

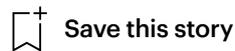
HOW REMBRANDT SAW ESTHER

What the queen means to Jewish tradition and to resisting tyranny and persecution—in the seventeenth century and today.

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Jewish persecution and Jewish self-protection, not to mention Jewish paranoia, the relations of Jews and Persians, the morality of Jewish reprisals for Jewish persecution, even the impulsive acts of a dim-witted ruler with a trophy wife—all of these feel so far from our daily preoccupations right now that the Jewish Museum's exhibition "Esther in the Age of Rembrandt," which dwells on them, may seem to offer an engaging summer distraction.

On the other hand, maybe not. In truth, almost everything in the exhibition is what many of us are brooding on right now, in its seventeenth-century form. It's a wonderfully complicated and compelling show, beautifully curated by Abigail Rapoport with Michele L. Frederick—a palimpsest of great painting, good painting, social history, and religious remembrance, all tied up in neat knots of pictorial parable. What Esther means to the Jewish tradition at large, what she meant specifically to the Sephardic community of Rembrandt's Amsterdam, and what she means symbolically—to the struggle of the Dutch to free themselves from Spanish domination in Rembrandt's day, and to us now—is a tight tangle of intention and obscurity, of local allegory and universal applicability, which makes paintings speak and art history matter.

The story of Esther is told, of course, in the Biblical book that bears her name, which produced the Jewish celebration of Purim. By a chance of circumstance, I was asked some twenty-five years ago to narrate the story for a Purim-spiel celebration for the same Jewish Museum, then under different management. As a somewhat secularized Jew, I had to undergo a crash course with the brilliant rabbi Isamar Schorsch, then the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, on Esther and the meanings of her story. As I learned, it is very much one of assimilated Jewishness: of how Ahasuerus, the Persian king, having become exasperated by the profeminism of his wife, Vashti, throws her over and holds a beauty pageant to choose her replacement, which is won by an assimilated Jewish

girl named Esther, who becomes his queen. (“What does she eat?” Rabbi Schorsch asked me uncomfortably. “It can’t be kosher.”)

One of the king’s advisers, Haman, develops a hatred for the Jewish presence at the court and in Persia at large, presumably for the usual reasons—Jews are clannish, secretive, too smart, and too ambitious—which reaches a climax when Esther’s cousin Mordecai, another counsellor, refuses to bow to him. He decides to launch a pogrom, to “destroy, slay, and exterminate” all the Jews in the kingdom, and persuades Ahasuerus to go along with it. “The money and the people are yours,” the clueless king tells him, “deal with them as you wish.” Mordecai then asks Esther for her help. She is reluctant, but finally decides that, if others’ lives depend on her, then she has no moral choice except to act.

Esther invites the king to a banquet where, dressed in her most fetching clothes, she she asks him to save her people. She also exposes a plot by Haman to harm the king and, in a dénouement that offends post-Enlightenment feelings, Haman and his sons are hanged on the scaffold that he had intended for Mordecai and the Jews. In “spieling” the story for the Jewish Museum, I turned the whole thing into a modern allegory of, well, Donald Trump, exchanging one wife for another, and set in the Persian palace of Trump Tower. At that time, imagining Trump as someone claiming royal prerogatives was so absurd that it created what sounded—from the lectern, at least—like ironic mirth.

The Jewish Museum’s new show, in this new time, is immediately impelled by the loan of a key Rembrandt from the National Gallery of Canada: his 1632 painting of Esther, with her handmaiden, at the moment when she is readying herself for the banquet where she pleads with her husband. The Canadians call the picture “A Jewish Heroine from the Hebrew Bible,” the identification of Esther being uncertain enough to make Canadians cautious, an easy thing to do. And, at first look, we may wonder if this really *is* Esther. Rembrandt’s queen has a double chin, a full belly, awkward proportions, and a doll-like and shiny face. But a glimpse at surrounding pictures by his students and followers who take up what is indubitably the subject of Esther, using the same iconography and portraying the same relationship between queen and servant, reassures us that it can be only her.

Then we remember that Rembrandt had simply no appetite for the ideal. He was one of those rare painters—or, for that matter, people—who relish the world as it is, and its inhabitants as they are, and whose talent naturally resists the course of easy exaggeration. There are no Bambi-eyed or swan-necked women in Rembrandt, as there are in other painters of his time. He saw the women in his life—Saskia, his wife, and Hendrickje Stoffels, his partner after Saskia's death—as people with faces, not as goddesses with wings. That is Esther and her handmaiden in his painting, sure as life.

Around it dance many other pictures that depict scenes from the life of Esther, and they reflect the fact that the Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam was uniquely emancipated, having fled other countries for the civil liberties of the Dutch Republic, and were thus free to celebrate Purim and its story openly. This, in turn, reflects the historical oddity that Esther was an avatar of the “Dutch maiden,” representing, with Mordecai, the struggle of the Dutch Republic against the Spanish imperium, symbolized by Haman. As Steven Nadler, in his wonderful study *“Rembrandt's Jews,”* writes, “The Dutch identification with ancient Israel in their own fight for freedom from Spanish tyranny and Catholic persecution found a particularly original expression in the popularity of the Esther story.” Nowhere else in Europe was the story told so often in imagery, or with so much complex purpose.

These countless intertwinings and embellishings of the ancient tale are startling, traced from picture to picture, but, in their way, they make perfect sense. The Esther story is what the professors call “multivalent,” simultaneously encompassing cosmopolitan assimilation, national resistance, imperial oppression, and, confusingly, colonial benevolence. It's at once a fable of murderous religious rivalry and of possible coexistence.

As art, it provided an opportunity for both exotic display—all those Persian furs and embroideries—and for symbolic images of heroic resistance and risk-taking. Rembrandt's contemporary Jan Steen painted a series of images of Ahasuerus's wrath as he realizes that he is being manipulated by Haman. Steen's works, set pieces of the kind of slightly provincial, secondhand Italianate rhetoric that Rembrandt was protesting in his more muted historical painting, nonetheless

contain a remarkable single figure: an image of Esther that, unlike Rembrandt's, is unmistakably meant as a Sephardic beauty, and might have been—must have been—modelled on a woman from the city's Jewish community. She's a very particular type: full-figured and dark-haired and sharp-nosed. (She looks, I confess, uncannily like my own Portuguese Sephardic mother when she was younger.)



"The Wrath of Ahasuerus" (1668-70), by Jan Steen. Museum Bredius / Courtesy The Jewish Museum

More moving to a modern eye is the highly Rembrandtesque pictures by his last and most loyal pupil, Aert de Gelder, a badly underrated painter who captured, as few students can, the essence of his master's approach without turning it into a manner. In the history of art, perhaps only the sixteenth-century Venetians Giorgione and Titian, under the benevolent sponsorship of Bellini, show a similar relation of apprenticeship producing faithful but new accomplishment—

which is significant because they were among Rembrandt's favorite painters, and it was his genius to translate the Venetians' bravura painterliness into a psychological interiority, making their ravishing atmospheric into nocturnes of nuance.

Emptied of all the inherited melodramatic posturing that was still the signature of the grand manner in historical painting, de Gelder's paintings share the emphasis on the inner life and isolation of individuals that Rembrandt nurtured: no background detail, only human figures interacting in dark space, with the enigmatic colloquies of Haman and Ahasuerus, and then of Esther and Mordecai, as troubled and as poetic as the ambivalent encounters in "Measure for Measure" or any of Shakespeare's "problem plays." De Gelder's picture of Haman's counsel to the king, meanwhile, is as good an image of a diabolical adviser warping the mind of a clueless boss as we might possess.

Yet the most moving and memorable picture in the show, aside from Rembrandt's, is one by his contemporary Hendrick van Steenwijk the Younger, on loan from the National Gallery, in Washington, D.C. It shows Mordecai and Esther in clandestine conspiracy in the shadows of the Persian palace, cloaked in darkness, obviously having a life-changing murmured exchange of confidence. An especially Jewish theme in the seventeenth century was not only the necessity but the dignity of subterfuge; to have lived in the shadows of another people's empire had a nobility of its own, captured in this exquisite and ambivalent image. The one scene from the story that no painter in the exhibition depicts is the hanging of Haman and his sons. Amsterdam tastes, like our own, doubtless found pleasure taken in revenge and reprisal excessive, while still recognizing the implacable and irrational nature of Haman's hatred. We recoil at the reprisal, even as we recognize the rapacity of the persecution.

Rembrandt's lack of idealism is part of what makes him the most personal of painters. That people don't look ideally perfect is art's embodiment of the larger truth that we cannot expect them to act ideally, either, and that any of us at any moment may be negotiating a complicated play between power, value, and loyalty. It is no accident, of course, that, as Russell Shorto reminds us in his wonderful book "The Island at the Center of the World," the developing

principles of coexistence and mutual dependence were a unique part of Amsterdam's civic life, and ones that we who live in the city born as New Amsterdam have inherited.

A last point occurs in looking at the Jewish Museum's show: as many have noted, Esther's book is the one book of the Bible in which God does nothing: its characters, believers and nonbelievers, have to cope for themselves. No burning bush comes to advise Esther on the best course of action. What we rightly call Rembrandt's humanism, and the incipient humanism of Amsterdam, involved people largely freed from religious dictatorship and moving toward religious freedom but still only beginning to learn how to cope with self-reliance and coexistence. Many commentators have also taken up the astonishing coincidence that Rembrandt and the great philosopher Spinoza, the brutally excommunicated member of Amsterdam's Portuguese Jewish community, coexisted for years, probably in mutual ignorance, though living only a couple of streets apart and presumably passing each other on their way to work or the market. Both were master humanists of a peculiar cast, one that begins in never over-idealizing human beings.

Spinoza, who was excommunicated partly for critiquing the historicity of Biblical episodes, including Esther's, believed that, though a force existed, continuous with nature, which might be called divine, no faith in divine intervention in human life could be trusted. We have to manage morality for ourselves. Spinoza, Nadler told me, "rejects in the strongest possible terms particular divine intervention; miracles are metaphysically impossible, there's just nature working through the necessitating agency of causes and effects."

It's a brave commentator who pretends to know Spinoza in full; even P. G. Wodehouse's omniscient Jeeves spent a lifetime trying to understand him. But surely Rembrandt shared with Spinoza at a minimum the sense that there's nobody here to straighten things out but us. We leave our good acts behind, and they alone may be immortal. The best we can do is do well, and bear witness. At a time when the claims of tribe and of conscience—of solidarity with one's own people and with humane universalism—are all at contest, it seems fair to call Rembrandt's Esther our queen, too. ♦