

REMBRANDT SEEN THROUGH JEWISH EYES



# Rembrandt

The Artist's Meaning to Jews

# Seen Through

from His Time to Ours

# Jewish Eyes

MIRJAM KNOTTER & GARY SCHWARTZ (EDS.)

Amsterdam University Press

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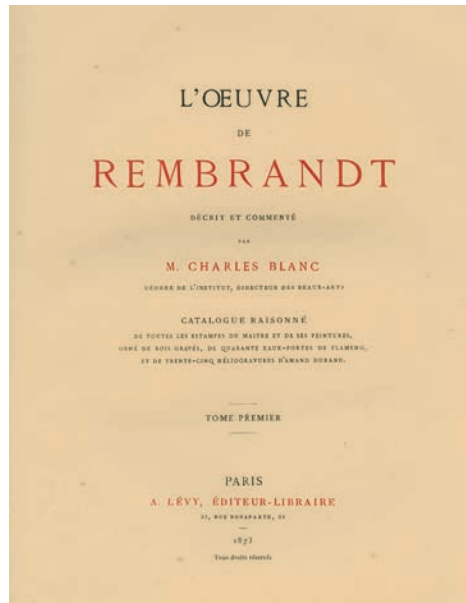
# Introduction

MIRJAM KNOTTER & GARY SCHWARTZ

“Voilà un juif de Rembrandt” (Just look at that Rembrandt Jew). The writer was pointing at a Jew not in a work by Rembrandt in the seventeenth century, but in the streets of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century.

That writer was Charles Blanc (1813–82), the most prestigious art historian, art critic and arts official of his time in France. Twice, from 1848 to 1851 and from 1870 to 1873, he was director of the Arts Administration of the French government. He wrote reviews of books and exhibitions for prestigious periodicals and was a founder of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, which was to become one of the leading art-historical journals in the world. Blanc also wrote two major works on Rembrandt. In 1853 he brought out *L'oeuvre de Rembrandt reproduit par la photographie* (Rembrandt's Work Reproduced by Photography), with one hundred photographs, more than two hundred illustrations of Rembrandt's etchings, and extensive commentary. In 1859 and 1861 this was expanded into *L'oeuvre complet de Rembrandt décrit et commenté par M. Charles Blanc* (The Complete Work of Rembrandt described and commented upon by M. Charles Blanc).

Blanc wrote about Rembrandt with comprehensive command of the known facts and unusual sensitivity. Reading him today, nearly two centuries later, one can only be impressed by how much he knew and how astute his judgments were. In one respect he has remained unsurpassed. In his entries on storytelling subjects—not only those from the Bible—he delved deeply into the sources, finding that Rembrandt had done the same before him. Particularly impressive is that he read the text of a rabbinical tract for which Rembrandt made etchings, *Piedra gloriosa o de la estatua de Nebuchadnesar* (The Glorious Stone, or On the Statue of Nebuchadnezzar) by Menasseh ben Israel (see fig. 56). His explanation is correct, but veined with antisemitic prejudice. In a four-page disquisition, Blanc recapitulates Menasseh's interpretation of the Jewish hero Daniel's interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon's dream (Daniel 2). The king had



1  
 Charles Blanc, *L'oeuvre complet de Rembrandt: catalogue raisonné de toutes les eaux-fortes du maître et de ses peintures ... orné de bois gravés et de quarante eaux-fortes tirées à part et rapportées dans le texte, décrit et commenté par M. Charles Blanc*  
 2 vols., Paris (Gide) 1859–61

Maarsse, Loekie and Gary Schwartz

seen a statue composed of different materials—strong and brittle, costly and cheap—standing for kingdoms that one after the other were to vanquish those following the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. All of them were eventually to be overcome by “a kingdom that will never be destroyed.” Blanc explains all the recondite symbolism, then adds this remarkable postscript:

It must be acknowledged that in the two hundred years since the book was printed, the history of the world has not falsified the predictions of the Jewish author. We see the people of Israel constantly growing in influence, accumulating untold riches, pursuing its destiny through so many hardships and so much contempt, becoming the protector of sovereigns who once persecuted them. What it has come to is that we compete with them everywhere for dominance in the grand initiatives of this century, inclining you to believe that the coming appearance of the fifth monarchy and the Messiah is inevitable.<sup>1</sup>

This was not meant kindly.

Blanc’s appreciation of Rembrandt’s respect for the Jews of the Bible was not paired with respect on his part for the “Rembrandt Jews” of his own day. In the 1861 volume of *Oeuvre complet*, his entry on Rembrandt’s so-called etching of *Jews in the Synagogue* (fig. 2) draws a malicious distinction between the Jews of Rembrandt’s time and his own.

They [the Jews in Rembrandt’s time] are all dealers in jewelry, traffickers in pearls, garment merchants, furriers, money-changers; they know how to assay diamonds and acquire gold; they are knowledgeable about lace, ivories, enamels and antiques; they wear old furs, sagging bonnets, stale lingerie. Their sort is captured in this small print of the *Synagogue* in unmistakable fashion, which is easy for us to verify today, since the race has not changed, being the same men in different clothing. But the Jews of the seventeenth century were not, like those of our day, spread among



2  
 Rembrandt, *Pharisees in the Temple*, formerly known as *Jews in the Synagogue*, 1648  
 Etching, 7.2 × 12.9 cm

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum  
 (RP-P-OB-342)



diverse social professions. Public animus as well as their natural penchant keep them confined to trade in gold and curiosities, gems and used clothing. Rembrandt, who lived in their quarter in Amsterdam, knew them so well and depicted them so well that it's as if he made their physiognomy his own, and that not a day goes by when we don't have occasion to say: "Just look at that Rembrandt Jew."<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, as full of antisemitic innuendo as this passage is, Blanc's identification of Rembrandt's Jews with those of his own time would have appealed to the targets of his scorn. With or without physiognomic resemblance, Jews could enjoy the thought that a giant of European culture like Rembrandt showed special interest in them. His portraits of the Sephardi Jews Menasseh ben Israel and Ephraim Bueno fed this conception. And the look Rembrandt bestowed on his models—in particular young women and old men—could come undeniably close to the image of the modern Ashkenazi Jew.

A stunning example is the correspondence in dress, beard, pose and expression of the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson (1880–1950), in the 1940s, to an elderly man painted in Rembrandt's workshop in the 1650s (figs. 3 and 4). Because sitters like him did not begin to be called Jewish until the nineteenth century, this must be considered sheer coincidence. Yet it is easy to see how the stereotypical image of a Jew in later centuries could be projected onto the identity of Rembrandt models who were not Jews. By the time the first catalogue of Rembrandt paintings was published by John Smith in 1836, this kind of painting was indexed under its own section—"Portraits of Jews and Rabbis," with twenty-nine entries. Seldom was a painting of a woman identified as Jewish. One exception is the rather glamorous, self-assured young woman who looks us straight in the face in a panel painting on poplar, now in the Royal Palace in Warsaw. In 1769 the Berlin engraver Georg Friedrich Schmidt made a copy of the painting to which he gave the title *La Juive Fiancée* (fig. 5); mean-



..272. PORTRAIT OF A RABBI. 1654. Dresden, Museum. (Panel 102 128)

3  
Rembrandt workshop,  
*Bearded Man with Black  
Beret*, 1654  
Oil on panel, 102 × 78 cm

Dresden, Gemäldegalerie  
(1567; from illustration in  
Bredius 1969, no. 272, where  
it is captioned “Portrait of a  
Rabbi.”)

while, in another painting believed to be a pendant, he called the older man sitting at a desk with a pen in his hand *Le Pere de la fiancée réglant sa dot* (The father of the bride arranging her dowry). Neither identification stuck. When the painting of the girl first entered the Rembrandt literature, in 1901, it was given the title *A Young Girl in a Broad-Brimmed Cap, Her Hands on a Window-sill*, and the man *An Old Savant at his Writing Table*. From early on, however, a number of prints were said to depict Jewish brides (see figs. 68 and 73). A self-conscious Jewish art lover had opportunity enough to identify with Rembrandt models, and in doing so feel like the object of sympathy on the part of the artist.

This conviction was put into words by one of the foremost writers on Rembrandt in the twentieth century, Jakob Rosenberg (1893–1980; see fig. 143). Rembrandt, he wrote, “was especially attracted by the faces of old Jews, embodying patriarchal dignity, but he took an interest also in what we may call the pharisaic type. Here he expressed a stubborn tenacity of character, along with an intellectual gift for casuistic argumentation.” Rosenberg related this to Protestant Bible study and Dutch tolerance, while positing that Rembrandt’s exceptional acceptance of Jews went even further. “It was Calvinism in particular which drew attention to the Old Testament and opened up a more just consideration of the Jews as the original Biblical people. But in addition to all the historical circumstances which fostered Rembrandt’s interest, there remains the indisputable fact that the artist’s attitude toward the Jewish people was an unusually sympathetic one.”



4  
 Photograph of Rabbi Yosef  
 Yitzchak Schneerson, 1940s  
 Reproduced in mirror image.

Rosenberg was not unique in seeing Rembrandt's many depictions of subjects from the Old Testament as evidence of sympathy for Jews and Judaism. These works surely affected the way Rembrandt was seen through Jewish eyes. The only two documented purchases by a contemporary Jew of finished work by Rembrandt—an etching plate bought in 1637 by Samuel d'Orta and a painting bought in 1639 by Alfonso Lopez—were both of Old Testament subjects (see figs. 13 and 135). They were moreover subjects pertaining to tension between Jews and others, tension of a kind being experienced by the Jewish buyers. The etching plate depicted Abraham driving off his concubine Hagar and their son Ishmael. Ishmael was to become the progenitor of the Arab tribes who founded Islam. The fortunes of the Sephardi Jews of Spain, Samuel d'Orta's people, were intertwined with those of the Iberian Muslims. The painting bought by a Jew, Alfonso Lopez, showed the non-Jewish prophet Bileam who, having been called upon to curse the Jewish people, is on his way to bless them. In his dramatic life, Lopez, too, navigated a fraught dividing line between religions.

The choice of these two Sephardi Jews for depictions of these subjects can be taken as an indication that the interest of Jews in Rembrandt's Old Testament motifs was not only sentimental, but also had meaning for their own lives. In later centuries, these particular effects lessened, and Old Testament paintings by Rembrandt were not disproportionately collected by Jewish as opposed to non-Jewish collectors. The same is even true of New Testament subject matter. There is, however, one particular subject that Jewish Rembrandt lovers avoided: depictions of the Passion of Christ. This is understandable in light of the built-in accusation that Jews were to blame for the death of Christ, for which they assumed eternal responsibility: "All the people answered, 'His blood is on us and on our children!'" (Matthew 27:25).

The only undisputed portrait of a contemporary Jew by Rembrandt portrays one of his neighbors, the Sephardi physician and scholar Dr. Ephraim Bueno.<sup>3</sup> On the cover of the present volume, he looks Rembrandt straight in the eye. The small oil sketch, made in preparation for Rembrandt's etched portrait of Bueno (see fig. 76), has given rise to the assumption of a personal bond between the Jewish doctor and the artist. The German-Jewish art historian and émigré to America Franz Landsberger, for one, pointed out in his *Rembrandt, the Jews and the Bible* (1946) Rembrandt's success in capturing Bueno's "species" (his Jewishness) and his inner life more successfully than did Jan Lievens in his later portrait etching of the doctor (see fig. 25):

It may be that Lievens' etching bears a more faithful resemblance to the original than does that of Rembrandt. But the latter discerns beyond the individual the species, and beyond the species the man. This is Ephraim Bonus; this is the Jew who has experienced centuries of suffering; this is the man who faces and strives to plumb the insoluble mystery of human destiny.<sup>4</sup>

Landsberger's observation was clearly influenced by his own experience as a Jewish refugee in the post-war era. So was that written twenty-five years later by a colleague who had also fled Germany for the United States: Erwin Panofsky. Panofsky had a different view of Rembrandt's portrait of Bueno, but he, too, related it to the sitter's Jewishness. Bueno's sombre expression, he wrote, evinces a great soul, to which he added that "the physiognomy, by contrast, does not really correspond and is, above all, without the accentuation of Jewish racial characteristics."<sup>5</sup>

The pattern of expectations created by Rembrandt's portraits of Jews and depictions of Old Testament subjects opened the possibility for attaching Jewish meanings to more abstract features of his work. A breathtaking utterance of this kind was made by a major figure in twentieth-century Jewish history, Rabbi Abraham Kook (1865–1935), the first chief rabbi of Palestine. After his death on 1 September 1935, he was commemorated by the British Jewish sculptor Avram Melnikoff (1892–1960).



5  
George Friedrich Schmidt  
after Rembrandt,  
*La Juive Fiancée*, 1769  
Reproduction print,  
18.1 × 23.4 cm

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum  
(RP-P-OB-54.183)

When I lived in London I used to visit the National Gallery, and my favourite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a *Tzadik* [a saint]. Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt's works, they reminded me of the legend about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light, it was so strong and pellucid, that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous when the Messiah should come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that was originally created by God Almighty.<sup>6</sup>

This remark has taken on a life of its own, generating nearly Talmudic explications. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of Great Britain (1948–2020), cites and comments on the statement in a video on the biblical portion Vayakhel, as read in the synagogue in the year 5771.<sup>7</sup> He relates it to an earlier part of the exchange between Kook and Melnikoff. When the sculptor asked the rabbi whether sculpture was or was not accepted in Judaism, he got this answer: "Our sages say, he read out [from a huge volume], 'that it is permitted to Jews to make images, if they are done imperfectly and maimed.'" Sacks makes the further connection, of the gap-leaping kind well known to students of the Talmud, between the imperfection of an image and the imperfection of its subject, specifically images of human beings. This allows him to put these thoughts into the mind of his revered predecessor: "Rav Kook's admiration for the artist had, I suspect, [...] everything to do with the light Rembrandt saw in the faces of ordinary people, without any attempt to beautify them. His work lets us see the transcendental quality of the human, the only thing in the universe on which God set His image." We are

skeptical of this reading, feeling that it departs needlessly from the literal meaning of Rabbi Kook's words, which are sublimely visionary rather than acquiescently ethical. Nonetheless, it has found a place in Orthodox Jewish thinking. The distinguished rabbi and academic Meir Soloveichik (b. 1977) quotes Sacks approvingly, linking the dogma of imperfection to Simon Schama's characterization of Rembrandt as an artist uniquely capable of depicting the weakness of the flesh "not as compromising the moral nobility of his sitters, but as describing it." These steps from Kook to Sacks via Schama leads to this resounding conclusion: "If Judaism's idea of art is an art that can truly represent our frail, fallible humanity, then Rembrandt is the artist for Jews."<sup>8</sup>

Rabbi Soloveichik did not leave things at that. With Jacob Wisse, the art historian director of Yeshiva University Museum, he gave a course at Stern's College for Women, where they both teach, with the telling title "Rembrandt and the Jews: Art as Midrash in 17th-Century Amsterdam."<sup>9</sup> These encomiums to Rembrandt from pious Jews are particularly precious in the context of the theme "Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes." Of the other Jewish writers, collectors, art dealers or artists whose relation to Rembrandt we present, no one but the Leiden art historian Henri van de Waal is known to us to have been an observant Jew. We have not been demanding about the quality of Jewishness in their lives: for the purposes of the exhibition, we included anyone born into a Jewish family, even if the person converted to a Christian faith (as Alfonso Lopez did). In their behavior, we find indications that they were moved by the thought that Rembrandt had sympathy for Jews. This manifests itself demonstratively in the years from the 1880s on, when antisemitism took on extreme forms in France and Germany. The appreciation of Rembrandt by Jewish writers and collectors in these years can be seen as a defensive response to the discrimination from which they suffered. The ideas expressed by the rabbis quoted here have a different cast. They are proactive rather than reactive, and come close to identifying Rembrandt himself as an honorary Jew. Not even Henri van de Waal relates his own Jewishness to his views on Rembrandt, as Kook, Sacks and Soloveichik do.

In response to the many questions on Rembrandt's possible ties with Jews, three Jewish museums have mounted exhibitions, of different complexions, looking at Rembrandt from a Jewish angle. In 1982, Jewish museums in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York mounted the traveling exhibition *The Jews in the Age of Rembrandt*, organized by the Judaic Museum of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington. The emphasis here was on religious tolerance as a value on its own, a value shared by the United States and the United Provinces. (It has been said that the United States was named after the Dutch Republic.) The exhibition was in fact circulated by the Netherlands–America Bicentennial Commission, in celebration of "the two hundredth anniversary of the establishment [in 1782] of America's oldest, continuously peaceful relationship with a foreign nation—the Netherlands."<sup>10</sup> The catalogue had excellent essays by Simon Schama, Jane Farmer and Cynthia von Bogendorf-Rupprath, still very worth reading. In itself, the exhibition was modest, showing fifty-six prints from the seventeenth-century Netherlands.

Another anniversary celebration—the four-hundredth anniversary of Rembrandt's birth in 2006—saw the creation of two larger exhibitions. The Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam showed *The "Jewish" Rembrandt: The Myth Unravelling*, which is

sparked by “a healthy degree of skepticism” weighed all the presumed evidence for Rembrandt’s sympathy for Jews and Judaism and found it wanting. The scholarship, by Mirjam Knotter, Jasper Hillegers and Edward van Voolen (with an afterword by Gary Schwartz, who first broached the project) is pioneering and penetrating, full of new information and informed by an admirably critical spirit. When interrogated sharply, few of the presumed indications of Rembrandt’s affinity with the Jews in his environment, or with Judaism as a religion, held water. The identifications of Rembrandt sitters and models as Jews were found to be baseless (as were many of the attributions); special reproof was meted out to authors, even a major figure like Erwin Panofsky, who saw traces of Jewish suffering in the faces of these models. To the authors of the exhibition catalogue, this amounted to the kind of ethnic profiling that was in line with the discriminatory attitude of a Charles Blanc.

In the eyes of some, the skepticism of the Amsterdam exhibition curators was not altogether healthy. That came out in the attitude of the curators of the largest exhibition ever devoted to the subject, at the Musée d’art et d’histoire du Judaïsme in Paris in 2007, with 186 well-chosen displays. The title of the exhibition, curated by Laurence Sigal-Klagsbald and Alexis Merle du Bourg, gave expression to a more positive view of the matter: *Rembrandt et la Nouvelle Jérusalem: Juifs et Chrétiens à Amsterdam au Siècle d’Or* (Rembrandt and the New Jerusalem: Jews and Christians in Amsterdam in the Golden Age). The exhibition highlighted the Dutch view of themselves as sharers of the Jewish experience of being victims of religious persecution, and the Jewish view of Amsterdam as a refuge from the same. The evidence marshaled in the Amsterdam and Paris exhibitions is real and important. If the interpretations attached to it by the curators sometimes seem like attempts to explain the inexplicable, this only serves to bring out the emotional impact, right up to the present day, of the phenomena under study. This gave depth and added appeal to the present project.

### JEWES AND JUDAISM IN REMBRANDT’S OWN WORLD

A fixed feature in writings on Rembrandt is that he lived for about thirty years in a part of Amsterdam that also housed nearly all the Jews in the city. That circumstance often leads to the supposition that Rembrandt enjoyed friendly neighborly relations with Jews. The commissions he took on from Sephardim in the neighborhood led to the easy assumption that they were friends of his. Critical scrutiny has undermined these propositions, but left something of a void. From her position in the heart of that area, in seventeenth and eighteenth-century synagogue buildings that now house the Jewish Museum of Amsterdam, Mirjam Knotter set out to retrieve and order as much information as possible on the lives of the people in that part of town. With the assistance of a number of researchers and interns, she combed the archival records on the houses on Rembrandt’s block and the surrounding streets, in many of which Jews lived. Her main collaborators were Guido Leguit, a student in the Dual Master’s program Curating Arts and Cultures (University of Amsterdam and Free University of Amsterdam) and Hans Bonke, a volunteer. In two essays, Mirjam mines the massive archival findings to sketch

## INTRODUCTION

“Sephardi Jewish Life and Material Culture in Rembrandt’s Time” and more particularly “Rembrandt and His (Jewish) Neighbors: A Stroll Through the Neighborhood.” Her work raises to a new high level our ability to visualize and conceptualize Rembrandt’s Jewish environment.

The Jews who until now have made an appearance in the Rembrandt literature were sophisticated, well-to-do Sephardim, Spanish and Portuguese Jews. Most of them lived on the Sint Antoniesbreestraat and the streets behind it. The big change in the Jewish composition of the neighborhood after he bought his house in 1639 was the arrival in increasing numbers of immigrants, often refugees, from Eastern Europe. They were poorer than most Sephardim, but also more pious and knowledgeable about Jewish ritual. Introducing them into the Rembrandt literature for the first time, Bart Wallet contributes the essay “Rembrandt’s Other Jews: The Amsterdam Ashkenazim in the Seventeenth Century.” He traces with admirable clarity the all-but-clear relationships between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, the religious and social standing of the groups, and the ways in which they interacted with the Amsterdam town government and non-Jewish Amsterdammers. Learning about the complexity of these relationships and arrangements is a beneficial corrective to any tendency to generalize about the religion and ethnicity of any group or denomination in Amsterdam. This is essential new material for our understanding of how the Jews of Amsterdam would have looked at an artist like Rembrandt.

Another border is breached by Michael Zell, in “Rembrandt and Multicultural Amsterdam: Jews and Black People in Rembrandt’s Art.” He asks pointedly why study of the ethnic component of Rembrandt’s neighborhood on the Sint Antoniesbreestraat has been limited largely to its Jewish inhabitants. Stimulated by the discovery that a number of free Black Africans lived a few doors away from Rembrandt, Zell has examined all the available sources concerning Black people in the city. He calls attention to pieces of evidence, like the remark by Ernst Brinck, later burgomaster of Harderwijk, that “almost all of the servants [of the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam] are slaves and Moors.”<sup>11</sup> Although slavery was forbidden in the Dutch Republic, persons who were brought there as enslaved people had to apply for freedom in the courts. Their declarations and those of slave owners provide snippets of life stories. Zell’s essay changes the complexion of Rembrandt’s Amsterdam, restoring personality to the unexpected large number of Black people in his art.

## SOCIETY, SPIRITUALITY, IMAGERY

Even the best-known contacts between Rembrandt and an Amsterdam Jew can be enriched with inventive research. The historian of philosophy Steven Nadler, the author of a biography of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, has looked again at the relationship between the rabbi and the artist, in “Rembrandt, Menasseh ben Israel and Spinoza.” He devotes a close reading to the messianic tract by Menasseh for which Rembrandt etched illustrations, *Even yekarah. Piedra gloriosa o de la estatua de Nebuchadnesar* (The Glorious Stone, or On the Statue of Nebuchadnezzar) (see fig. 56). Like Charles Blanc, Nadler relates Menasseh’s message to the expectations of the non-Jews among whom the Jews lived.

He finds this meaning not in a power struggle in which the Jews were taking over the world, but in the pious though idle hope of Menasseh's Christian millenarian friends that the Second Coming of Christ was in the offing and would bring about the conversion of the Jews. Concerning the publication itself, and Rembrandt's share in it, he has stunning new information. Nadler and his co-author, Victor Tiribás, discovered that the board of the Sephardi community censured Menasseh for having published this book, and forbade him from continuing to print it. The most widely accepted, though unproven, explanation for this is that the book contained a depiction of the Almighty in human form. This would explain the existence of copies without Rembrandt's etchings or with substitute engravings in which God is not represented. Rembrandt would then have been seen, in the Jewish eyes of the board, as a violator of the Second Commandment. Concerning the frequently broached relationship between Rembrandt and the most famous Dutch Jew ever, Baruch de Spinoza, Nadler deflates our own hopes that it ever existed.

Shelley Perlove has devoted more attention to the place of Judaism in Rembrandt's art than anyone; in this volume, she presents the main results of her research in "Rembrandt and the Jews and Vice Versa." Crediting Rembrandt with success in achieving what she calls "a semblance of authenticity" in his evocations of Jewish dress and biblical locations, she opens her mind and the reader's to the opportunities available to him for achieving this. A major source could be found outside his front door on the Sint Antoniesbreestraat, in the appearance and behavior of his Sephardi and Ashkenazi neighbors. But he also could have turned to Christian scholarship and Jewish religious writings. For images of the Temple he had available the influential translation of the Talmud tractate on the building, made by the Leiden professor of Hebrew Constantijn L'Empereur. Perlove relates the spaces in Rembrandt's renditions of the Temple to contemporaneous theories concerning the ground plan of the building and the location of particular events. She also finds sources in the Mishnah, available to Rembrandt in a Latin translation, for Rembrandt's unique depiction of two high priests in the Temple, who serve liturgical and administrative functions, respectively. All of these avenues of access connected Rembrandt's own Christian conviction and milieu to the Jews whose presence and history informed his art.

Roman Grigoryev's contribution, "Jewish Brides, Rabbis and Sitters in Rembrandt's Etchings," examines Rembrandt's etchings for what they can tell us about his relationship with Jews. In addition to concepts attending specific iconographies, he also comes up with at least one important observation concerning Rembrandt's actual contact with Jews. The poor men in the street from Rembrandt's Amsterdam years that have always been seen as Jews, Grigoryev points out, can already be found in his earlier work made in Leiden, where there were no Jews. This puts into doubt one of the key pieces of evidence for Rembrandt's interest in Amsterdam Jews other than those with whom he had a professional relationship. Grigoryev also questions the Jewishness of the women who in several etchings are called Jewish brides.



## JEWISH ARTISTS

In “Modern Jewish Artists Discover Rembrandt,” Larry Silver takes on the single most fascinating aspect of our subject: how Jewish artists regarded Rembrandt. Silver shows how in Eastern Europe and the Netherlands, the first Jews to become professional artists gravitated toward Rembrandt. Not only was he a hero and emblem of the kind of emancipation to which they aspired, he also brought Jewish imagery into the mainstream of European art. Silver singles out striking Rembrandt references in the work of the leading Jewish artist of the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe, Maurycy Gottlieb, who like Rembrandt introduced charged identities (including his own) into paintings of biblical dramas. In Western Europe it was mainly Rembrandt’s chiaroscuro and the emotional appeal of his figures and compositions that inspired Jewish artists like Jozef Israëls. Intense expressions of involvement with Rembrandt and his art, in word and image, are cited from Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine, R.B. Kitaj, Larry Rivers, Leonard Baskin and others. These artists lend breadth as well as depth to our theme.

A particular class of Jewish artists who engaged profoundly with Rembrandt is discussed by Simon Schama, in “Laying it on Thick: British (Immigrant) Artists and Their Rembrandt.” Schama grew up in Jewish London, in proximity to these artists. The artist Schama considers the greatest British artist of the twentieth century, David Bomberg, was Jewish. His attachment to Rembrandt was thematic, stylistic, social and personal. He found a match between Rembrandt’s career and personality and his own, responded viscerally to the emotional impact of Rembrandt’s compositions, modeled his self-portraits on Rembrandt’s, and emulated his impasto. Going even further, Bomberg, his students Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, and after them their friend Lucian Freud, “all pursued the ultimately unattainable end of an equivalence, even an interchangeability between flesh and paint.” Rembrandt was the one who showed these Jewish artists the way. Schama brings Chaim Soutine, who never visited Britain, into the picture on account of the way Soutine’s own appreciation of Rembrandt echoed that of Bomberg and his associates, as “the very epitome of a painter for whom passion and subject treatment were functionally inseparable.” These refugees and children of refugees or immigrants all found in Rembrandt a welcoming presence in new homes, where not everyone accepted them.

Thanks to the origins of our project in Russia, we felt called upon to include an essay on Jewish artists in that country, allowing us to bring into consideration artists who have not yet entered the canon of Western art. Nina Getashvili wrote for us on “Rembrandt and Russian Jewish Artists,” introducing for the first time in English-language scholarship a theme that has drawn increasing attention in Russia over the past decades. The names of most of the artists will be new to non-specialist readers. Their relations to Rembrandt involve more than artistic preferences. In the art world and outside of it, their lives were impacted by the dramatic events in Russian and Jewish history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A touching highpoint in Getashvili’s presentation can serve as a motto for our theme as a whole. They are the closing words from a book on Rembrandt by Leonid Pasternak, the most outspokenly Jewish of the artists in her essay:

Every Jewish home should have on its wall, perhaps alongside portraits of Montefiore and Herzl, a reproduction of one of the paintings emerging from the depths of Rembrandt's exalted soul, transmitting with so much love and such depth the spiritual inspiration nestling in the depths of the Jewish nation.

While working with Nina on the final details of her essay, we learned to our deep regret that she had suddenly passed away.

### JEWISH COLLECTORS AND MUSEUMS

Laurence Sigal-Klagsbald homes in on one of the key issues in the discussion of Rembrandt and the Jews. In "Jewish Museums Present Rembrandt" she lays out the contrasting views on the position of Jews in Rembrandt's Amsterdam in the three exhibitions mentioned above. The last and by far the largest of the exhibitions was her own, *Rembrandt et la Nouvelle Jérusalem*. Rather than generalizing about a "positive" versus "negative" attitude, she specifies the issues involved, point by point, providing a valuable launching pad for continued debate. Sigal-Klagsbald tackles another hotly contested question: is Rembrandt's 1636 etched portrait of a man Menasseh ben Israel (see fig. 124) or not? The identification was accepted by all cataloguers from the time it was broached, in 1751, until Adri Offenbergh challenged it in 1992. His objections soon became the new orthodoxy. Sigal-Klagsbald, once more supplying point-by-point argumentation, comes down on the side for the traditional identification. She also offers fresh insights into the collaboration between Rembrandt and Menasseh, in Rembrandt's illustrations for Menasseh's book *Piedra gloriosa*. Amplifying the research of Steven Nadler, she puts her finger on the existence of uncut impressions of those four etchings in a single sheet. Does this not imply that the insertion of the Rembrandt etchings into the printed book was stopped after Menasseh was censured by the board of the Sephardi community? In all, Sigal-Klagsbald's contribution, which closes with an appreciation of *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes*, puts the reader in the middle of the most heated discussions on our theme.

From his time to ours, there have always been Jews who bought work by Rembrandt. In itself, this need not be meaningful. There are, however, circumstances that suggest a meaningful relationship between the collecting choices of these Jews and their ethnicity. In "Jewish Collectors Take Rembrandt to Their Hearts," Gary Schwartz sketches the general features of the phenomenon while highlighting the areas of heightened significance. The most striking of these was the near explosion of Rembrandt collecting by French and German Jews from the 1880s to the 1910s, which Schwartz relates to the horrifying upsurge of antisemitism in their countries in these years. Although none of them seem to have said it in so many words, Schwartz argues that their collecting of his art, and their donations of work by him to major museums, implies a recognition of Rembrandt's deeply felt representations of Old Testament subjects, his use of Jewish models and his reputation as being sympathetic to Jews. They saw him as a hero of European Christian culture who built a bridge to the Jewish world, and hoped that they could help Christians see him that way as well.



How, we may finally ask, would Rembrandt have felt about his particular appeal to Jews? Little in his biography, with its conflicts with Jews, or the iconography of his Christian subjects, with their principled antagonism to Jews as deniers of Christ's divinity, encourages us to think he would have been pleased. There is, however, one self-portrait in which he projects an image of himself that, to our mind, expresses a decided openness to dialogue with or even identification with Jews, among others. We refer to the only self-portrait in which Rembrandt takes on the guise of a specific biblical figure, his imposing *Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul* in the Rijksmuseum (see frontispiece), featuring the sword and book that are St. Paul's attributes. This is usually taken as an endorsement by Rembrandt of a point of Pauline theology, or as an affirmation of Calvinism as opposed to the Catholicism of St. Peter.

Another interpretation, advanced by Gary Schwartz in 2006, offers a more inclusive possibility, embracing others rather than shutting them out. (Needless to say, no inference concerning what was in Rembrandt's mind can be proven.) This interpretation is based on Rembrandt's habit, in his self-portraits, of taking on guises that he also lends to his portrait sitters. The self-portraits, in this view, are less objects of introspection than gestures of connection,

even bonding, with the artist's fellow man. This method or manner evokes a certain passage in St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 9, St. Paul declares his rights as an apostle, a self-representation in words that bears illuminating comparison to Rembrandt's visual self-representations. The climax of this statement reads thus.

[19] Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. [20] To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. [21] To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. [22] To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. [23] I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

"I have become all things to all people." That is the thought that we ascribe to Rembrandt. That Jews feel that he belongs to them is, in this view, exactly Rembrandt's intention, just as it was his intention to appeal to the interests and predilections of every viewer, no matter what their belief or stance in life. The Rembrandt seen through Jewish eyes that we bring out in this book has its equivalent in the Rembrandts seen through the eyes of Calvinists, but also Catholics, of non-believing humanists, of Black people, of aesthetes to whom the artist's intention and social contexts mean nothing. To look at Rembrandt through Jewish eyes, we hope, is to see him not as a sectarian but the figure of universal attraction and impact that he was.

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L. [Leonid] Pasternak, Academician [in 1905 Pasternak was elected to the venerable Imperial Academy of Arts, St. Petersburg], *Rembrandt: His Creations and His Value for Judaism*

Translated from the manuscript by Y. Koplivitz, with an introduction by Ch. N. Bialik (in Hebrew) Jerusalem and Berlin (Yavneh) 1923