Dudok van Heel, “Rembrandt en Menasseh ben Israel,” citing earlier objections.
- ⁵ See Erik Hinterding and Jaco Rutgers, *Rembrandt: The New Hollstein Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450–1700* (Sound and Vision Publishers, 2013), 3, and Laurence Sigal-Klagsbad, “Rembrandt as Seen by Jewish Museums,” in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist’s Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 230–31.
- ⁶ In 1904, Johannes Dyserinck identified Rembrandt’s source for the unusual arrangement of the letters as one of three formulas suggested in the Talmud. In 1963, Reiner Haussherr linked the painting’s inscription to Menasseh’s publication of the code in this form in his *De Termino Vitae*. See Johannes Dyserinck, “Eene Hebreuwsche inscriptie op eene schilderij van Rembrandt,” *De Nederlandse Spectator* 49 (1904): 160–61, and Reiner Haussherr, “Zur Menetkel-Inschrift auf Rembrandt’s Belsazarbild,” *Oud Holland* 78 (1963): 142–49. See further Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 59–63, and Nadler and Tiribás, “Rembrandt’s Etchings for Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*,” 3–5.
- ⁷ On this relatively minor error, see Robert Littman, “An Error in the Menetkel Inscription in Rembrandt’s *Belshazzar’s Feast* in the National Gallery in London,” *Oud Holland* 107 (1993): 296–97. Shalom Sabar, “Between Calvinists and Jews: Hebrew Script in Rembrandt’s Art,” in *Beyond the Yellow Badge: Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism in Medieval and Early European Modern Visual Culture*, ed. Mitchell Merback (Brill, 2008), 389–90, argues that Rembrandt did not err but purposefully depicted God’s hand actively writing the last letter, which is not yet complete; however, Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz are skeptical, questioning whether Menasseh or any learned Jew would approve of the inscription. See Mirjam Knotter, “Rembrandt’s Hebrew,” *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 51 (2009): 30–31, and Gary Schwartz, “Rembrandt’s Hebrews” *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 51 (2009): 35–36.
- ⁸ Michael Montias suggested that Rembrandt’s painting had been commissioned by Jean Le Bleu, who owned an anonymous painting titled *Een stuck daer inne mene, mene, tekel*. See John Michael Montias, *Art at Auction in 17th Century Amsterdam* (Amsterdam University Press, 2002), 204–8.
- ⁹ Only after Daniel had correctly interpreted the cryptic warning, Menasseh writes, was God’s plan fulfilled, for only then did the frightened eunuchs of the Babylonian court kill Belshazzar, bring his head to the Persians, and advise his enemies to seize Babylon. The Persians then recognized Daniel’s gifts and “were very favorable to the Jews upon this account.” Quoted from the English translation of 1709: Menasseh ben Israel, *On the Term of Life, viz. Whether it is Fix’d or Alterable*, trans. Thomas Peacock (1709), 82. On the interconnections between Rembrandt’s *Belshazzar’s Feast*, Menasseh’s *De Termino Vitae*, and his involvement with Remonstrant Humanists in the 1630s, see in particular Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 64–9.
- ¹⁰ Menasseh ben Israel, *Piedra Gloriosa o de la Estatua de Nebuchadnesar* (Menasseh ben Israel, 1655). This discussion of Rembrandt’s illustration of Menasseh’s text is taken largely from Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 72–84. For a recent analysis, see Nadler and Tiribás, “Rembrandt’s Etchings for Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*.”
- ¹¹ Menasseh ben Israel, *Piedra Gloriosa*, “Al Lector,” n.p. Japer Hillegers, “A Painter Goes to the Rabbi: Rembrandt and Menasseh ben Israel,” in Epco Runia and David DeWitt, *Rembrandt’s Social Network: Family, Friends and Acquaintances* (Waanders, 2018), 116, reads the preface as saying Menasseh made the etchings himself, which Nadler and Tiribás rightly refute. See Nadler and Tiribás, “Rembrandt’s Etchings for Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*,” 7–8.
- ¹² For Rembrandt’s illustrations, see also Henri van de Waal, “Rembrandt’s Etchings for Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*” (1954–55), reprinted in *Steps Towards Rembrandt: Collected Articles, 1937–1972*, ed. Rudi Fuchs, trans. Patricia Wardle and Alan Griffiths (North Holland, 1974), 113–32; Christian Tümpel, with Astrid Tümpel, *Rembrandt legt die Bibel aus: Zeichnungen und Radierungen aus dem Kupferstichkabinett der Staatlichen Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin* (Kupferstichkabinett der Staatlichen Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 1970); and Erik Hinterding and Jaco Rutgers, *Rembrandt: The New Hollstein Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450–1700* (Sound and Vision Publishers, 2013), 248–51.
- ¹³ Nadler and Tiribás, “Rembrandt’s Etchings for Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*,” 10.
- ¹⁴ As Erik Hinterding notes, by 1654, Rembrandt approached printmaking less like a businessman, prioritizing the broad distribution of relatively uniform editions to maximize sales and “more like a connoisseur.” See Erik Hinterding, *Rembrandt as an Etcher: The Practice of Production and Distribution* (Sound and Vision Publishers, 2006), 144.
- ¹⁵ A trial proof on Japanese paper with the names of the nations inscribed in pen and ink is in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.
- ¹⁶ For the D’Andrade and Ruffo documents and commentary, see Strauss and Van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents*, docs. 1654/4, 310–11; 1662/11, 506–8; and 1662/12, 509; and Crenshaw, *Rembrandt’s Bankruptcy*, 120–35. For the Sauli documents and analysis, see Lauro Magnani, “1666. Een onbekende opdracht uit Genua voor Rembrandt,” *Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* (2007): 3–17.
- ¹⁷ Nadler and Tiribás, “Rembrandt’s Illustrations for Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*,” 8, report that Menasseh was awarded an annual stipend of 600 guilders in 1654. As a comparison, in the same year Rembrandt illustrated the *Piedra Gloriosa*, he received a commission to etch the portrait of Otto van Kattenburch for 400 guilders, an exceptionally high amount for a print. See Strauss and Van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents*, doc. 1655/9, 333–35, and Nadler and Tiribás, “Rembrandt’s Illustrations for Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*,” 8.
- ¹⁸ For Rembrandt’s other book illustrations in relation to his illustrations for *Piedra Gloriosa*, see Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 83, with further references.

¹⁹ For the document, see Strauss and Van der Meulen, *The Rembrandt Documents*, doc. 1665/6, 541–43.

²⁰ Nadler and Tiribás, “Rembrandt’s Etchings for Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*, and Adler and Tiribás, “Jewish Censorship of Menasseh ben Israel’s *Piedra Gloriosa*.”

²¹ For the relationship between the *Piedra Gloriosa* and Menasseh’s close involvement with Protestant “philo-semitic” theologians in 1650s, see Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 84–96, with further references.

▶ Chapter 4

The Representation of Jewish People in Rembrandt's Amsterdam

by Megan Hinckley and Jenna Wendler

As Jewish immigrants settled in Amsterdam during the 17th century, they became more visible in artistic depictions. This development is exemplified in the work of Rembrandt, who lived on the Jodenbreestraat, or the Jews' Broad Street, which, at the time, was both the city's art center and home to significant populations of Sephardi and, increasingly, Ashkenazi Jews. Rembrandt's encounters with his Jewish neighbors are documented, and the artist surely observed and interacted with members of both communities in his everyday life. Though other artists lived and worked in this neighborhood, Rembrandt is a unique case study, in part because his representations of Jewish figures shift noticeably from before he moved from Leiden to Amsterdam to after, once he was living alongside Jews as his neighbors and clients. This chapter examines this transition in Rembrandt's oeuvre, considering how Jewish figures in his biblical scenes evolve from sidelined, typecast players into independent depictions of Jewish subjects that highlight the sitter's emotional interiority and humanity.

▶ Jews as Subjects in Rembrandt's Biblical Narratives

From early in his career, Rembrandt typecast Jewish figures in New Testament scenes. In *St. John the Baptist Preaching* from 1634–1635 (Fig. 4-1), the three Pharisees in the center, with their backs turned to St. John, are harshly caricatured stereotypes that serve as foils to the

subject's Christian message. Rembrandt fills John the Baptist's audience with the diversity of the known world in the 17th century, with some figures identifiable by costumes that signified different parts of the world for early modern Europeans. For example, a Japanese man appears in full samurai armor and an Indigenous American wears a feathered headdress. There are several Black



Figure 4-1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *St. John the Baptist Preaching*, 1634–1635, canvas on oak panel, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (Photo: Christoph Schmidt).



Figure 4-2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ Before Pilate: The Large Plate*, 1636, etching, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Africans and a man riding on horseback in a turban, which associates him with the Islamic world or the Near or Middle East. The three central figures with long beards who walk away from St. John's preaching are identified as Jews by their prayer shawls (*tallitot*) with legible Hebrew script, which reads, "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." A central tenet of Judaism that is repeated satirically in the Gospel of Matthew, this line's presence here stresses the Jewish scribes (Pharisees) as opponents to Christ.¹ Positioned in the center of the composition and facing away from John the Baptist, the Jewish trio is shown to reject the Christian message of salvation. Rembrandt's inclusion of figures representing the four known continents among the crowd of John's listeners subtly affirms European missionary efforts across the globe.² Even

as others listen attentively, or encourage children to listen, the Jews are represented as actively refusing the Christian message.

Rembrandt caricatures Jewish figures as antagonists to Christianity even more explicitly in *Christ Before Pilate: The Large Plate* from about the following year (Fig. 4-2). The scene depicts the moment in the Gospel of John when Christ is presented to a hostile crowd before his crucifixion. Directly in front of Christ is a group of four Pharisees kneeling on the dais, aggressively thrusting the ceremonial rod of justice on Pontius Pilate, who is shown refusing it.³ These figures are made visibly Jewish by their attire, including the *tallit* with a Hebrew inscription, as in *St. John the Baptist Preaching*. The text reads "Thou shalt not kill" from Exodus 20:13, ironically juxtaposing their demands for Christ's death and their devotion



Figure 4-3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Abraham Casting Out Hagar and Ishmael*, 1637, etching and drypoint, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

to the tenets of Judaism.⁴ Their exaggerated facial features convey their anger and hostility in contrast to Christ's gentle detachment. Rembrandt uses this emotive contrast to emphasize the divide between Judaism and Christianity.

Both works were completed shortly after Rembrandt settled permanently in Amsterdam in 1632. These early representations align with the stereotypical caricatures of Jewish individuals that were established by Rembrandt's predecessors. However, there is a notable shift in his depiction of Jewish figures from the late 1630s through the remainder of his career. Although we cannot be certain why this change took place, the timeline coincides with Rembrandt's move to what was then

considered Amsterdam's Jewish neighborhood. This suggests that Rembrandt's observations of and interactions with real Jewish people in his neighborhood may have informed his portrayal of Jewish people and of Jewish identity.

Rembrandt's etching of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament scene of *Abraham Casting Out Hagar and Ishmael* (Fig. 4-3) of 1637 exemplifies his increasingly nuanced portrayal of Jewish figures. In this biblical story, Sarah, Abraham's wife, orders him to banish their enslaved servant Hagar and his son Ishmael. Abraham dominates the center of the etching, his outstretched arm bridging the gap between Sarah and Hagar, while his face conveys his anguish and uncertainty about abandoning the



Figure 4-4. Pieter Lastman, *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael*, 1612, oil on canvas, Hamburger Kunsthalle (Photo: Elke Walford / Art Resource, NY).

mother of his child. On the right, Hagar sobs as she leads their son away. While the story of Abraham was a popular subject in 17th-century Dutch art, Rembrandt transforms this dramatic moment between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar into a work with strong emotional resonance, especially in comparison to earlier precedents.⁵ In the painting *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael* (Fig. 4-4) by Rembrandt's teacher Pieter Lastman, Abraham is turned away from the viewer, obscuring his reaction to this emotionally charged event. Both artists were likely looking to Lucas van Leyden's print *Abraham Banishing Hagar and Ishmael* from 1516 (Fig. 4-5), where the figures are rigid and their expressions placid. By changing the composition and including visual markers of emotional distress, Rembrandt grounds his version of the scene in the conflicting desires of the central characters, emphasizing their humanity.⁶

In creating an emotionally charged and visually compelling depiction of this Old Testament scene,

Rembrandt appealed to both Jewish and Christian audiences. In 1637, Rembrandt sold the etching plate for *Abraham Casting Out Hagar and Ishmael* to the Sephardi painter Samuel d'Orta, who most likely bought it to produce and sell his own impressions.⁷ As discussed in a previous chapter, this episode suggests the broader audience that Rembrandt's Old Testament scenes attracted in his Jodenbreestraat neighborhood. Rembrandt's representation of Abraham's emotional turmoil emphasizes his human nature, making this scene more accessible to diverse audiences, to whom he catered with the widely available and affordable medium of printmaking.

Both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews lived in Rembrandt's Amsterdam neighborhood, and both appear in his art. However, affluent Sephardim, like Ephraim Bueno and Diego d'Andrade, had the resources to commission portraits, while Ashkenazi men, who were generally less well-off and acculturated and could be identified by their distinctive dress, hats, and untrimmed beards,



Figure 4-5. Lucas van Leyden, *Abraham Banishing Hagar and Ishmael*, 1516, engraving, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 4-6. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Two Men in Conversation (Two Jews in Discussion, Walking)*, about 1640–1650, black chalk and brown ink, Teylers Museum.

appear primarily as anonymous types. In the chalk sketch *Two Jews in Discussion, Walking* from the 1640s (Fig. 4-6), Rembrandt captured an informal exchange between two men whose scraggly beards, large floppy hats, and caftan-like robes were characteristic of Amsterdam's Ashkenazi residents. Rembrandt's slightly later chalk drawing, *Four Men Standing, Wearing Hats* from about 1650 (Fig. 4-7) shows his continued process of observing his Ashkenazi Jewish neighbors from life. Here, Rembrandt sketched a closed conversation between three presumably Jewish men with untrimmed beards, hats, and voluminous robes while the fourth man on the left in a more detailed vest, trousers, and shirt may be a soldier, as the old title suggests. These drawings affirm Rembrandt's indirect engagement with Amsterdam's Ashkenazim, sketching them from life potentially to integrate into his prints and paintings.



Figure 4-7. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Four Men Standing, Wearing Hats*, about 1650, black chalk, white chalk, framing lines in black ink over brown ink, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Rembrandt's evolving portrayal of Jewish figures coincides with a broader aesthetic shift in Dutch art toward greater naturalism and lifelikeness. While Jewish figures had frequently featured in New Testament narratives as antagonists to Christ and his followers, overt caricatures gave way in the 17th century to depictions of Jews based on observations of real Jewish people and their way of life.⁸ This visual shift in Dutch art coincides with and may relate to the rise and importance of Christian Hebraists in the Republic, Calvinist scholars who studied Hebrew—in some cases with Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel—to understand better original scriptural sources and Jewish traditions. But while this curiosity was primarily a friendly exchange of ideas, it often still held undertones of prejudice.⁹ This implicit bias sometimes became explicit. For example, a 1681 inventory describes a painting as a Polish Jew with the colloquial Dutch slur, *smous*.¹⁰ This disparaging



Figure 4-8. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jews in the Synagogue*, 1648, etching and drypoint, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

language is also used in a 1732 inventory to describe Rembrandt's *Four Men Standing, Wearing Hats* from about 1650 (Fig. 4-7) as “Een soldaetje bij 3 Smousen” (A Soldier with 3 “Smousen”).¹¹ Although Rembrandt and other Dutch artists may have been moving away from blatantly stereotyped depictions of Jewish people, these derogatory characterizations reveal a continuing underlying bias.

From the later 1640s, Rembrandt seems to have incorporated the direct observation of his sketches of Jewish figures into biblical prints, such as the so-called *Jews in the Synagogue*, or *Pharisees in the Temple*, dated 1648 (Fig. 4-8); *The Hundred Guilder Print*, completed about 1649 (Fig. 4-9); and *Christ Preaching* (known as *La Petite Tombe*), from about 1649 (Fig. 4-10). In each print, clusters of Jewish men with floppy hats, long robes, and scraggly beards that were characteristic of the Ashkenazim represent biblical Hebrews. As the 1679 title *Pharisees in the Temple* (*Phariseen in den tempel*) for *Jews in the Synagogue* suggests, men based on the Ashkenazim, mixed with others wearing exotic turbans evoking the distant biblical past, were understood to be Pharisees, a sect of biblical Hebrews whom the New Testament identifies as Christ's opponents.¹² The architecture

also does not correspond with Amsterdam's synagogues or any synagogue of the period, further heightening the merging of contemporary Jews and an imagined biblical past. Notably, two men in the left foreground who are engaged in conversation do not seem to be rendered entirely positively. In *The Hundred Guilder Print* and *Christ Preaching*, Rembrandt grouped clusters of Jewish men in characteristic Ashkenazi attire and scraggly beards around a standing and haloed Christ, who almost seems to replace the anonymous central seated figure in a turban in *Jews in the Synagogue*, who turns his back to us. Characteristically, Rembrandt shows Christ and his followers without head covering and in classical-style togas.¹³

In *The Hundred Guilder Print*, Rembrandt unified multiple verses from Matthew chapter 19 and other sources, centered on the preaching Christ. The Pharisees who tried to draw Christ into a debate about divorce are placed on the far left, speaking among themselves in a manner similar to the conversing figures at the left in *Jews in a Synagogue*. Lightly etched and with the least amount of detail, they are sidelined in comparison to the crowd of men, women, and children who have come to Christ



Figure 4-9. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ Preaching* (*The Hundred Guilder Print*), about 1649, etching, drypoint, and burin on Japanese paper, fund in memory of Horatio Greenough Curtis, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

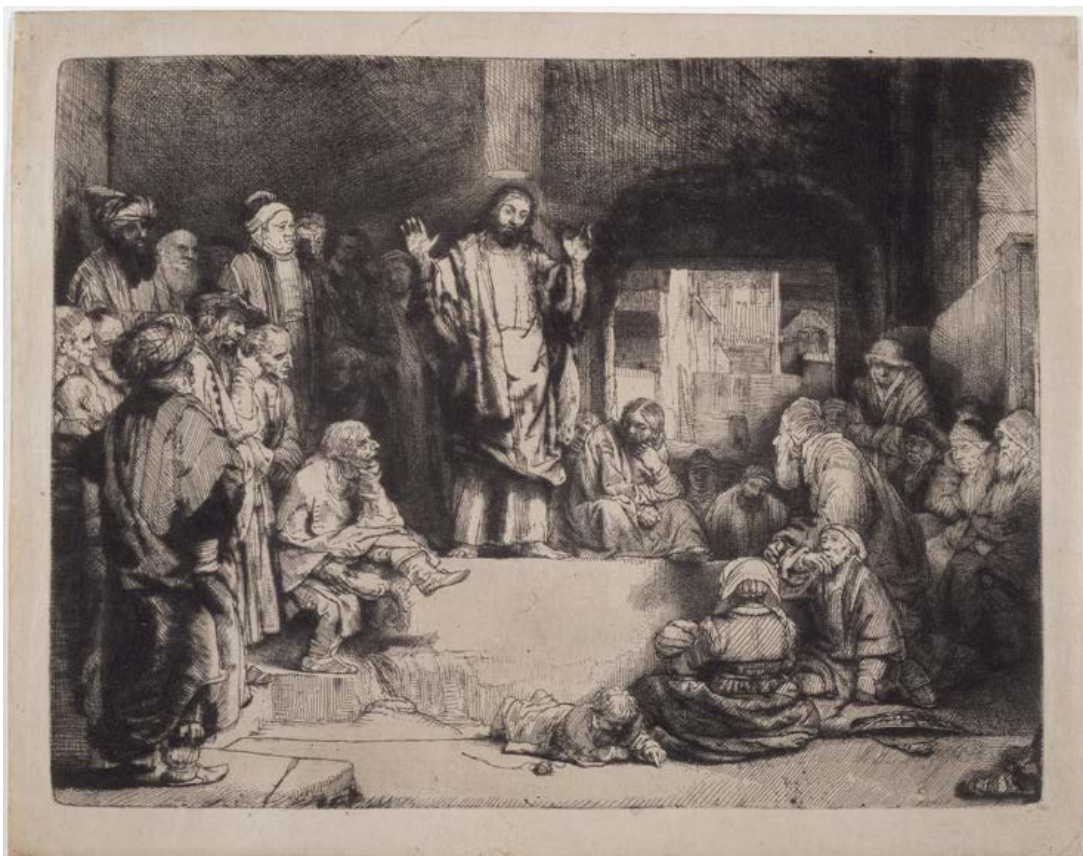


Figure 4-10. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ Preaching* (*"La Petite Tombe"*), about 1652, etching and drypoint on Japanese paper, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

to be blessed or healed. In *Christ Preaching*, the men in Ashkenazi attire and untrimmed beards, again intermingled with figures in exotic turbans, are not Pharisees but Hebrews drawn to Christ's preaching. Unlike *Jews in a Synagogue* and *The Hundred Guilder Print*, none of the figures is portrayed negatively or characterized as an opponent of Christ. Here, Rembrandt depicts the divide between Judaism and Christianity more subtly than in previous works. Yet while Rembrandt's earlier caricature of Jewish figures in Biblical scenes gave way to more subtle portrayals, he still placed them in the liminal space between the biblical past and contemporary Amsterdam, melding reality and imagination.

Rembrandt's *Peter and John Healing the Disabled Man* (Fig. 4-11), dated 1658, exemplifies the extent of this transformation and where his evolution stopped. The print shows Christ's disciples Peter and John miraculously healing a disabled beggar not with money but faith in Christ's promise of salvation. Farther to the left, two men—who again are coded as Jews by their Ashkenazi beards, hats, and robes—watch the miracle unfolding. Their contemporary Ashkenazi dress distinguishes them from the throng of ancient Israelites in turbans and togas in the background who attend a Jewish ritual in the courtyard of the Temple at Jerusalem.

The individuality of their faces and dress indicate that they were likely modeled after real Jews who Rembrandt observed. Despite this sensitivity to the men's appearances, they are portrayed as either ambivalent to or suspicious of the Christian miracle depicted in the foreground, even as they see it with their own eyes. By placing these identifiably Ashkenazi Jewish figures in an imagined New Testament scene, Rembrandt recontextualized biblical narratives to integrate the contemporary present with the ancient past.

► From Sideline to Center Stage: Individual Works of Jewish “Models”

Rembrandt appears to have produced autonomous paintings of Jewish models, known as *tronies* or character or head studies, which underwent a similar evolution as his treatment of Jewish figures in biblical scenes. Meaning “head” or “face” in Dutch, *tronie* had come to mean by the 17th century a bust or half-length portrayal of a specific character or type. *Tronies* were a distinct and widely popular picture type that, although usually based on a live sitter, decenter the “model,” making them a distinct genre from portraiture.¹⁴ Rather than a faithful record of a patron's or sitter's likeness, the *tronie* represents an established social or ethnic type—sometimes with



Figure 4-11. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Peter and John Healing the Disabled Man*, 1659, etching, drypoint, and engraving on Japanese paper, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

biblical, ancient, or exotic resonance—or a specific emotion. Originally, artists like Peter Paul Rubens used head studies as part of the preparatory process for paintings of historical or mythological narratives but, by Rembrandt's time, *tronies* were viewed and sold as autonomous works of art. We know that paintings of Ashkenazi Jews were identifiable to contemporaries, as a 1681 inventory records an anonymous “portrayal of a Polack Jew” (“Een contrefijtsel van een Polacqse smous”).¹⁵ Although it is difficult and clearly problematic to identify Jewish models by appearance alone, Rembrandt likely used Ashkenazi Jewish models for some of his *tronies*, including *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* (Fig. 4-12), from 1656–1658 in The Leiden Collection, New York, and *Bust of a Young Jew* (Fig. 4-13), dated 1663, at the Kimbell Museum, Fort Worth. Both men, though individualized through specific facial features and probably painted from actual models, were meant to represent generic types, unlike a portrait. Their untrimmed beards and unkempt curly hair likely would have been recognizable to Rembrandt's contemporaries as characteristic of Ashkenazi



Figure 4-12. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bust of a Young Bearded Man*, about 1656–1658, oil on panel with arched top, The Leiden Collection.

Jewish men. (The skullcap the man wears in the Kimbell picture would not have been recognized as a marker of Jewishness; however, as they were part of standard Christian clerical dress of the time, *keppot* or *yarmelukes* were also not required of Orthodox Jewish men until the 19th century.) Consistent with Rembrandt's later *tronies* in general, the figures' pensive inward expressions, looking directly at the viewer albeit disconnected from their environment, transform a social or ethnic type into a deeply human and therefore accessible subject.

Bust of a Young Bearded Man was modified significantly in the 18th century, transforming the image of an anonymous Jewish type into a more conventional portrait. In 1829, the picture was listed in a Christie's London sales catalogue as “Rembrandt—Portrait of a Burgomaster, with arched top,” with overpainting obscuring its original appearance, as shown in a 1976 photo (Fig. 4-14).¹⁶ The dramatic alteration provided the man with a typical wide Dutch burgher hat, collar, and tassels, in addition to cutting the top of the panel to create an arched shape and trimming the sides.¹⁷ These changes altered the sitter's perceived social status, elevating him from a generic type into an individual who could commission



Figure 4-13. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bust of a Young Jew*, 1663, oil on canvas, Kimbell Art Museum.



Figure 4-14. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* (with 18th-century overpaint), about 1656–1658, oil on panel with arched top, The Leiden Collection.

and shape his own image. There also may have been a desire to distance the painting from its subject of a Jewish man.¹⁸ Whatever the motivations for the alterations, the hat, white collar, and tassels were only removed between 1976 and 2004, when the painting resurfaced at auction with Sotheby's London.¹⁹

While Rembrandt's later *tronies* like *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* and *Bust of a Young Jew* focus on the figure's interior life, his earlier works primarily rely on the use of costume and strong expression to convey meaning and mark identity.²⁰ One of Rembrandt's early *tronies*, *Bust of an Old Man in a Fur Cap* (Fig. 4-15), of 1630, depicts a man in a fur cap that resembles a *kolpak*, a hat worn by Polish Jews that became especially popular in the 19th century. That the *kolpak* likely identifies the man as Jewish or possibly Jewish is further reinforced by Rembrandt's use of the same hat for one of the Pharisees in *Judas Returning the Pieces of Silver* (1629).²¹ The contrast between *Bust of an Old Man in a Fur Cap* and Rembrandt's later *tronies* of Jewish models



Figure 4-15. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bust of an Old Man in a Fur Cap*, 1630, oil on panel, Tyrolean State Museum.

is striking. In the 1630 painting, costume serves as an indicator of otherness. In the later *tronies*, Rembrandt's attention shifts from external features to the men's soulful gazes and pensive expressions, presenting them in casual dress and self-absorbed, relaxed states. As art historian Erwin Panofsky first argued and later reiterated by Frans Landsberger and Jakob Rosenberg, these later *tronies* seem to transcend religious, ethnic, and social difference to show a universal human essence.²² Although these portrayals of Jews are not portraits, they capture something essential and deeply personal in the sitters' soft gazes and introspection.

Related to Rembrandt's *tronies* of anonymous Jewish models is a series of seven *Heads of Christ* painted beginning in the late 1640s—two or three probably by the artist himself (Berlin, Louvre Abu Dhabi, and Philadelphia) (Figs. 4-16, 4-17, and 4-18), and the others by members of Rembrandt's workshop.²³ Each shows Christ with similar body positioning and an unfocused yet captivating gaze that conveys a deep sense of interiority, and dark hair and a full beard reminiscent of his *tronies*



Figure 4-16. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Head of Christ*, 1645–1650, oil on panel, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (Photo: Christoph Schmidt).



Figure 4-17. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Head of Christ*, 1648–1656, oil on panel, Louvre Abu Dhabi.



Figure 4-18. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Head of Christ*, 1648–1656, oil on oak panel, laid into larger oak panel, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

discussed previously. It is possible that a Jewish model posed for some or all of these paintings. The 1656 bankruptcy inventory of Rembrandt's possessions lists "a Head of Christ, after life" ("*een Christus tronie, nae't leven*"), suggesting that a live model was used for these images, while a derogatory contemporary poem by Jan Vos confirms that Rembrandt's pupil Govert Flinck used a Jewish model for a painting of Christ.²⁴ In the poem "Christ Painted for Joris de Wijze by Govaert Flinck, after a Jew," Vos accuses Flinck of blasphemy for basing the image of his savior on a Jew. Regardless, his satirical poem is evidence of this practice in Rembrandt's workshop and its potential controversy. The heads of Christ by Rembrandt and his pupils also seem to conform in some respects with the *Letter of Lentulus*, an allegedly Roman but really contemporary description of Christ's appearance that was widely known in 17th-century Europe, and even discussed by Rembrandt's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten in 1678.²⁵ Ernst van de Wetering suggested that this spurious letter may have influenced Rembrandt's choice of model who fit the description rather than "randomly picking a young Jewish man from the Breestraat to pose for him."²⁶

The interiority of Rembrandt's later *tronies* and the *Heads of Christ* point to a new focus on the figure's humanity as opposed to a conscious othering. Rembrandt created approachable, compellingly lifelike, or *naer het leven*, images, likely inspired by the Jewish Amsterdammers whom he encountered in his neighborhood.

► Conclusion

This chapter has traced the progress of Rembrandt's depictions of Jewish figures as he moved away from overt caricatures to more complex, nuanced depictions. Although we cannot be certain why this change took place, we do know that the timeline aligns with Rembrandt's move to the center of Jewish Amsterdam. The changes in Rembrandt's depiction of Jewish people in both Old and New Testament scenes after his move to the Jodenbreestreet do not seem to be coincidental. This shift is also evident in Rembrandt's independent works with Jewish "models," including his *tronies*. While Rembrandt's early *tronies* relied on costumes to convey the sitter's otherness, his later works offer a more complex, humanizing depiction of their subjects. Perhaps Rembrandt's ability to convey interiority and individuality in all his later figures—be they Jews, Protestants, Catholics, merchants, members of his inner circle of collectors and admirers, or Black Africans—created a perceived equity that appealed to diverse audiences of both Christian and Jewish audiences. Either way, living in a religiously and ethnically diverse, cosmopolitan neighborhood, with members of multiple Jewish communities, likely informed Rembrandt's perception of "the other" and contributed to his nuanced depictions of Jewish subjects in his later works.

- ¹ See Mirjam Knotter, "Rembrandt's Hebrew," in *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 51 (2009): 29–30; and Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (University of California Press, 2002), 70–72.
- ² David De Witt, "The Black Presence in the Art of Rembrandt and His Circle," in *Black in Rembrandt's Time*, ed. Elmer Kolfin and Epco Runia (Waanders, 2020), 102.
- ³ Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 70.
- ⁴ Knotter, "Rembrandt's Hebrew," 28–29.
- ⁵ Astrid Tümpel and Peter Schatborn et al., *Pieter Lastman: leermeester van Rembrandt/The Man Who Taught Rembrandt* (Waanders, 1991), 67.
- ⁶ Ger Luijten, "Rembrandt the Printmaker: The Shaping of an Oeuvre," in *Rembrandt the Printmaker*, ed. Erik Hinterding, Get Luijten, and Martin Royalton-Kisch (British Museum Press, 2000), 16.
- ⁷ For the dispute, see recently Mirjam Knotter, "Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture in Rembrandt's Time," in Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours* (Routledge, 2024), 30; and Gary Schwartz, "Jewish Collectors Take Rembrandt to Their Hearts," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 236.
- ⁸ Yosef Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint His Three Pictures of the Sephardi Synagogue of Amsterdam?" *Studia Rosenthaliana* 32 (1998):133.
- ⁹ Kaplan, "For Whom Did Emanuel de Witte Paint," 134.
- ¹⁰ The full description reads, "een contrefijtsel van een Polackse smous," or "portrayal of a Polack Jew." See Albert Blankert et al., *Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact* (Waanders, 1997), 176. The slang word *smous* more literally translates to a thief, vagrant, or cheat. It was a pejorative word for a Jewish person in 17th-century Dutch. See Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 46–48.
- ¹¹ Bart Wallet, "Rembrandt's Other Jews: The Amsterdam Ashkenazim in the Seventeenth Century," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 71 (caption for Fig. 30). See also Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 54.
- ¹² This earliest-known title for the print appears in the print publisher Clement de Jonghe's estate, which included 74 of Rembrandt's copperplates. For De Jonghe's entry, see D. de Hoop Scheffer and K. G. Boon, "De inventaris-list van Clement de Jonghe en Rembrandt's etsplaten," *Kroniek van her Rembrandthuis* 25 (1971): 1–17; and Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 54.
- ¹³ See Gary Schwartz, "Convention and Uniqueness: Rembrandt's Responses to the East," in *Rembrandt's Orient: West Meets East in Dutch Art of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Gary Schwartz et al. (Prestel, 2020), 59.
- ¹⁴ Mariët Westermann, *Rembrandt* (Phaidon, 2000), 51.
- ¹⁵ See Franziska Gottwald, "The Heads of Christ in the Context of the Tronie," in *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus*, ed. Lloyd de Witt et al. (Yale University Press, 2011), 147–48; and Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 46.
- ¹⁶ Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Bust of a Young Bearded Man" (2021), rewritten by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (2024), in *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge (Leiden Collection, 2023), at <https://www.theleidencollection.com/artwork/bust-of-a-young-bearded-man/>.
- ¹⁷ Wheelock, "Bust of a Young Bearded Man."
- ¹⁸ John Smith, who published the first catalogue raisonné of Rembrandt's paintings in 1836, characterized Rembrandt's Jewish patrons as malevolent, even attributing his 1656 bankruptcy to the influence of Menasseh ben Israel and Ephraim Bueno. See John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French Painters*, 9 vols. (London, 1829–1843), vol. 7 (1848), XXVII, footnote. Cited in Michael Zell, "Eduard Kolloff and the Historiographic Romance of Rembrandt and the Jews," *Simiolus* 28 (2000–2001): 185; and Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 59.
- ¹⁹ Wheelock, "Bust of a Young Bearded Man."
- ²⁰ Gottwald, "The Heads of Christ," 147–48.
- ²¹ Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 46.
- ²² For Panosfky, Rosenberg, and other German-Jewish scholars' readings of Rembrandt's depictions of Jews in the context of rising German antisemitism and ultimately the Holocaust, see Zell, "Eduard Kolloff," 193–97; and Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 43–46.
- ²³ For the series, see Lloyd de Witt et al., *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus* (Yale University Press, 2011); and Ernst van de Wetering, *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings VI: Rembrandt's Paintings Revisited—A Complete Survey* (Springer Netherlands, 2014), 606–8.
- ²⁴ Jan Vos, *Alle de gedichten van Jan Vos* (Amsterdam, 1726), vol. I, p. 326, quoted and translated in *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings*, ed. Gary Schwartz (Viking, 1985), 284; and Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 56–57.
- ²⁵ For a discussion of the *Letter of Lentulus* in relation to Rembrandt's portrayals of Christ, see Lloyd de Witt, "Testing Tradition Against Nature: Rembrandt's Radical New Image of Jesus," in *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus* (Yale University Press, 2011), 121–22; and Van de Wetering, *Corpus*, vol. 6, 697–708. Van Hoogstarteten quoted the letter in its entirety in his 1678 treatise *Introduction to the Academy of Painting; or, the Visible World*. See *Samuel van Hoogstraten's Introduction to the Academy of Painting; or, The Visible World*, trans. Jaap Jacobs, ed. Celeste Brusati (Getty Research Institute, 2021), 154.
- ²⁶ Van de Wetering, *A Corpus*, vol. 6, 608.

Chapter 5

Minority Perspectives: Jews and Black People in Rembrandt's Art and Neighborhood

by Sophie Cassarino and Jailei Maas

Both reality and imagination factor into Rembrandt's depictions of the minority groups living on the Jodenbreestraat (Jews' Broad Street) and in the surrounding neighborhood. While it was the Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jewish communities that gave this part of 17th-century Amsterdam its popular name, this chapter explores the smaller but significant population of Black Africans who interacted with Dutch and Jewish residents in a myriad of ways.

Black individuals in Amsterdam, who lived primarily on or near the Jodenbreestraat, theoretically enjoyed freedoms unknown outside the Republic and most of the colonized world, including the Dutch trading empire, but their presence in Rembrandt's work harkens to larger Western narratives of Black and brown bodies as foils to white sensibilities. We explore the city of Amsterdam through Rembrandt's eyes, looking at the larger global narratives of colonialism, diaspora, agency, and tolerance by focusing on the exceptionally diverse neighborhood that the artist called home.

Rembrandt's depictions of his Sephardi, Ashkenazi, and Black neighbors reflect and refract a complex sociocultural weave of unprecedented economic opportunity, active identity building, intersectionality, and collective memory of greater global diaspora, simultaneously bolstering and disrupting historical stereotypes of minority communities of his time.

The Sephardim

As we have learned in other chapters, the Sephardim were the first and, initially, most important minority

community to settle in in Amsterdam, forming a distinct and semiautonomous presence in Rembrandt's neighborhood.¹ Hebrew was integrated into the population's continued use of Portuguese and Spanish, which united this community linguistically and separated them from other European Jews gradually arriving in the city. Their governing body, the *mahamad*, controlled or mediated religious and social activity and sought to define how the Sephardim interacted with their neighbors of other nationalities, religions, and races.² Because Jews were prohibited from practicing most professions and crafts overseen by the city's guilds (with a few notable exceptions), the Sephardim were active as merchants, becoming involved in the expansion of Dutch overseas trade and through their connections within the Sephardi diaspora. A small but not insignificant number of the Sephardim were active in both the Dutch West and East India Companies and, by 1672, Jews accounted for 13 percent of account holders at the Amsterdam Wissel Bank.³

The presence of industrious, successful, and devout Sephardi Jews was clear to the residents



Figure 5-1. Romeyn de Hooghe, *House of David de Pinto on the Sint Athoniesbreestraat, Amsterdam*, about 1695, etching and engraving, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

of the area, Amsterdam in general, and beyond. An etching by Romeyn de Hooghe from 1695, for example, illustrates the mansion of the wealthy Sephardi merchant David de Pinto on the Sint Antoniesbreestraat, across from Rembrandt's house (Fig. 5-1). Lavishly dressed women are assembled on the porch of an elegant townhouse. The foremost woman sports an extravagant hairstyle, while her companion holds a large fan, possibly imported from Asia. The pair is accompanied by a Black servant, who perhaps was brought or descended from slave trading abroad. De Hooghe's lavish etching of the inauguration of the new Sephardi synagogue in 1675, commissioned by prominent Sephardi sponsors

of the spectacular building, showcased both the community's success and its piety.

► The Ashkenazim

The Sephardim made a conscious effort to self-distinguish from the Ashkenazim as the more unified, socially elevated, and affluent Jewish ethnic group in Amsterdam. The Ashkenazim, who were multinational central and eastern European Jews that fled to the city to escape violent pogroms, generally were from the lower social classes and settled on Vlooienburg, an island adjacent to the more upscale St. Antonies or Jodenbreestraat, where Rembrandt and many Sephardim lived. The

Ashkenazim worked menial jobs or worked alongside less affluent members of the Sephardim, as servants in the homes of wealthy Christians or Jews.

While the Sephardim wore similar fashions to their Dutch Christian counterparts and were socially, economically, and visually incorporated into the fabric of Dutch society, the Ashkenazim maintained traditional Jewish dress from their home countries.⁴ Although never separated from their Jewish identity and practices, the Ashkenazim lacked the unified culture fostered by the Sephardim, with the community split between several nationalities. The term *Ashkenaz* technically refers to Jews of Germanic descent, whereas other terms such as *Polaco* referred to Jews from Poland and *Italiano* to Jews from Italy. Yet “Ashkenaz” has historically been used more broadly to group Eastern and Central European Jews and distinguish them from Jewish populations of the Iberian Peninsula and elsewhere.⁵ As part of their continued efforts to distinguish themselves, the Sephardim coined the term *Tudesco*, which is etymologically related to the Italian word for “German,” as a name for members of the Ashkenazi community.⁶ Although it began small and disunified, Amsterdam’s Ashkenazi community grew in influence and size throughout the 17th century. By the turn of the next century, the Ashkenazi population dwarfed the Sephardim in numbers. Ashkenazi Jews became the dominant Jewish group in Europe in the following centuries and remain so today.⁷

Despite the divide between Amsterdam’s two major Jewish ethnic groups, the Ashkenazim relied on Sephardi investment to build their first synagogues and cemeteries. After these structures were built, the Ashkenazim maintained independent communities and rituals.⁸ The Sephardi *mahamad* also took formal measures to distance themselves from their fellow Jewish newcomers. Although Ashkenazim initially participated in Sephardi rituals, the 1639 merging of the three Sephardi synagogues clarified that the newly unified congregation was specifically for “Jews of the Portuguese and Spanish Nation” and that the Ashkenazim would have to secure permission from the *mahamad* to participate in these services.⁹ Although attitudes changed somewhat as more educated Polish and Lithuanian Jews immigrated in the late 17th century, the Sephardim maintained

a segregationist attitude toward the Ashkenazim despite the common roots of their faith.¹⁰

► Amsterdam’s Black Population

While the Dutch shared their city with multiple minorities from elsewhere in Europe, most of the Black individuals who lived in Rembrandt’s neighborhood were forcibly brought from abroad by the global slave trade and the operations of the Dutch West India Company. Between 1640 and 1660, the Dutch dominated the slave trade between Africa and the Americas, and Southeast Asia and Europe.¹¹ As a result, enslaved and free Black Africans began to appear in Dutch households, art, and literature. Rembrandt depicted Black Amsterdammers more often than any other 17th-century Dutch artist.¹² Like the Ashkenazi Jews, he integrated the Black Africans whom he encountered in his neighborhood into biblical scenes and created a remarkably sensitive and unusual painting of two men who may have been members of the city’s small community of free Black Africans (Fig. 5-2).

The presence of Black Africans in Amsterdam can be traced back as early as 1612, when a Black enslaved man named Domingos gave a statement to a notary that he had been incited to steal from the man who “owned” him.¹³ The Black individuals brought to Amsterdam in the 17th century were generally enslaved servants of officials of the Dutch West India Company or indentured servants in the homes of Dutch Christians and Sephardi Jews.¹⁴ While slavery was legal throughout the Dutch trading empire, including Africa and the Americas, regions from which Black individuals were violently displaced, the practice was outlawed in the Republic itself. In 1644, an article was added to Amsterdam’s laws that specifically stated no persons within the city could be considered slaves; anyone being kept in servitude against their will had the right, in theory, to “arraign said masters and mistresses in the court of law of this city, where they then shall formally and legally declare them to be free.”¹⁵ It is uncertain how successfully this edict barred slavery from Amsterdam; however, several Black individuals attained their freedom by these legal means. In 1642, an enslaved Guinean woman named Zabelinha and her child, for example, were granted their freedom from Simon Correa, the Sephardi merchant who brought her to Amsterdam, at a notary’s office in Amsterdam.¹⁶



Figure 5-2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Two African Men*, 1661, oil on canvas, Mauritshuis.

A community of servants and free Black people began to settle in Amsterdam in the early to mid-17th century and, by Rembrandt's time, a small group of free Black Africans lived on or near the Jodenbreestraat, alongside the Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and the artist himself.¹⁷ Black people concentrated in this area because most had been brought to the city as the enslaved of Sephardim who were active in the Dutch colonies of Brazil (until 1654), Suriname, and the Caribbean, like Simon Correa. The histories of Black people and the Sephardim of 17th-century Amsterdam are therefore disturbingly entangled, as Rembrandt himself would likely have been aware, at least on some level.

Black individuals lived among the Sephardim and often followed some Jewish customs, but they faced increasing segregation as the Sephardi community

intensified its effort to build an affluent, exclusive, and Iberian identity. While Black and mixed-race Jews had been buried in the Sephardi graveyard at Ouderkerk outside Amsterdam as early as 1614, increasingly exclusionary practices throughout the 1600s began to differentiate Black Jews from Iberian Jews. In 1627, Black people were banned from burial in the Sephardi graveyard.¹⁸ Black and mixed-race Jews would later be allocated a separate section of the burial ground in 1647.¹⁹ In 1644, "circumcised Negro Jews" were barred from participation in synagogue rituals because "such is fitting for the reputation of the congregation and its good government." Three years earlier, Black women had been barred from reserving seats for Sephardi women and from sitting in certain areas of the synagogue.²⁰ In 1650, the vast majority of Black people—and all Black women—were barred from

inclusion in the Sephardi congregation unless they met increasingly stringent *halakhic* requirements (meaning in accordance with Jewish law).²¹

The Sephardim sought to distance themselves from people who were becoming increasingly associated with slavery and social inferiority, due in part to the discrimination that they had previously faced because of their ethnicity. In medieval and early modern Europe, Christianity was largely equated with whiteness, whereas being Jewish or Muslim was equated with phenotypical Blackness—an attitude that persisted in the Dutch Republic and elsewhere in the 17th century. Upon visiting a Sephardi synagogue in Amsterdam in 1635, Sir William Brereton of England remarked that Jewish men are “most Black, full of hair, and insatiably given unto women.”²² Another 17th-century visitor to a synagogue, John Greenhalgh, remarked that the “chief Ruler” of London’s first Sephardi congregation was “a big, Black, fierce, and stern man” with “a barbarous thundering voice.”²³ These claims demonized Black populations and the Sephardim alike, equating them with disparaging attributes assumed of their ethnicity. In separating from Black Jews, the Sephardim sought to sever themselves from these prior racial associations. If they were not Black, then the Sephardim could participate in the ideology of Whiteness. The Sephardi Jews enjoyed a much more secure social status in the Dutch Republic than elsewhere in Europe, yet buttressing their place in Dutch society through racial disassociation from servants and enslaved people was a part of the community’s efforts to align itself with the dominant and increasingly racialized hierarchies of European society.

Rembrandt’s depictions of Black people do not align easily with this increasing designation of Blackness as socially and racially inferior and, in some cases, even seem to resist it. He introduced Black figures whom he may have observed in his neighborhood into

New Testament prints such as *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* of 1652 (Fig. 5-3) and *Christ Preaching (The Hundred Guilder Print)* of about 1648 (Fig. 5-4), and in paintings like *St. John the Baptist Preaching* of 1634–1635 (Fig. 5-5), where their presence alludes to Christianity’s message of salvation for all people. In *The Visitation* of 1645 (Fig. 5-6), Rembrandt’s novel inclusion of a young Black woman, seemingly studied from life, as a servant lifting the pregnant Mary’s shawl signals the idea of Christian universalism while simultaneously confirming the Black person’s subservient social status.²⁴ Yet Rembrandt’s celebrated *Two African Men* of 1661 (see Fig. 5-2) seems to refuse Black subservience and stereotyping. The painting may even be an unusual *tronie* or character study of two brothers from São Tomé, Bastiaan and Manuel Fernando, one of whom (Bastiaan) we know lived at the other end of the Jodenbreestraat from Rembrandt.²⁵

► Conclusion

Although the Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and Black Africans lived alongside Rembrandt in his Amsterdam neighborhood, they inhabited very different yet deeply entangled places in the complex social economy of the city. Empowerment and othering coalesce in the narrative of these interrelated communities, and these contradictory impulses seem to be embodied in Rembrandt’s work. Illustrating the facts recorded in the historical record while also embracing the muddy unknowns that surround the stories of these immigrant groups is crucial to decode the complex richness of their lived experiences and the multiplicities of their perspectives and agency. Whatever tensions underlay these distinct communities’ interactions, the uniquely diverse, multicultural neighborhood in which they lived together with Rembrandt became an unprecedented site from which he could mine models and inspiration for his vividly lifelike, or *naer het leven*, art.



Figure 5-3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ Disputing with the Doctors: A Sketch*, 1652, etching and drypoint, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 5-4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ Preaching (The Hundred Guilder Print)*, about 1649, etching, drypoint, and burin on Japanese paper, fund in memory of Horatio Greenough Curtis, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 5-5. Rembrandt van Rijn, *St. John the Baptist Preaching*, 1634–1635, canvas on oak panel, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (Photo: Christoph Schmidt).



Figure 5-6. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Visitation*, 1640, oil on cedar panel, City of Detroit purchase, Detroit Institute of Arts.

- ¹ Simon Schama, "A Different Jerusalem: The Jews in Rembrandt's Amsterdam," in *The Jews in the Age of Rembrandt*, ed. Susan W. Morganstein and Ruth E. Levine (Judaic Museum of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington, 1981), 43.
- ² Schama, "A Different Jerusalem," 103–16.
- ³ Schama, "A Different Jerusalem," 6–7.
- ⁴ For the Ashkenazim, see in particular Bart Wallet, "Rembrandt's Other Jews: The Amsterdam Ashkenazim in the Seventeenth Century," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Amsterdam University Press, 2024), 71–88. See also Shelley Perlove, "Rembrandt, the Jews and Judaism," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Amsterdam University Press, 2024), 126.
- ⁵ Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Indiana University Press, 1999), 125–26.
- ⁶ Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, 126.
- ⁷ Bart Wallet, "Rembrandt's Other Jews: The Amsterdam Ashkenazim in the Seventeenth Century," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Amsterdam University Press, 2024), 86.
- ⁸ Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, 126.
- ⁹ Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, 129.
- ¹⁰ Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, 130.
- ¹¹ Mark Ponte, "Black in Amsterdam Around 1650," in *Black in Rembrandt's Time*, ed. Elmer Kolfin and Epco Runia (Waanders, 2020), 52–53.
- ¹² Elmer Kolfin, "Black by Rembrandt," in *Black in Rembrandt's Time*, ed. Elmer Kolfin and Epco Runia (Waanders, 2020), 10.
- ¹³ Mark Ponte, "Black in Amsterdam Around 1650," in *Black in Rembrandt's Time*, ed. Elmer Kolfin and Epco Runia (Waanders, 2020), 49.
- ¹⁴ Ponte, "Black in Amsterdam Around 1650," 49.
- ¹⁵ Ponte, "Black in Amsterdam Around 1650," 52.
- ¹⁶ Ponte, "Black in Amsterdam Around 1650," 52.
- ¹⁷ Ponte, "Black in Amsterdam Around 1650," 53.
- ¹⁸ Grave records in Beth Haim, the first Sephardic cemetery in the country, indicate the burial of 15 Black and Mulatto bodies between 1614 and 1648. See Dienke Hondius, "Black Africans in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam," *Renaissance and Reformation* 31 (2008): 92; and Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 192.
- ¹⁹ Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*, 99.
- ²⁰ Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*, 195.
- ²¹ Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*, 176.
- ²² William Brereton, *Travels in Holland, the United Provinces, England, Scotland, and Ireland, M.DC.XXXIV.-M.DC.XXXV.* (Chetham Society, 1844), 61, cited in Michael Zell, "Rembrandt and Multicultural Amsterdam: Jews and Black People in Rembrandt's Art," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024) 101.
- ²³ Appendix I in Wilfred S. Samuel, *The First London Synagogue of the Resettlement (Founded in 1657, Enlarged in 1674)* (Spottiswoode, Ballantyne, & Co., 1924), 51, cited in Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*, 180.
- ²⁴ See Shelley Perlove, "Rembrandt's *Visitation*: The African Woman at the Dawn of Christianity and Colonialism," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 14:1 (Winter 2022), available at <https://jhna.org/articles/rembrandts-visitation-the-african-woman-at-the-dawn-of-christianity-and-colonialism>.
- ²⁵ Ponte, "Black in Amsterdam Around 1650," 57.

Chapter 6

The Legacy of Rembrandt and the Jews

by Romina Fernández Riviello, Michelle Kelley, and Hailey Manlowe

More than 350 years after Rembrandt van Rijn's death (1606–1669), his relationship with the Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews of Amsterdam remains a vital part of his reception among art historians, collectors, artists, and the public. Both visual and written evidence testifies to the varied interactions that the artist had with Dutch Jews, conveying everything from Rembrandt's collaboration with Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel on the *Piedra Gloriosa* to the legal proceedings brought against him by Jewish clients and neighbors. However, while these records are important, there is much uncertainty, resulting in more than three centuries of changing interpretations. The ambiguity of these personal and professional relationships has led some to claim that Rembrandt was a “friend of the Jews,” a romanticized notion shaped by the evolving cultural, social, and political circumstances of the 18th, 19th, and especially 20th centuries.

This chapter examines the historiography of the trope of Rembrandt and the Jews, beginning with the early renaming of Rembrandt's so-called *Jewish Brides*. Instead of accurately identifying the sitters, these titles reflect 18th-century interest in what were considered “picturesque” Jewish subjects, thus reinterpreting the images and reshaping perceptions of Rembrandt's art. This retitling profoundly impacted how later artists and art historical scholarship engaged with Rembrandt's art and his apparent representations of Jewish figures. In this chapter, we discuss this enduring legacy, first looking at the 19th-century American painter

Washington Allston (1779–1843), whose *Head of a Jew* of 1817 (Fig. 6-1) is included in the “Reality and Imagination” exhibition at the MFA. Allston, who was primarily a painter of historical and biblical scenes, also created compellingly lifelike portrayals of Jewish men that are reminiscent of the *tronies* or character studies of anonymous Ashkenazi Jews by Rembrandt and his circle. We then turn to the contemporary Jewish painter Joshua Meyer, who takes artistic inspiration from Rembrandt, as well as previous generations of Jewish artists who were similarly influenced by his work. Spanning several centuries, these examples demonstrate



Figure 6-1. Washington Allston, *Head of a Jew*, 1817, oil on canvas, gift of Henry Copley Greene, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

the continuing legacy of “Rembrandt and the Jews,” a trope that, while rooted in fact, is also shaped by history, sentimentality, and faith.

► Rembrandt's Jewish Brides

The pictorial subject of the Jewish bride has become virtually inextricable from Rembrandt. This association emerged in the early 18th century as his reputation became increasingly intertwined with his connection to the Jews. While many of the identifications of Rembrandt's portrayals of women as Jewish brides are clearly or most likely inaccurate, their traditional titles persist. For example, Rembrandt's so-called *The Great Jewish Bride* of 1635 (Fig. 6-2) was first used in a manuscript catalog written by the Delft collector Valerius Röver (1686–1739) in 1731, alongside a smaller print referred to as *The Little Jewish Bride* (Fig. 6-3).¹ In the slightly later 1751 catalog of Rembrandt's prints (the first catalogue raisonné of an artist's work ever published) by the famous Parisian art dealer Edme-François

Gersaint (1694–1750), Gersaint adds an explanation for the title of *The Great Jewish Bride*, describing the figure's pearl headdress as conforming to “the custom of coiffure in Holland among Jewish women about to be married.”² However, the print is more likely the biblical scene of Esther preparing to confront Ahasuerus. Esther, the Jewish heroine, is probably seen clutching a decree from Haman, the chief advisor of her husband, King Ahasuerus, calling for the annihilation of the Jews.³ Rembrandt represents Esther in the moments before she confronts her husband, exposing Haman's treachery and thus securing the safety of the Jewish people.

The so-called *Little Jewish Bride* of 1638 is unmistakably a biblical subject. The etching depicts St. Catherine, identifiable by the spiked wheel at the far right, the symbol of Catherine's martyrdom. Despite their 18th-century titles suggesting a correlation between the two prints, they are distinct in both subject and in appearance. The earlier, larger



Figure 6-2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Great Jewish Bride*, 1635, etching, drypoint, and engraving. Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 6-3. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Little Jewish Bride* (Saskia as Saint Catherine), 1638, etching and drypoint. Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 6-4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Jewish Bride (Isaac and Rebecca)*, about 1665–1669, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Great Jewish Bride is rendered in precise, even laborious detail, with dense crosshatching used to convey the dark recesses and play of shadows behind the figure. In the much smaller *Little Jewish Bride*, finely and freely etched lines give the image a sketch-like quality. Their greatest visual similarity is in the central figure, likely because Rembrandt used his wife Saskia van Uylenburgh as the model for both images. Representations of Saskia have been identified as Jewish women throughout the 18th, 19th, and first half of the 20th centuries, despite her likeness similarly being used for mythical and biblical figures, such as Flora and Bathsheba.⁴ This titling convention creates the false impression that we are looking at a portrait of an early modern Jewish woman in Amsterdam, rather than Rembrandt's rendition of a historical subject. The retention of the titles of these images contributes to the enduring legacy of Rembrandt and the Jews.

One of Rembrandt's most celebrated paintings, *The Jewish Bride* of about 1665–1669 (Fig. 6-4), demonstrates the continued relevance of this titling convention and its impact on the artist's reputation. When he purchased the painting in 1833, Adriaan van der Hoop described the work as "a depiction of the Jewish bride being adorned by her father with a necklace."⁵ However, the subject is much more likely historical, representing the biblical couple Isaac and Rebecca, or perhaps Jacob and Rachael, though it may also be a portrait of a Dutch couple in the guise of these figures.⁶ As art historian Gary Schwartz writes, "Rembrandt began accumulating Jewish attributes and associations in such a large degree that the knot that ties them will never be undone."⁷ The collecting history and renaming of Rembrandt's art has ensured that Rembrandt and the Jews will forever be entangled. The role of the contemporary art historian is not only to

interrogate the validity of the Jewish titles of his works but also to engage with the enduring and compelling afterlife of this larger narrative.

► Washington Allston and *Head of a Jew*

Artists have been in dialogue with Rembrandt's work for centuries, with many, including the 19th-century American painter Washington Allston (1779–1843), taking inspiration from the artist's representations of Jews, either actual or presumed (Figs. 6-5 and 6-6). Though he was born in South Carolina, Allston sailed to London in 1801, where he became a member of the Royal Academy and toured the continent before returning to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1818. While abroad, Allston presumably viewed several works by Rembrandt, possibly including paintings currently or previously identified as Jewish subjects. One painting, now titled *A Bearded Man in a Cap* (Fig. 6-7), was known as *A Jewish Rabbi* in Allston's time, based on the man's soft cap and square-cut beard.⁸ It was purchased by the National Gallery in 1844, from Jeremiah Harman (1764–1844), an important



Figure 6-5. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bust of a Young Bearded Man*, about 1656–1658, oil on panel with arched top, The Leiden Collection.

art collector and Governor of the Bank of England. Allston may also have seen Rembrandt's *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* (see Fig. 6-5), which had entered the collection of the Englishman Peter Burrell (1754–1820), 1st Baron Gwydyr, in the 18th century. However, the version owned by Burrell and his descendants would have looked substantially different due to overpainting added in the 18th century,⁹ which transformed the likely Ashkenazi Jewish subject into a more typical portrait of a Dutch burgher with a wide-brimmed hat and a collar with tassels (Fig. 6-8).¹⁰

Beginning in 1817, Allston produced a series of four paintings based on Jewish models. Like Rembrandt, Allston endows his subjects with a sense of emotional interiority. In *Head of a Jew* at the MFA (see Fig. 6-1), a bearded man in a cap looks expectantly toward the upper right-hand corner, suggesting that he is witnessing or experiencing a heavenly vision. The other pictures in the set, including a second, more finished *Head of a Jew* (Fig. 6-9), *Sketch of a Polish Jew* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC), and *Isaac of York* (Greenville County Museum of Art) are similarly lifelike and sensitive portrayals.¹¹ The lack of finish in three of the pictures, excluding the second *Head of a Jew*,



Figure 6-6. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bust of a Young Jew*, 1663, oil on canvas, Kimbell Art Museum.



Figure 6-7. Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Bearded Man in a Cape*, late 1650s, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London.



Figure 6-8. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* (with 18th-century overpaint), about 1656–1658, oil on panel with arched top, The Leiden Collection.



Figure 6-9. Washington Allston, *Head of a Jew*, 1817, oil on canvas, courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York (Photo: Eric W. Baumgartner).



Figure 6-10. Washington Allston, *Jeremiah Dictating His Prophecy of the Destruction of Jerusalem to Baruch the Scribe*, 1820, oil on canvas, gift of Samuel F. B. Morse, Yale University Art Gallery.

reinforces the impression that these images were painted directly from life, heightening the sense of immediacy. Their incomplete state suggests that they were not intended to be autonomous works of art but rather preliminary studies for other paintings. However, when Allston returned to America in 1818, all four were exhibited at the Boston Athenaeum between 1828 and 1843.¹² Two of the paintings, *Head of a Jew* and *Isaac of York*, were acquired by the Boston Athenaeum in 1828 and 1833, respectively, pointing to the admiration for Allston among Boston's cultural elite, and his Jewish busts in particular.

The MFA's *Head of a Jew* strongly resembles Allston's *Jeremiah Dictating His Prophecy of the Destruction of Jerusalem to Baruch the Scribe* from 1820 (Fig. 6-10), suggesting the earlier bust served as a reference point for the later history painting. In both images, the central figure is seen experiencing a divine vision or inspiration, looking beyond the limits of the canvas and the corporeal realm entirely. The lifelikeness and vividness imparted by the contemporary model ground this staged historical moment in reality, making the imagined scene accessible to the viewer.¹³ Like Rembrandt, then, Allston took inspiration from real Jewish sitters, using their likeness for his biblical subjects.

In contrast, Allston's colossal *Belshazzar's Feast* (Fig. 6-11) gives the impression of a highly staged drama, the emotion and nuance of his figures lost in the crowded composition. Despite beginning the work in London in 1817, Allston was still reworking the piece at the time of his death in 1843.¹⁴ Thus, it is difficult to predict what Allston's completed work would have looked like. While it is possible that Allston could have seen Rembrandt's *Belshazzar's Feast* of about 1636–1638 (Fig. 6-12) when he was living in England, the two paintings differ substantially. In representing the supernatural handwriting central to the Old Testament story, Rembrandt includes a remarkably accurate Hebrew text,¹⁵ reading “Mene Mene Tekel Ufarsin,” oriented vertically as diagrammed by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel in his book *De Termino Vitae* of 1639 (Fig. 6-13).¹⁶ Allston, meanwhile, conveys the cryptic message through a radiant light on the right of the canvas. Allston, therefore, did not seek out someone learned in Hebrew to assist in the painting, unlike Rembrandt.

The Chaldean soothsayers at the right of the composition, whom Allston gave caricatured Jewish features, contrast strikingly with the artist's sensitive portrayals of Jews in the series of four busts. Nineteenth-century viewers noted these figures and their jarring appearance, with an anonymous account describing them as “the most perfect embodiment of every malignant passion.... Anger, malice, bitterness, and hatred seem contending for mastery,” despite, in the same review, praising Daniel's countenance as Christlike.¹⁷ Art critic William Wetmore Story, who viewed the painting when it was exhibited at the Athenaeum in 1845, called the soothsayers “grotesque, unnatural and ludicrous.”¹⁸ Despite the sensitivity of his earlier sketches, with *Head of a Jew* capturing the same interior life found in Rembrandt's *tronies*, Allston was capable of perpetuating antisemitic stereotypes, choosing to include the “grotesque” soothsayers in what he thought would become his masterwork.

Allston was born during the American Revolutionary War, a period, like Rembrandt's, in which differing religious practices were tolerated, allowing Jewish populations to practice their faith openly. While the first synagogue in the Boston area, Temple Ohabei Shalom, was not formally established until 1842, shortly before Allston's death, the city's Jewish population grew substantially in his lifetime, eventually resulting in the Temple's establishment.¹⁹ For Allston, therefore, an encounter with a Jewish resident of Boston is plausible if not likely. Before leaving for England, Allston attended boarding school in Newport, Rhode Island, home to the Touro Synagogue, dedicated in 1763 as the first synagogue in the United States. Seen in the context of Allston's life and work, the Touro Synagogue was not unlike the Jewish house of worship that populated Rembrandt's neighborhood in Amsterdam.²⁰

► Joshua Meyer and Rembrandt's Contemporary Legacy

The Cambridge, Massachusetts–based painter Joshua Meyer (b. 1974) is a living testament to the ways Rembrandt's works continue to resonate with Jews and Jewish artists. Meyer has always been drawn to what he perceives as the humanity of Rembrandt's figures, whether in his portraits, *tronies*, or Old Testament scenes, finding the



Figure 6-11. Washington Allston, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1817–1843, oil on canvas, gift of the Allston Trust, Detroit Institute of Arts.



Figure 6-12. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Belshazzar's Feast*, about 1636–1638, oil on canvas, bought with a contribution from the Art Fund, National Gallery, London.



Figure 6-13. Menasseh ben Israel, *De Termino Vitae*, 1639, page 160, Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, Allard Pierson, Amsterdam.

representation of their flaws more profoundly real and empathetic than in other artists' works from the period.²¹ Meyer sees a lack of formality and pretense in Rembrandt's paintings like *Bust of a Young Bearded Man* (see Fig. 6-5), a quality reflected in his own ambiguous, unstable human forms. *Untitled of 2001* (Fig. 6-14) exemplifies his signature method of constructing a figure that seems to emerge and dissolve simultaneously from the thick, layered applications of oil paint.

Meyer's artistic philosophy is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, and he sees his work as actively embodying the creation story from Genesis. In Meyer's words, "The first time we meet God in the Hebrew Bible is when he is in the act of creating. If humans are made in the image of God, then humans are intended to create."²² In *Tohu vaVohu* from 2003 (Fig. 6-15), titled in Hebrew after the formless void that precedes

Creation, Meyer explores the Jewish creation narrative not through symbolic imagery but through painterly form. As God steps back from creation and asks, "Is it good?," Meyer's studio practice becomes a parallel act of judgment/assessment: stepping back, reshaping, reconsidering, and revising. The resulting image is less a conclusion than a process of becoming—a "gooey grey mix of everything" out of which meaning slowly coalesces. This emphasis on process and unresolved form is similarly embodied in Rembrandt's *Artist in His Studio* from 1628 in the MFA (Fig. 6-16). The small yet powerful painting depicts a young artist confronted by his panel, immersed in the uncertainty and reflection inherent in the act of creation.

Meyer is viscerally drawn to Rembrandt's paintings, convinced that they transcend superficial likeness and social convention to capture a universal human truth.²³

This ideal of Rembrandt as a transcendent figure whose images reveal a deeper truth beyond religious, ethnic, class, and racial difference is rooted in the afterlife of Rembrandt's portrayals of and relationships with Jews, especially among German-Jewish scholars before and after the Second World War.²⁴ In 1920, Erwin Panofsky delivered a lecture in Berlin, published posthumously, in which he transformed Rembrandt into a paragon of humanitarianism, asserting that his late images of Jews, like the Kimbell's *Bust of a Young Jew* of 1663 (see Fig. 6-6), erase ethnic and religious differences to reveal a universal human essence: "Here we see expressed a timeless and unfathomable depth of a soul which, beyond the borders of individual consciousness, has been subsumed into a consciousness of all."²⁵ Immediately after the war, the German Jewish refugee scholar Frans Landsberger expressed his personal attachment to this idea that Rembrandt's sensitive depictions of Jews reflect the artist's transcendent humanitarianism:

It has often proven a comfort to me, in the era of European Jewish tragedy, to dwell upon the life and work of Rembrandt. Here was a man of German ancestry who did regard the

Jews of Holland of his day as a 'misfortune,' but approached them with friendly sentiment, dwelt in their midst, and portrayed their personalities and ways of life.... He was the first to have the courage to use Jews of his environment as models for the heroes of scared narratives. I have frequently referred to these remarkable facts in lectures delivered in Germany and later in America, and have felt it incumbent upon me to convey to others the solace I have experienced in their contemplation. I desired, also, to furnish my coreligionists with an understanding of what Rembrandt had done for them, and to bring them a recognition of their debt to his art.²⁶

Landsberger's book *Rembrandt, the Jews, and the Bible* (1961) exerted an enormous influence on subsequent scholarship. In his classic 1948 monograph on Rembrandt, Jakob Rosenberg, another German Jewish immigrant, championed the "sensitive objectivity" of Rembrandt's portrayals of Jews and proclaimed that "there remains the indisputable fact that the artist's attitude to the Jewish people was an unusually sympathetic one."²⁷ This post-Holocaust elevation of Rembrandt as



Figure 6-14. Joshua Meyer, *Untitled*, 2001, oil on board, courtesy Johusa Meyer.



Figure 6-15. Joshua Meyer, *Tohu vaVohu*, 2003, oil on linen, courtesy Joshua Meyer.



Figure 6-16. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Artist in His Studio*, about 1628, oil on panel, Zoe Oliver Sherman Collection given in memory of Lillie Oliver Poor; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

a paragon of morality based on his depictions of Jewish subjects enduringly shapes perceptions of Rembrandt's work, including Meyer's.

Meyer's admiration for Rembrandt also stems from previous generations of Jewish artists who were directly inspired by the artist. "As a Jewish artist," says Meyer, "I feel a kinship with [Chaim] Soutine because we are both drawn to the same things about Rembrandt," namely, his use of thick impasto.²⁸ In his painting *Flayed Ox* of 1925 (Fig. 6-17), Soutine borrows the image of the slaughtered ox from Rembrandt's 1655 painting in the Louvre (Fig. 6-18), further emphasizing the textured layering of thick paint through the stark contrast between red and blueish pigments. Soutine, and the community of Jewish artists and collectors with whom he surrounded

himself in 1920s Paris, would have been responding to Rembrandt's work at a time when the romantic myth of Rembrandt as a "friend to the Jews" was prevalent.²⁹ In a period of increasing antisemitism, paintings like the so-called *The Little Jewish Bride* (see Fig. 6-3), one of Soutine's personal favorites, further encouraged Jews' affinity with the artist. Meyer claims that Rembrandt's association with his Jewish neighbors and his depictions of Jews do not factor into his emotional connection to Rembrandt's artwork. However, by purposefully positioning himself in relation to Jewish artists like Soutine, Meyer becomes an extension of this legacy.

If, as Meyer asserts, the artist is an "interloper," observing and recording the truths of the world from an outsider's perspective, Rembrandt is



Figure 6-17. Chaïm Soutine, *Flayed Ox*, 1925, oil on canvas, Musée de Grenoble.

certainly one, going beyond his own circles to seek out subjects from other faiths and geographies. It is this quality that makes his representations of Jews and his close association with Amsterdam's Jewish neighborhood compelling to both scholars and the public. Despite the questions and uncertainties that surround his interactions with Jewish patrons, clients, and neighbors, many members of the public embrace the perceived affinity between Rembrandt and Amsterdam's Jewish community. The work of artists like Meyer and Allston is ultimately inseparable from this romance. Each looks to Rembrandt and finds their own affinity with him, mining Rembrandt's oeuvre for its emotion, expression, and, ultimately, its humanity.



Figure 6-18. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Slaughtered Ox*, 1655, oil on panel, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

- ¹ Michael Zell, "Eduard Kolloff and the Historiographic Romance of Rembrandt and the Jews," *Simiolus* 28 (2000): 183. See J. G. van Gelder and N. F. van Gelder-Schrijver, "De 'Memorie' van Rembrandt's prenten in her bezit van Valerius Röver," *Oud Holland* 55 (1938): 1–16.
- ² Zell, "Eduard Kolloff and the Historiographic Romance," 183. See François Gersaint, *Catalogue raisonné de toutes les pieces qui forment l'oeuvre de Rembrandt* (Hochereau, 1751), no. 31, 244.
- ³ Madlyn Millner Kahr, "Delilah," *The Art Bulletin* 54 (1972): 282–99.
- ⁴ Roman Grigoryev, "Jewish Brides, Rabbis, and Sitters in Rembrandt's Prints," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 146.
- ⁵ Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt's Universe: His Art, His Life, His World* (Thames & Hudson, 2006), 305.
- ⁶ "Isaac and Rebecca, known as the Jewish Bride," Rijksmuseum, accessed May 6, 2026, at <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/object/Isaac-and-Rebecca-Known-as-The-Jewish-Bride--O19c1265e6dbf108d4587ab2b7c02c66?tab=data>.
- ⁷ Schwartz, *Rembrandt's Universe*, 304.
- ⁸ "A Bearded Man in a Cap," The National Gallery, accessed May 6, 2026, at <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rembrandt-a-bearded-man-in-a-cap>.
- ⁹ Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Bust of a Young Bearded Man," in *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., Elizabeth Nogrady, and Caroline Van Cauwenberge (Leiden Collection, 2023), accessed May 6, 2026, at <https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/bust-of-a-young-bearded-man/>.
- ¹⁰ Wheelock Jr., "Bust of a Young Bearded Man."
- ¹¹ Regarding *Isaac of York*, Allston apparently renamed this work after the publication of Sir Walter Scott's popular medieval romance *Ivanhoe* in 1819. In *Ivanhoe*, Isaac of York is one of two major Jewish characters, a moneylender portrayed as avaricious, but also a devoted father who asks the titular knight *Ivanhoe* to serve as champion on behalf of his daughter Rebecca.
- ¹² Nathalia Wright, *The Correspondence, with Editorial Links in The Correspondence of Washington Allston*, (University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 238. Both *Head of a Jew* paintings, as well as *Isaac of York* were included in the Athenaeum's second ever Exhibition of Paintings in 1828. The *Sketch of a Polish Jew* was included in the 1842 exhibition. *Isaac of York*, with its applied literary title, was apparently a popular inclusion, as it was exhibited nine times between 1828 and 1843.
- ¹³ Elizabeth Johns, "Washington Allston: Method, Imagination, and Reality," *Winterthur Portfolio* 12 (1977): 5.
- ¹⁴ Accounts from shortly after Allston's death note that Belshazzar's figure had been completely overpainted, with Allston evidently intending to enlarge the Babylonian king within his composition. This overpaint was removed by a group of Bostonians that had invested in the piece prior to its exhibition. See Jared B. Flagg, *Life and Letters of Washington Allston* (B. Blom, 1969), 334.
- ¹⁵ The text does include one error, which is frequently brought up in discussions about Menasseh ben Israel's possible involvement. See Steven Nadler and Victor Tiribás, "Rembrandt's Etchings for Menasseh ben Israel's *Piedra Gloriosa*: A Mystery Solved?" in *Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* (De Kroniek, 2021), 15; and Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (University of California Press, 2002), 59–64.
- ¹⁶ Reiner Hausherr, "Zur Menetekel-Inschrift Auf Rembrandts Belsazarbild," *Oud Holland* 78 (1963): 142–49.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Flagg, *Life and Letters of Washington Allston*, 343.
- ¹⁸ William Wetmore Story, "Athenaeum Gallery—Allston's Belshazzar," *Harbinger*, July 5, 1845, 57.
- ¹⁹ "Our Story," Temple Ohabei Shalom, accessed May 6, 2026, at <https://www.ohabei.org/about-us/our-story/>.
- ²⁰ "History of Touro Synagogue," Touro Synagogue Foundation, accessed May 6, 2026, at <https://touro synagogue.com/about-us/ourhistory/>.
- ²¹ Interview with Joshua Meyer, August 20, 2025.
- ²² Interview with Joshua Meyer, August 20, 2025.
- ²³ Interview with Joshua Meyer, August 20, 2025.
- ²⁴ See Zell, "Eduard Kolloff and the Historiographic Romance," 193–97; and Zell, "Rembrandt and Multi-cultural Amsterdam: Jews and Black People in Rembrandt's Art," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 104–5.
- ²⁵ Erwin Panofsky, "Rembrandt und des Judentum," *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen* 18 (1973): 98, quoted and translated in *Rembrandt: A Genius and His Impact*, ed. Albert Blankert et al. (Waanders, 1997), 177.
- ²⁶ Frans Landsberger, *Rembrandt, the Jews, and the Bible* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), ix.
- ²⁷ Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt* (Harvard University Press, 1948), vol. 1, 61.
- ²⁸ Interview with Joshua Meyer, August 20, 2025.
- ²⁹ Larry Silver, "Modern Jewish Artists Discover Rembrandt," in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Mirjam Knotter and Gary Schwartz (Routledge, 2024), 173–74.

Chapter 7

Rembrandt's *Aeltje*, Nazi Looting, and the Restitution of Dutch Art at the MFA

by Caroline Spurr and Scarlett Wills

In 2017, Boston-area collectors Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo and Susan and Matthew Weatherbie pledged 114 Dutch and Flemish paintings to the MFA.¹ Their gift also established the CNA, a major initiative dedicated to scholarship, conservation, and public engagement with Dutch and Flemish art. One of the highlights of the gift is Rembrandt's *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh* (Fig. 7-1) from 1632. Even at the young age of 26, Rembrandt was able to capture with great sensitivity the sitter's likeness and evoke a sense of character and wisdom. Her skin, while aged, still feels lively thanks to the wash of pink over her cheeks and the subtle highlights on the forehead and down the center of the nose. The right side of the face, from temple to jowl, is cast in shadow, emphasizing the contrast between flesh and fabric. The inscription "AE[tatis] 62" in the upper left corner of the panel documents the age of the sitter, leading to her identification as Aeltje Uylenburgh (about 1587–1661), who was a first cousin of Amsterdam art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh (Rembrandt's then-landlord) and Saskia Uylenburgh (1612–1642), who became Rembrandt's wife.²

The back of the panel bears an additional mark recording another part of the painting's complex history: a stamp identifying it as property of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR), the branch of the Nazi government responsible for much of the widespread looting and confiscation of artworks under the Third Reich.³ When France was invaded by Germany in 1940, the painting was

confiscated from Baron Édouard de Rothschild (1846–1909) and taken to Altaussee, Austria, where thousands of looted artworks were stored in salt mines. Paintings and prints by Rembrandt had been popular with Jewish collectors in prewar Europe, due to both his status as a revered Old Master and his supposed sympathy for the Jewish people.⁴ When Jewish private collections were



Figure 7-1. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh*, 1632, oil on panel, gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art and in honor of Matthew Teitelbaum, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

expropriated by the Nazis, these works were then recast as part of a narrative about Aryan Germanic supremacy—one that purposely obscured the artist's connection to Amsterdam's Jewish quarter. The *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh* embodies these two conflicting receptions of Dutch painting.⁵ Understanding this history is not only essential for reconstructing the material history of the *Aeltje* portrait and its art historical significance but also for reminding us of the importance of provenance research and the ongoing urgency of restitution efforts today.

The growing awareness of Nazi-looted art has prompted many institutions to reevaluate the provenance of their collections and take active steps toward transparency and restitution. The MFA has been at the forefront of museums committed to transparency in provenance research, maintaining since the early 2000s a dedicated curator for provenance research, Victoria Reed, who was appointed Bettina Burr Chair for Provenance in 2025. Reed investigates the ownership history of artworks in the collection and in the process of being acquired, looking specifically at those with gaps between 1933 and 1945. She and her team maintain a publicly accessible record that details the ownership histories of artworks acquired during or shortly after the Nazi period and work proactively with scholars, archives, and potential heirs to resolve cases involving suspect provenances.⁶ Thanks to Reed's work, the MFA has been exceptionally proactive and responsive to Holocaust-era restitution claims of Dutch art (and the restitution claims for many other works). Unlike artworks only recently returned to the heirs of their rightful owners, Rembrandt's *Aeltje* was restituted to the Rothschilds shortly after the war.

► The Early Provenance of the *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh*

Aeltje, positioned off-center with her body turned to her right, strongly suggests that the portrait was originally conceived as part of a pendant pair. The companion portrait of Aeltje's husband, Reverend Johannes Sylvius, was lost in the 18th century, but an etched portrait Rembrandt made of him in 1633 may give us an idea of its appearance (Fig. 7-2). A notarial document from 1681 indicates

that their eldest son, Cornelis, inherited two portraits by Rembrandt that depict his parents.⁷ At the time of the paintings' commission, Aeltje Uylenburgh was primarily known to Rembrandt as the cousin of his then-landlord, art dealer Hendrick van Uylenburgh.⁸ Shortly after the painting was completed, Rembrandt would become part of the Uylenburgh family, marrying Aeltje's younger cousin, Saskia, in 1634. Saskia and Aeltje shared a close familial bond, with Aeltje serving as surrogate mother for Saskia, who lost her mother in 1619, when she just seven, and her father five years later.

The companion portraits of Aeltje and Sylvius, which are exemplary of Rembrandt's technical mastery and expressive style in the early stages of his career, remained in the Sylvius family's possession for nearly 90 years. In 1721, the portrait of Aeltje was purchased in the Netherlands by prominent Genevan legal scholar and politician Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, who believed the work to depict "*la mère de Rembrandt*" (Rembrandt's mother).⁹ Upon his death, the painting passed to his two great nieces, the Chapeaurouge sisters, who sold it to a Parisian art dealer by the name of Dubois in 1825.¹⁰ Between 1828 and 1843, the portrait changed hands multiple times, passing through the collections of several short-term owners, including the London banker and collector William J. Coesvelt, the London art dealer John Smith, and the Amsterdam artist and dealer Albertus Brondgeest.¹¹

Baron James Mayer de Rothschild (1792–1868), founder of the French branch of the prominent Ashkenazi Jewish family, purchased the painting in Paris under the title *Portrait de vieille femme* (Portrait of an Old Woman) at auction in 1843.¹² He and his wife, Betty (1805–1886), who was a well-known *salonnière*, philanthropist, and patron of the arts, bequeathed it to their son Alphonse de Rothschild (1827–1905) and his wife, Leonora (1837–1911), who in turn left it to their son Édouard de Rothschild. The Rothschilds, having made their fortune in banking, owned one of the largest private art collections in the world and were "the principal Jewish collectors of Rembrandt paintings."¹³ Prior to its confiscation in 1941, the *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh* had been in the possession of the Rothschild family for generations.

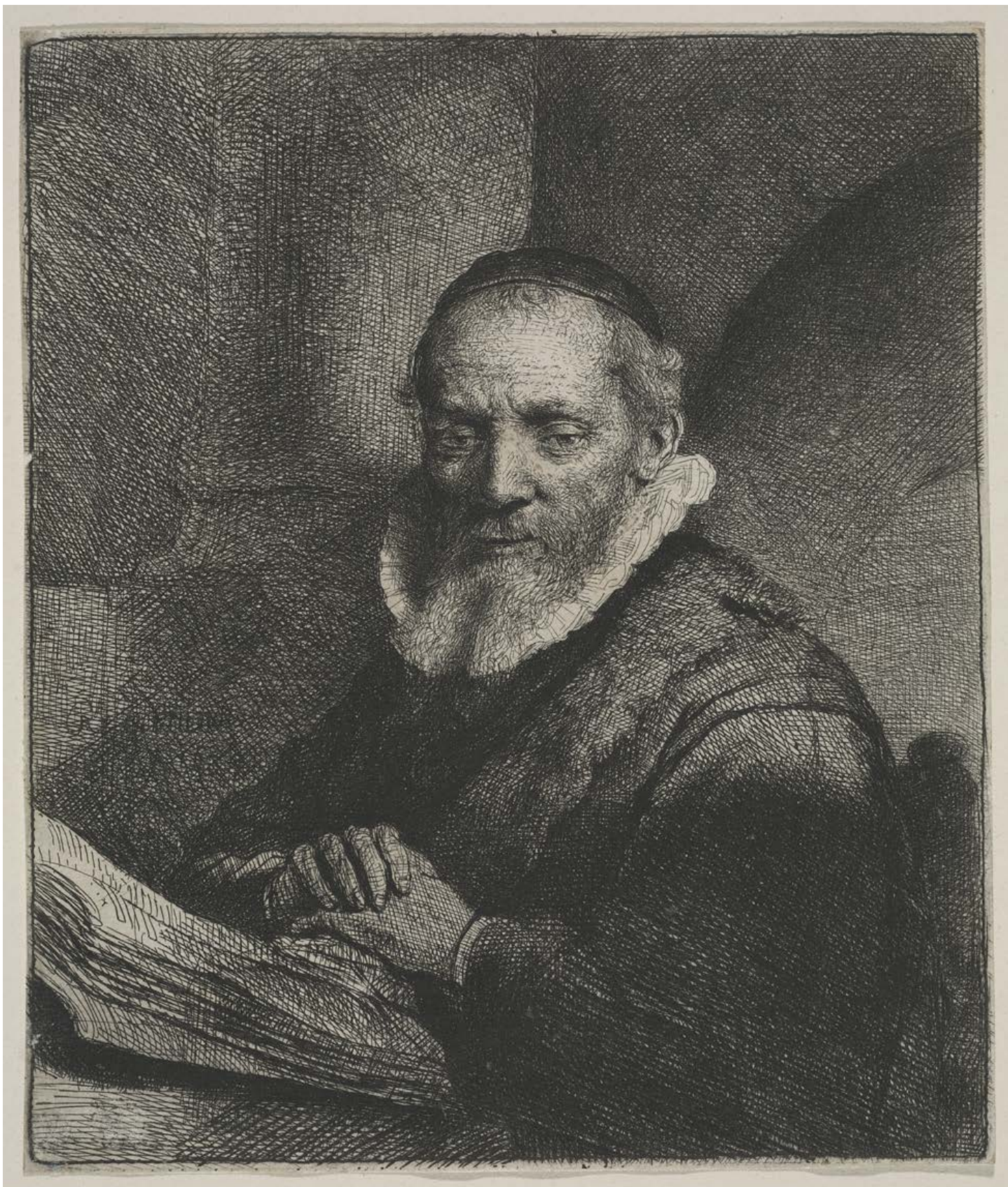


Figure 7-2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jan Cornelius Sylvius, Preacher*, 1633, etching and engraving, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

► Nazi Looting

As Gary Schwartz demonstrates, Jewish collectors and patrons took a special interest in Rembrandt in the decades leading up to World War II. For affluent European Jews, including the Rothschilds, collecting Rembrandt paintings was simultaneously a marker of taste and a means of participating in high society in a way that resonated with their cultural identity during an era of intensifying antisemitism, particularly in France and Germany. Meanwhile, organizations like the Kaiser Friedrich Museumsverein, founded in Berlin in 1897, provided an opportunity for Jewish philanthropists to become patrons for leading cultural institutions.¹⁴ With the rise of Nazism, however, Rembrandt's works and 17th-century Dutch art in general became entangled with sinister cultural and ideological resonances.

From the beginning of his political career, Hitler took an intense personal interest in the acquisition of art—especially paintings by Old Masters. He regarded the acquisition of artworks as a potent symbol of German hegemony. His ambition was to build the world's largest art museum in his hometown of Linz, Austria, as a monument to the triumph of German Aryan culture.¹⁵ He intended not only to showcase Germanic art but also to display artistic treasures from across Europe as a demonstration of the Third Reich's domination of the continent.¹⁶ Hitler personally designed the layout of his envisioned *Führermuseum* with the goal of imposing a new hierarchy of artistic value that elevated Germanic art above all others. The Dutch so-called “Golden Age” paintings were to be accorded a prominent place within this new hierarchy, with Hitler seeing this period in art history as the “prototype” of great Germanic art.

This ideology was reflected in Hitler's design, with the Dutch galleries leading directly into those devoted to Austro-Bavarian art.¹⁷ Hitler was particularly drawn to Rembrandt, as he believed that the artist exemplified the ideals of Germanic culture and the Aryan race.¹⁸ The Führer's once close friend Ernst Hanfstaengl recalled that, during a visit to Berlin's National Gallery in the early 1920s, Hitler paused before the painting *Man in the Golden Helmet* (Fig. 7-3), which is now attributed to Rembrandt's circle rather than the master himself, and exclaimed, “Look at that heroic, soldierlike expression. It proves

that Rembrandt, in spite of the many pictures he painted in Amsterdam's Jewish quarter, was at heart a true Aryan and German!”¹⁹ Hitler viewed the Austro-Bavarian artists featured in the museum as the rightful successors to Rembrandt's legacy. Eduard von Grützner (1846–1925) was one of his favorites, with Hitler stating, in response to the low price of Grützner's paintings:

It's simply that he hasn't been discovered yet. Rembrandt also counted for nothing for many decades after his death. His pictures were practically given away. Believe me, this Grützner will some day be worth as much as a Rembrandt. Rembrandt himself couldn't have painted that better.²⁰

Following the 1940 invasion of Western Europe, Nazi Germany launched a massive campaign to loot artworks from Jewish owners across Belgium, France, and the Netherlands, seizing thousands of paintings and other works for both Hitler's envisioned art museum in Linz or the private collections of high-ranking Nazi officials, including Hermann Göring, who shared Hitler's view of a “racialized” artistic hierarchy.²¹ This cultural plundering was an integral part of the Nazi process of persecuting, dehumanizing, and ultimately annihilating Europe's Jewish population. The “Aryanization” of Jewish property, including art, was carried out with chilling efficiency across occupied Europe. While the legal and administrative mechanisms used to legitimize this theft varied by country, the goal remained the same: to strip Jews of their possessions, identity, and cultural legacy. The Dienststelle Mühlmann oversaw the expropriation of Jewish-owned artworks in the Netherlands; the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) was responsible for the looting in France and Belgium.²²

► Aeltje and the Altaussee Salt Mines

Prior to the war, the Rothschild family's vast and storied art collection, comprising at least 5,000 works, was among the most prestigious private holdings in Europe. It was, therefore, a prime target for Nazi looting. Anticipating the aerial bombardment of Paris, members of the Rothschild family began relocating their artworks to the countryside for safekeeping. Among these was the *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh*, sent by Édouard de Rothschild to Pont-



Figure 7-3. Unknown painter, circle of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Man in the Golden Helmet*, about 1650–1660, oil on canvas, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (Photo: Christoph Schmidt).

l'Évêque in Normandy. The 71-year-old baron and his family then fled to America, only for Édouard to be stripped of his French citizenship by the collaborationist Vichy regime, which also seized all his property. In the autumn of 1940, the ERR initiated a targeted effort to locate and seize Édouard's dispersed collection, scouring Rothschild estates throughout the French countryside.

By early February 1941, the ERR had succeeded in assembling most of the Rothschilds's prized possessions, bringing them to the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris, which the Nazis had repurposed as a central depot for confiscated art.²³ There, a preliminary inventory of the Rothschild holdings was completed, cataloging hundreds of masterworks by European painters. Among the listed items was Rembrandt's *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh*, registered under the German title *Bildnis einer alten Frau* (Portrait of an Old Woman). The painting, along with other pictures from the Rothschild collection, was then transferred to the art repository codenamed "Lager Peter," an ERR-controlled depot in the Altaussee salt mines in Austria.²⁴

By the end of the war, the storehouse contained more than 8,000 works of art, both confiscated from Jewish collectors and taken from Austrian museums, churches, and monasteries.²⁵ Among the accumulated artworks was the collection of the Viennese Jewish industrialist and banker Rudolf Gutmann (1880–1966), who left behind his rare books and Old Master prints when he fled with his wife via Czechoslovakia and Switzerland to Canada following the Anschluss or annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938.²⁶ After Gutmann left Austria, the works were declared "ownerless," with many seized for the future *Führermuseum*. Among the artworks Gutmann left behind was a superb early impression of Rembrandt's etching *Clement de Jonghe* from 1651 (Fig. 7-4), which is currently in the MFA. The print was one of the works from the Gutmann collection transported to the Altaussee salt mines.

What was and was not seized during the widespread looting reveals the priorities of the Nazi regime. While impressive works on paper, like the printed portrait of Clement de Jonghe, were equally prized to paintings, Gutmann's impression of Rembrandt's *Great Jewish Bride* (Fig. 7-5) was not taken for the museum in Linz, allegedly due to its "Old Testament subject matter."²⁷



Figure 7-4. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Clement de Jonghe*, 1651, etching, drypoint, and engraving, William Francis Warden Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Beginning in 1943, Allied forces established dedicated teams to recover and return stolen cultural property. Among these were the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program personnel, known colloquially as the "Monuments Men."²⁸ This group of scholars, curators, and officers was instrumental in identifying, cataloging, and restituting looted artworks. Their work was conducted at several collecting points, or centralized collection depots, established immediately after Germany's surrender. Due to their efforts, Rembrandt's *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh* was recovered from Altaussee in 1945, transferred to the Munich Central Collecting Point, and, in 1946, restituted to its rightful owner, Édouard de Rothschild, who had returned to France. It was the only work by Rembrandt shown at the exhibition of recovered paintings at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris that same year.²⁹ In 1947, Rembrandt's print of *Clement de Jonghe*, which was also recovered from Altaussee in 1945, was exported to Canada to be returned to Rudolf Gutmann. Following its restitution, Gutmann sold the print to a New York art dealer, with the MFA purchasing it in 1948.



Figure 7-5. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Great Jewish Bride*, 1635, etching, drypoint, and engraving, Harvey D. Parker Collection—Harvey Drury Parker Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Upon the death of Édouard de Rothschild, the *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh* was inherited by his youngest daughter Bethsabée de Rothschild (1914–1999), who went by Batsheva after she immigrated, in 1951, to Israel, where she lived until her death. After her passing, her estate, including the painting, was auctioned by Christie's London. The work was purchased by Noortman Master Paintings and, in 2005, acquired by the Boston-based Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo. Their promised gift to the MFA in 2017 brought the painting into a public collection, completing a long and complex journey of loss and recovery.

► Restitution Claims of Dutch Art in the MFA

While the story of Rembrandt's *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh* and his print of Clement de Jonghe are notable examples of successful and timely restitutions, positive outcomes were not necessarily the norm. In many cases, dispossessed Jews were murdered in the death camps prior to restitution efforts. If there were no surviving family members, artworks often became the property of the countries to which they were repatriated. Even when there were surviving heirs, families often struggled to regain their property. One of the most well-known cases is that of Jacques Goudstikker (1897–1940), who was a prominent Jewish art dealer in Amsterdam. Goudstikker fled the Netherlands with his family in 1940, leaving behind a meticulously documented collection of more than 1,200 works. The Nazis, particularly Göring, selected extensively from his holdings, which were shipped to Germany and absorbed into state and private collections. Although Goudstikker's widow, Désirée, worked tirelessly after the war to reclaim the works, her efforts were frustrated by postwar bureaucracies and a lack of political will. It was not until 2006—more than 60 years after the theft—that the Dutch government agreed to restitute 202 paintings to the Goudstikker heirs. This landmark decision helped reshape cultural property law in the Netherlands.³⁰

Thanks to the painstaking research of MFA provenance curator Victoria Reed, the Museum recently resolved the restitution claim over a 17th-century Dutch painting by the heirs of another Jewish art dealer, which was sold under duress during the war.³¹ Adriaen van Ostade's *Customers Conversing in a Tavern* of 1671 (Fig. 7-6), which was one of 28 paintings Susan and Matthew

Weatherbie pledged to the MFA in 2017, had been part of the stock of Paris-based dealer Paul Graupe (1881–1953) and his business partner Arthur Goldschmidt, who was also Jewish. Graupe, who fled France in 1939 and ultimately arrived in the United States in 1941, asked Goldschmidt, who remained in unoccupied France, to arrange for his paintings, including the Van Ostade, to be sent to Switzerland or the United States. Instead, Goldschmidt sold the painting to Hitler's agent Karl Haberstock in 1941, shortly before fleeing to Cuba. Haberstock then sold the painting to the Reich Chancellery, with Hitler's art advisor and curator Hans Posse selecting it for the planned *Führermuseum* in Linz. The painting was recovered after the war; however, with no claims submitted on it by the late 1940s, the French state auctioned it in 1951. Unaware of the Van Ostade's Nazi-era past, the Weatherbies bought it in 1992 and, in 2023, reached an amicable agreement with the heirs of Graupe and Goldschmidt.

As a result of Reed's research at the MFA, other restitution claims have recently been resolved with the heirs of persecuted owners of other Dutch paintings in the collection. In 2021, the Museum settled a financial agreement with the descendants of Ferenc Chorin (1879–1964), a Jewish collector in Budapest who fled to New York in 1947, for Salomon van Ruysdael's *View of Beverwijck*, which the MFA acquired in 1982, with no knowledge that it had been missing since 1945.³² In 2011, the Museum also agreed to a financial settlement with the heirs of the German Jewish art dealer Walter Westfeld (1889–1943), who had owned Eglon van der Neer's *Portrait of a Man and a Woman in a Refined Interior* (Fig. 7-7). Westfeld was arrested in 1938 and murdered at Auschwitz in 1943. The Museum was unaware of the persecution of the painting's rightful owner when it purchased it in New York in 1941.³³

Reed has also meticulously reconstructed the complicated Nazi-era history of Frans Hals's *Portrait of a Man* of about 1665 (Fig. 7-8), a virtuosic, loosely painted late work depicting an unknown sitter wearing a Japanese robe or *Japonse rok*.³⁴ Since 1911, the painting belonged to Dr. Leon Lilienfeld (1869–1938) of Vienna, a renowned scientist who had converted to Christianity shortly after his 1914 marriage to Antonie Shulz (1876–1972), who was not of Jewish descent. Because Nazi law considered Dr. Lilienfeld Jewish, the couple fled immediately after the 1938 Anschluss. They went



Figure 7-6. Adriaen van Ostade, *Customers Conversing in a Tavern*, 1671, oil on panel, promised gift of Susan and Matthew Weatherbie, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 7.7. Eggon van der Neer, *Portrait of a Man and a Woman in a Refined Interior*, 1665–1667, oil on panel, Seth K. Sweetser Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Figure 7-8. Frans Hals, *Portrait of a Man*, about 1665, oil on canvas, gift of Mrs. Antonie Lilienfeld in memory of Dr. Leon Lilienfeld, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

first to Italy, where Dr. Lilienfeld died of pneumonia in the same year; his widow escaped via Switzerland to the United States in 1941, settling in Winchester, outside Boston. Allied forces discovered the painting in the Altaussee salt mines in 1945, but it was only three years later, after contentious legal complications, and partly with the support of MFA curator William George Constable, that Hals's *Portrait of a Man* was restituted to Antonie Lilienfeld, who immediately donated it to the MFA.

Despite these recent successes, many restitution claims remain unresolved due to gaps in documentation and the complexity of tracing ownership. One notable example for the purposes of this study is *Old Man with a Beard* by Salomon Koninck, a member of Rembrandt's circle and fellow student of Pieter Lastman (Fig. 7-9). Prior to the war, the painting was owned by Alphonse, Oscar (1878–1948), and Adele Stettiner, a family of Paris-based British art dealers who were of Jewish heritage.³⁵ The heirs' restitution claim states that the painting was loaned to an exhibition in Dieren, in the eastern Netherlands, in 1939, after which the gallery owner, Firma D. Katz, sold the work to a German art dealer without the Stettiners's knowledge or consent in August 1940. The Dutch Restitutions Committee rejected their claim on the grounds that the heirs were unable to provide documentation showing that the painting had been on loan or consignment at the time of the sale. These stringent requirements ignored the historical context in which many Jewish collectors were dispossessed of their property under coercive or opaque circumstances. Cases like that of *Old Man with a Beard* exemplify the moral dilemma of balancing legal formalities with historical justice.

► Conclusion

A number of museums have recently mounted exhibitions to bring greater visibility to Nazi-looting of artworks. The Bonnefanten Museum in

the Netherlands took a bold step in this direction with its 2023–2024 exhibition "Art Adrift," which addressed the problematic histories of works whose ownership was disrupted by war, forced sales, and plunder. Rather than hiding gaps in provenance, the museum placed them at the center of the exhibition, emphasizing uncertainty and loss as part of the viewing experience.³⁶ These efforts reflect a broader shift in museum practice, grounded in the belief that provenance research is not merely academic but central to the integrity of cultural institutions.

The story of Rembrandt's *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh*, while complex, is an example of successfully restituted Nazi-era looted artworks. The painting was returned to its rightful owners in a timely manner, and its eventual acquisition by the MFA adhered to appropriate legal and ethical protocols. This was not the case for other artworks displaced during the Nazi period, with many examples lost or entangled in unresolved claims. Rembrandt's artistic merit is on full display in this portrait, which, thanks to the gift of the Van Otterloos, can be enjoyed by the public today. The transparency of the painting's provenance serves as a model for museums striving to present cultural heritage with historical integrity. While collectors are motivated by aesthetic appreciation, ethical considerations increasingly influence the acquisition and interpretation of art. Provenance research not only deepens scholarly engagement with works of art but, in some cases, adds an entirely new dimension to their cultural significance. In the case of the Uylenburgh portrait, its provenance reveals layers of historiographical complexity that expose underlying power dynamics and value judgments. The portrait's wartime displacement reflects a targeted effort to erase the legacy of Jewish collectors. Restitution, in this context, can be viewed not only as an act of justice but as a direct challenge to the ideology that sought to sever Jews from their cultural heritage.



Figure 7-9. Salomon Koninck, *Old Man with a Beard*, dated 1650, oil on panel, Collection Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands. *The NK-collection includes objects that were brought back from Germany to the Netherlands after World War II, with the instruction to return them to their rightful owners.*

- ¹ “Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to Receive Landmark Gifts of Dutch and Flemish Art Including Rembrandt Portrait and Other Golden Age Masterpieces,” Museum of Fine Arts Boston, October 11, 2017, at <https://www.mfa.org/news/masterpieces-of-dutch-and-flemish-painting>.
- ² The portrait was known by several names, frequently being misidentified as a portrait of Rembrandt’s mother. The discovery of a 1681 notarial document in 2000, confirming Aeltje Uylenburgh’s age, led to its current attribution. See Ben Broos, “De Lotgevallen van Rembrandts ‘Portret van Aeltje Uylenburgh,’” *Oud Holland* 123 (2010): 91.
- ³ The stamp “R49” on the reverse of the panel relates to the Nazi requisitions of 1940–1941: see <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-1960656#:~:text=Uylenburgh%2C%20whose%20brother%20Robertus%20was,future%20father-in-law>. The stamp aligns with the inventory number for the painting listed on the ERR Project database: https://www.errproject.org/jeudepaume/card_view.php?CardId=7857.
- ⁴ Gary Schwartz, “Jewish Collectors Take Rembrandt to Their Hearts,” in *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist’s Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*, ed. Gary Schwartz and Mirjam Knotter (Routledge, 2024), 240.
- ⁵ Michael Zell, “Eduard Kolloff and the Historiographic Romance of Rembrandt and the Jews,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 28 (2000): 181–97.
- ⁶ For resolved claims of artworks in the MFA collection, see <https://www.mfa.org/collections/provenance/ownership-resolutions>. For unresolved claims, see <https://www.mfa.org/collections/provenance/nazi-era-provenance-research>.
- ⁷ Broos, “De Lotgevallen van Rembrandts ‘Portret van Aeltje Uylenburgh,’” 91.
- ⁸ Stephanie Dickey, “Aeltje Uylenburgh,” in *Dutch Art in a Global Age* (Museum of Fine Arts, 2023), 131.
- ⁹ Broos, “De Lotgevallen van Rembrandts ‘Portret van Aeltje Uylenburgh,’” 93.
- ¹⁰ Broos, “De Lotgevallen van Rembrandts ‘Portret van Aeltje Uylenburgh,’” 93.
- ¹¹ Broos, “De Lotgevallen van Rembrandts ‘Portret van Aeltje Uylenburgh,’” 94–95. Coesvelt bought the painting in 1828 at Carlton Gardens in London before putting it up for auction on May 2, 1828. As the panel did not sell, it remained in the possession of the art dealer John Smith until he sold it to Brondgeest in 1835. It is unknown how the painting came to be included in the auction of Casimir Pierre Périer’s collection as recorded in Charles Blanc’s 1864 catalog on Rembrandt’s works.
- ¹² Broos, “De Lotgevallen van Rembrandts ‘Portret van Aeltje Uylenburgh,’” 95.
- ¹³ Schwartz, “Jewish Collectors Take Rembrandt to Their Hearts,” 239.
- ¹⁴ Schwartz, “Jewish Collectors Take Rembrandt to Their Hearts,” 241.
- ¹⁵ Hector Feliciano, *The Lost Museum: The Nazi Conspiracy to Steal the World’s Greatest Works of Art* (BasicBooks, 1997).
- ¹⁶ Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 248.
- ¹⁷ Jakob Kurz, *Kunstraub in Europa: 1938–1945* (Facta Oblita, 1989), 17, 33–34.
- ¹⁸ In this line of thinking, Hitler was greatly influenced by Julius Langbehn, who saw Rembrandt’s work as a source of inspiration for cultural reform in Germany, calling Rembrandt “*der deutscheste aller deutschen Maler und sogar der deutscheste aller deutschen Künstler*” (“The most German of all German painters and even the most German of all German artists”). See Julius Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (C. L. Hirschfeld, 1891), 9.
- ¹⁹ Ernst Hanfstaengl, *Hitler: The Memoir of the Nazi Insider Who Turned Against the Führer*, trans. John Toland (Arcade Publishing, 2011), 60.
- ²⁰ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs* (The Macmillan Company, 1970), 44.
- ²¹ Jean-Marc Dreyfus, “The Looting of Jewish Property in Occupied Western Europe: A Comparative Study of Belgium, France, and the Netherlands,” in *The Conflict over Jewish Property in Europe*, ed. Martin Dean et al. (Berghahn Books, 2007).
- ²² Dreyfus, “The Looting of Jewish Property,” 55.
- ²³ Feliciano, *The Lost Museum*, 47.
- ²⁴ For the painting’s looting, recovery, and restitution, see <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/494558/portrait-of-aeltje-uylenburgh>.
- ²⁵ Feliciano, *The Lost Museum*, 23.
- ²⁶ Sophie Lillie, *Was Einmal War: Handbuch der Enteigneten Kunstsammlungen Wiens* (Czernin, 2003), 440.
- ²⁷ Lillie, *Was Einmal War*, 442.
- ²⁸ Robert M. Edsel, *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* (Center Street, 2009).
- ²⁹ The first exhibition of “Masterpieces from French Collections Found in Germany by the Commission for Artistic Recuperation and Allied Organizations” was held between June and August 1946, showcasing 283 works of art across various mediums. See Feliciano, *The Lost Museum*, 216–17.
- ³⁰ See the Dutch Restitutions Committee’s 2006 recommendation for full details: <https://www.restitutiecommissie.nl/en/recommendation/goudstikker/>.
- ³¹ See Victoria S. Reed, “Paul Graupe, Arthur Goldschmidt and the Dispute over an Adriaen van Ostade painting in Wartime France,” *Journal of the History of Collections* 36 (2024): 251–70.
- ³² See “Ownership Resolutions” on the MFA website: <https://www.mfa.org/collections/provenance/ownership-resolutions>.
- ³³ See “Ownership Resolutions” on the MFA website: <https://www.mfa.org/collections/provenance/ownership-resolutions>.
- ³⁴ Victoria S. Reed, “Frans Hals, Hitler, and the Lilienfeld Collection: A Case Study of Expropriation in Austria,” *Journal of the History of Collections* 30 (2018): 471–86.
- ³⁵ See the Dutch Restitutions Committee’s 2015 decision for full details of the restitution claim: <https://www.restitutiecommissie.nl/en/recommendation/stettiner/>.
- ³⁶ Nina Siegal, “A Dutch Museum Tells the ‘Hidden Story’ of Looted Artworks,” *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 2024: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/28/arts/design/bonnefanten-museum-looted-art.html?searchResultPosition=2>.