# Rembrandt and Multicultural Amsterdam: Jews and Black People in Rembrandt's Art

MICHAEL ZELL


## ABSTRACT

This chapter revisits Rembrandt's depictions of Jews in light of the recent discovery of a small community of free Black Africans in his Amsterdam neighborhood. Like some Jews, these Black people served as models for Rembrandt. Yet the disturbingly entangled histories of these two communities must be addressed when assessing the neighborhood's impact on the artist. Most Black people arrived in the city as enslaved servants of the Sephardim, and while slavery was illegal in the Republic, it was widely practiced in Dutch trading sites abroad, in which the Sephardim were heavily involved. Echoing the idea that Rembrandt's portrayals of Jews transcended ethnic and religious difference, his sensitive images of Black people have recently been promoted as alternatives to the dominance of their stereotyping in the history of art.



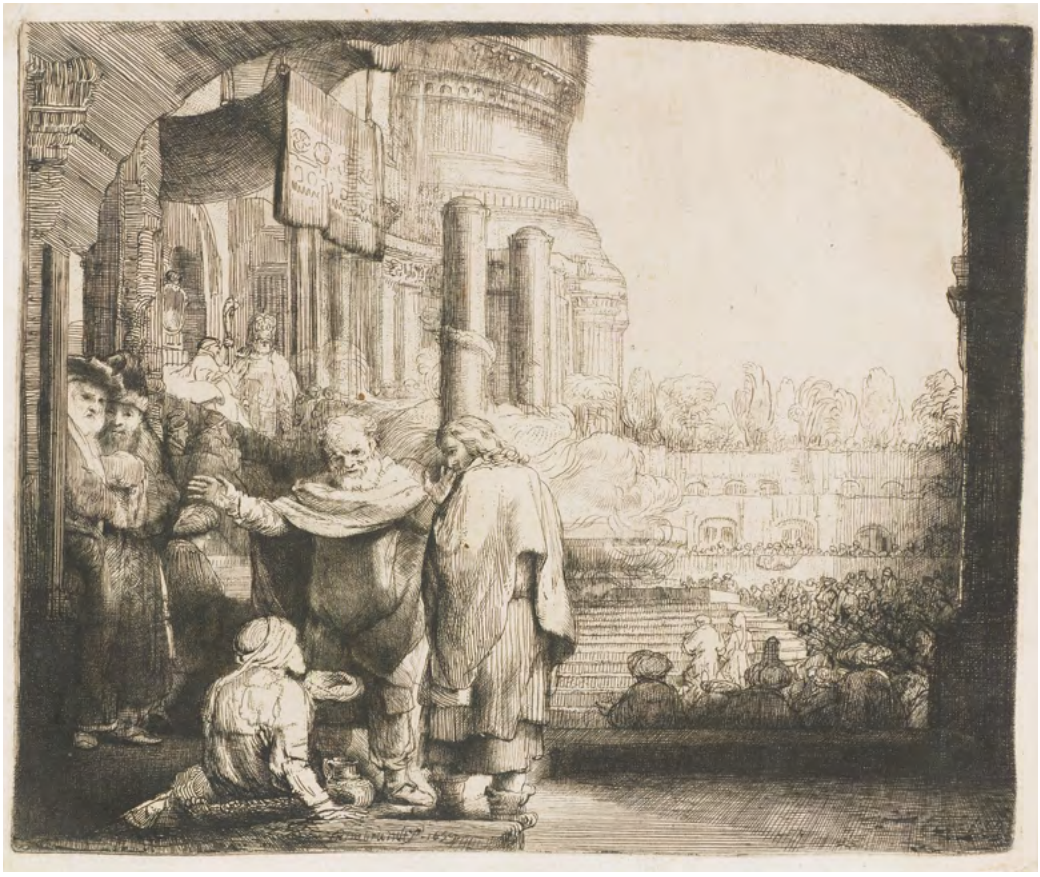
## KEYWORDS

Rembrandt, Sephardim, Black people, slavery, colonialism


45
Rembrandt, *Two African Drummers*, ca. 1638
Pen and brown ink and red chalk with brown wash, touched with white and yellow, 23 × 17.1 cm

London, British Museum (Oo,10.122; © The Trustees of the British Museum)

Knotter, Mirjam and Gary Schwartz (eds.), *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes: The Artist's Meaning to Jews from His Time to Ours*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024
DOI 10.5117/9789463728188_ZELL



40
Rembrandt, *Peter and John Healing a Cripple*, 1659
Etching and drypoint,
17.9 cm × 21.8 cm

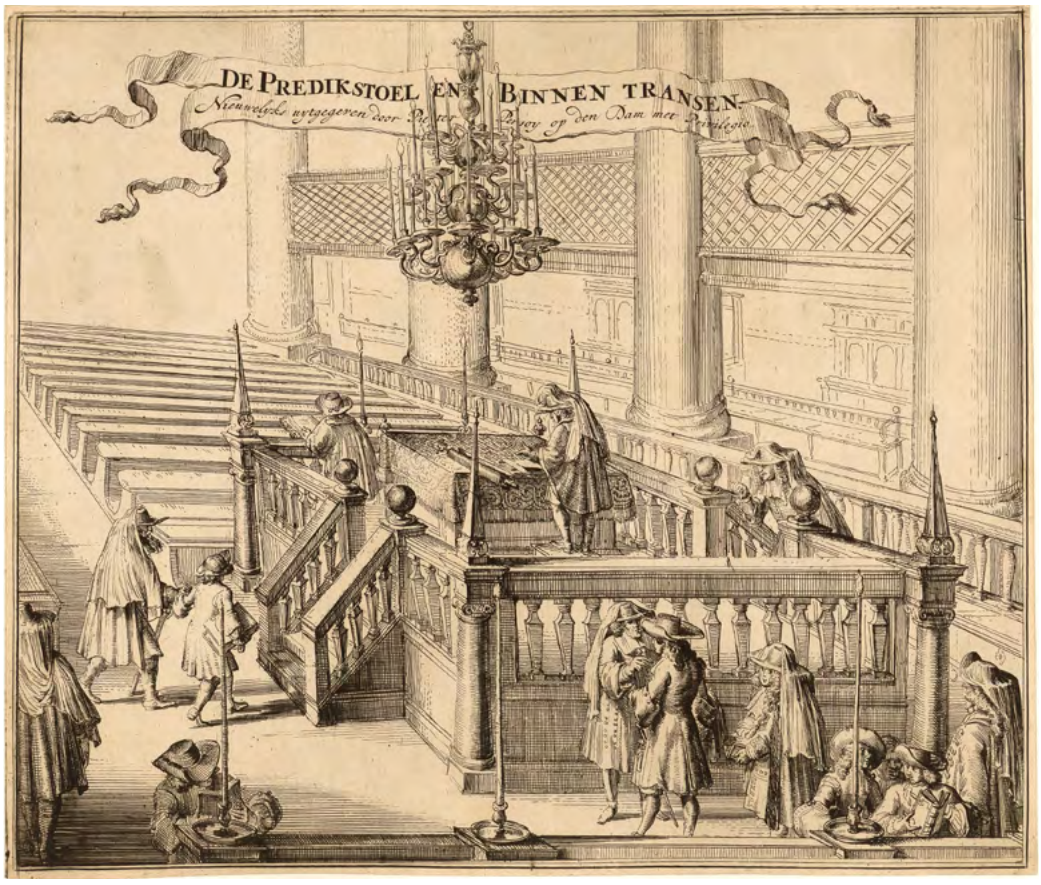
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum
(RP-P-OB-324)

That Rembrandt portrayed the Jews he encountered in the streets of his Amsterdam neighborhood was acknowledged early on. The painter Adriaen van der Werff, a near-contemporary who appears to have been well informed, reported in the early eighteenth century that Rembrandt "turned the picturesque *tronies* [using the Dutch term for paintings of social and ethnic types] of the Jodenbreestraat [the Jews' Street] to good advantage."[1] Tronies, non-portrait head or half-length studies, usually of a single figure, sometimes dressed in flamboyant costume, constitute a significant proportion of Rembrandt's production.[2] To be sure, the identification of some if not most of these pictures as Jews—Rabbis, Old Jews, Young Jews, Jewish Merchants and Jewish Brides—became grossly inflated in the nineteenth century.[3] Moreover, identifying Jewish sitters on the basis of dress—let alone physiognomy—is notoriously problematic. But two likely candidates, based on modern scholarly consensus, are *Portrait Study of a Young Jew* from about 1657 in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, and especially *Bust of a Young Jew*, dated 1663, in the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth (see fig. 134).[4]

That Rembrandt's contemporaries recognized and collected tronies of Jewish subjects is also confirmed by a 1681 inventory description of a painting as "A portrayal of a Polack Jew"—using the derogatory term "smous."[5] Rembrandt also incorporated his studies of contemporary Jewish models in biblical scenes that blur the distinction between the past and the present: two Ashkenazi Jewish men appear at the left of the 1659 etching *Peter and John Healing a Cripple*, watching from the sidelines as the Christian miracle unfolds (fig. 40).

Rembrandt lived on the "Jodenbreestraat" (the Jews' Street), as van der Werff called the Sint Antoniesbreestraat, or Breestraat for short, from the early 1630s to 1635, working and residing with the art dealer Hendrick Uylenburgh, and returned in 1639 when he purchased a ruinously expensive house, which he was forced to sell in 1658 after his bankruptcy. The period coincides with the street's emergence as the epicenter of Amsterdam's Jewish community, initially with Sephardi ex-*converso* immigrants seeking economic opportunity and fleeing persecution from Iberia and other parts of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. By mid-century, growing numbers of Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe had become the Jewish majority in the district. While the Breestraat was a fashionable street favored by painters and art dealers, it was already called the "Jews Street" in two English traveler accounts of the city from the first half of the seventeenth century. Sir William Brereton wrote in 1634–35 that the Breestraat was "a street they have called the Jews street; they have three synagogues here"; and in 1640 Peter Mundy called it the "Joode strate or Jewes streete."[6] Mundy also commented that the Jews living on the street were mostly Sephardim from Portugal, "Ritch Merchantts, nott evill esteemed off, living in liberty, wealth and ease," adding that "they allow Pictures in their houses (Not soe att Constantinople)" and that some were themselves artists. Mundy's reporting is reliable. Archival documentation confirms the presence of paintings in Sephardi households, as Mirjam Knotter details with exciting new evidence in her essay in this volume; the Sephardi physician Dr. Ephraim Bueno, who Knotter shows was Rembrandt's close neighbor, commissioned portraits of himself from both Rembrandt and Jan Lievens; and the Jewish artist Salom Italia is best known for his engraved portraits of Menasseh ben Israel and Judah Leon Templo.

This much is well-known territory. But the historian Mark Ponte's remarkable archival discoveries are transforming our image of Rembrandt's neighborhood from a mixed quarter populated by Jews, artists, dealers and other merchants into an urban landscape increasingly recognized and labeled as "multicultural."[7] Ponte demonstrated the presence of a small but visible community of free Black Africans living on and in the vicinity of the Jodenbreestraat from the 1630s onwards, which reached its apogee in the late 1650s and therefore coincided exactly with Rembrandt's residence on the street. Some of these Black people were mariners or soldiers involved in Dutch maritime trade, but most were servants of the Sephardim originally brought to Amsterdam as slaves. Ernst Brinck, later mayor of Harderwijk, recorded in the early seventeenth century that "almost all of the servants" of the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam "are slaves and Moors" (a term commonly used to refer to Black Africans).[8] Romeyn de Hooghe's etching *Hof van de E: Heer de Pinto* (The Pinto House on the Sint Antoniesbreestraat) from about 1695 shows a Black manservant in elegant livery attending the Pinto family as they leave the house for an awaiting carriage (see fig. 29). A second Black manservant is just visible behind the flamboyantly dressed Pinto women.

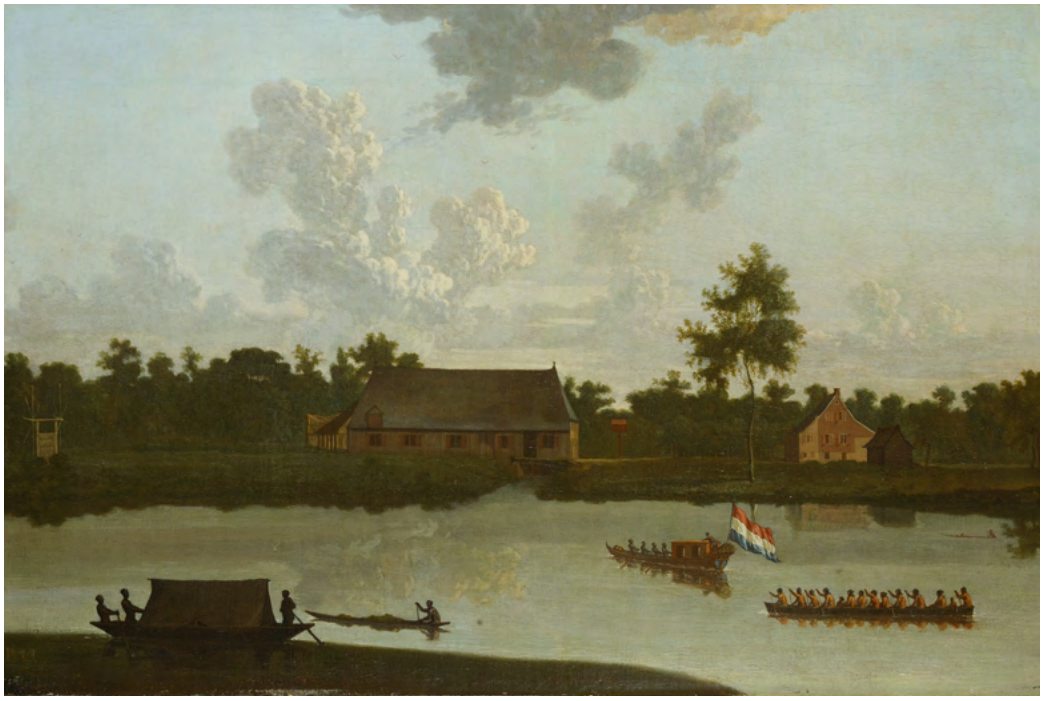



41
Romeyn de Hooghe, *De predikstoel en binnentransen* (The Pulpit and Inner Sanctum), published by Pieter Persoy, Amsterdam
ca. 1695
Etching, 27.4 × 22.8 cm

Amsterdam, Jewish Museum (M001483; donated in memory of Mr. L. Abas)

In his etched *Pulpit and Inner Sanctum* of the Portuguese-Jewish Synagogue, de Hooghe also included a Black manservant—the only man not wearing a head covering—between two Sephardi Jews conversing in the right foreground (fig. 41).

Slavery was officially and explicitly banned in the Dutch Republic, so from the standpoint of domestic law slaves were in principle free as soon as they set foot in the country.[9] But enslaved people were required to claim their freedom through municipal courts of law, as was the case with a Black woman from Guinea named Zabelinha, who had been brought to Amsterdam by the Sephardi Jew Simon Correa. In 1642 she and her children were officially granted their freedom in a notary's office.[10] Since the initiative lay with the enslaved person, who may not have had the capacity or the compliance of their owner to seek their freedom through legal channels, the status of enslaved people in the Republic remained vulnerable. Some evidently remained enslaved despite the ban, at least early in the century. According to the burial records of Amsterdam's Sephardi cemetery at Ouderkerk aan de Amstel, in 1617 an enslaved woman (*escrava*) belonging to Abraham Aboab, who must have converted to Judaism, was laid to rest next to an enslaved person (*escrava*) of David Netto.[11] Others lived in fear of forced relocation to areas where slavery was legal. In 1656 a twenty-four-year old Black woman named Juliana, purchased by Eliau de Burgos in Brazil for 525 guilders when she was ten or eleven years old, fled rather than move with his family to Barbados, where she would have returned to a life of slavery.[12] In 1659, the Afro-European woman Debora

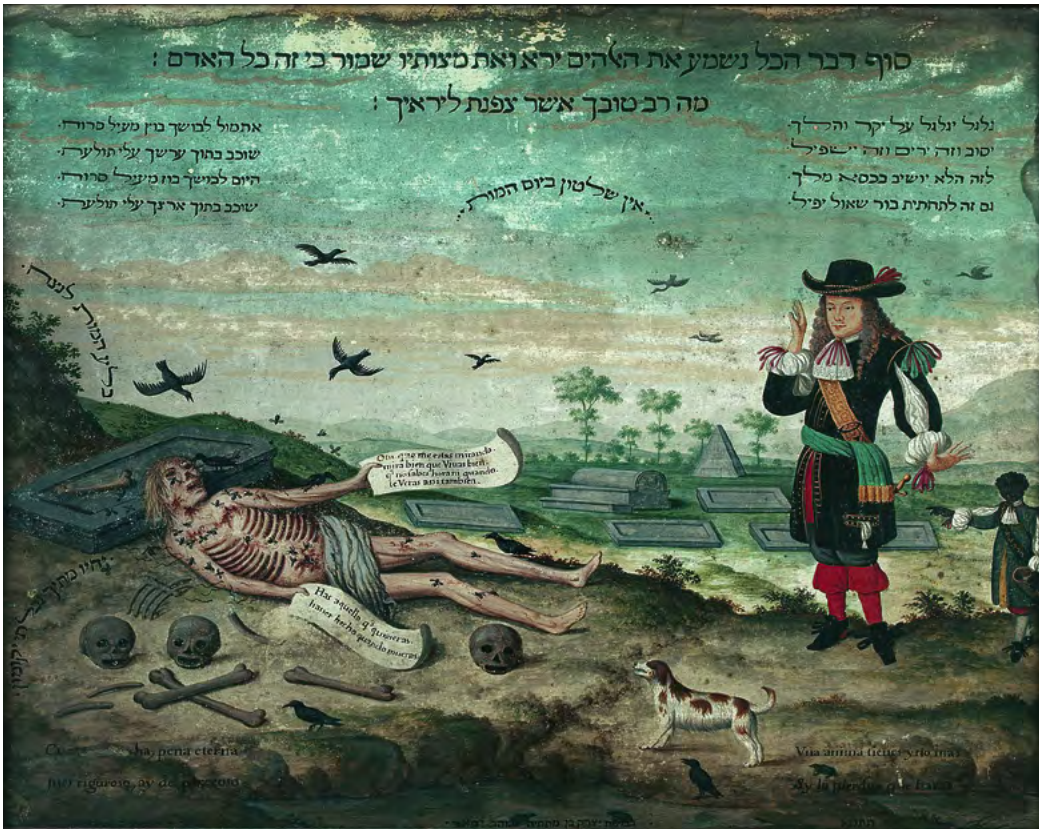


42
Dirck Valkenburg,
*The Waterland Sugar Plantation in Suriname*,
1707–9
Oil on canvas,
31.5 × 47.5 cm

Amsterdam, Amsterdam Museum (SA-35413)

Nassy, a servant in the household of the ex-*converso* David Nassy, wisely had her freedom certified before accompanying Nassy's daughter to Cayenne, in Guiana. Nassy declared before an Amsterdam notary that Debora, described as "being a brown female or mulatto," was a free woman "conceived and born in freedom and also raised as such, without anyone in the world having any kind of claim on her person."[13] Debora's action was crucial, for despite the fact that slavery was illegal in the Republic, it was widely condoned and practiced throughout the Dutch trading and colonial empire. With the seizure of northeastern Brazil and parts of West Africa from the Portuguese by the West India Company (WIC, *Geoctrooieerde West-indische Compagnie*) between 1636 and 1644, the Dutch became actively involved in provisioning the slave labor deemed essential for the hugely profitable sugar industry. For a few decades, the Dutch were the dominant slave traders in the world.[14]

David Nassy, who as we just saw affirmed his Black servant Debora Nassy's freedom in 1659, had been a slaveowner in Brazil in the early 1640s but returned to Amsterdam in 1644, before Brazil's recapture by the Portuguese in 1654.[15] In 1659 the WIC granted him and several Jewish partners the right to establish a settlement in Cayenne, Guiana, then in Dutch hands, triggering Debora's preemptive action to secure her freedom in an Amsterdam court of law. The next year Nassy embarked with his family and Debora for Cayenne and after its fall to France in 1664 moved to neighboring Suriname, which became a Dutch colony in 1667. Nassy did not own a sugar plantation and died in Amsterdam in 1685, having returned from Suriname shortly before; but by 1681 his son Samuel owned eighty enslaved people who labored on his sugar plantations. By 1693 that number had more than doubled.[16] No trace of the brutal and dangerous working conditions of enslaved Africans is visible in Dirck Valkenburg's pastoralized representation of a Surinamese sugar plantation from the early eighteenth century (fig. 42).



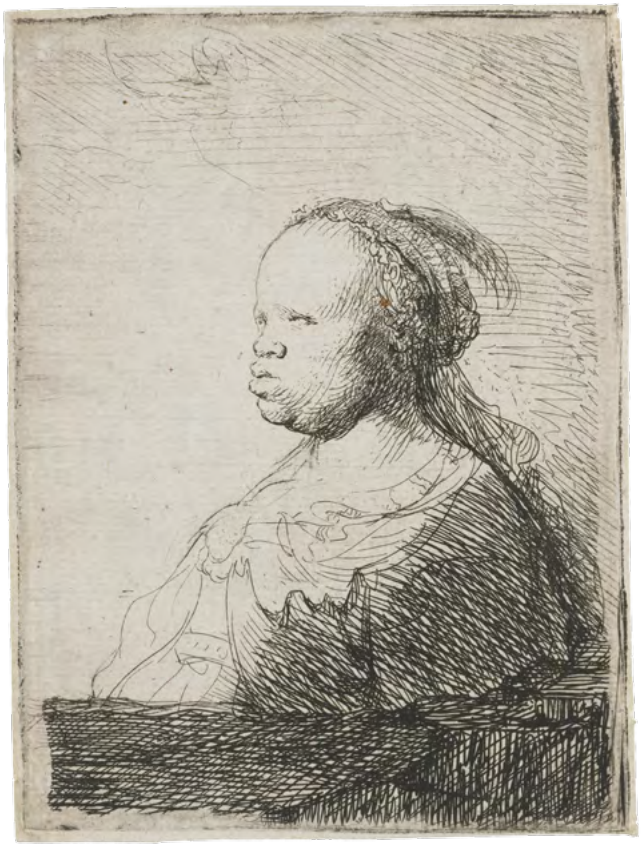

43
Benjamin Senior Godines, *Memento Mori*; commissioned by Isaac de Matatiah Aboab, 1681
Tempera on wood, 30.7 x 39.6 cm

London, Jewish Museum (JM 895.1)

Despite this erasure, the painting was likely based on Valkenburg's firsthand experience in Suriname from 1706 to 1708 while in the service of the Amsterdam patrician Jonas Witsen, who had inherited three sugar plantations in 1702.[17]

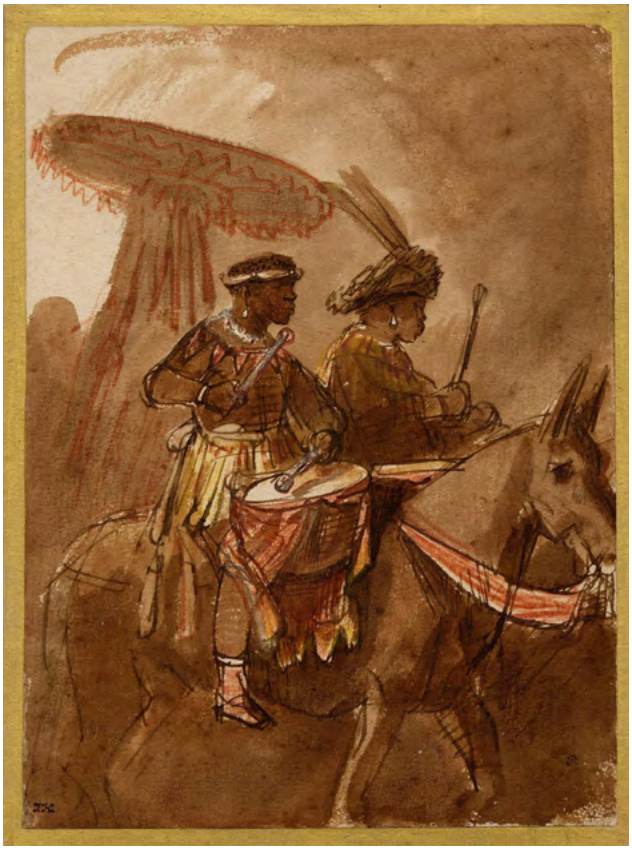
Let us now return to the interconnected lives of the Dutch Sephardim and Black Amsterdammers in Rembrandt's neighborhood. Wealthy Sephardim, as ex-*conversos* from the Iberian world, were accustomed to the elite practice of owning Black enslaved people as domestic servants.[18] A *memento mori* painting by Benjamin Senior Godines from 1681 in the Jewish Museum, London, one of a set of three *vanitas* images commissioned by Isaac de Matatiah Aboab, shows a fashionably dressed Sephardi man accompanied by a smaller Black enslaved person or servant, who may be a man or a boy (fig. 43). A copy of it on parchment is in the collection of the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam.[19]

Sometimes affective ties developed between Sephardi families and their formerly enslaved servants, which is not surprising given the quasi-familial status of domestic servants and the near-total social isolation of Black enslaved people and servants from their own communities.[20] Nor does this familial acceptance or affection diminish the abhorrence of the Sephardim's ownership of human beings. A Black man named Elieser, who was brought to Amsterdam from Portugal in 1610 with his master Paulo de Pina, must have converted to Judaism because he was buried in the Beth Haim cemetery at Ouderkerk in 1629.[21] In 2002 Lydia Hagoort and Rabbi Hans Rodrigues Pereira discovered Elieser's headstone with the Portuguese inscription "grave of the good servant



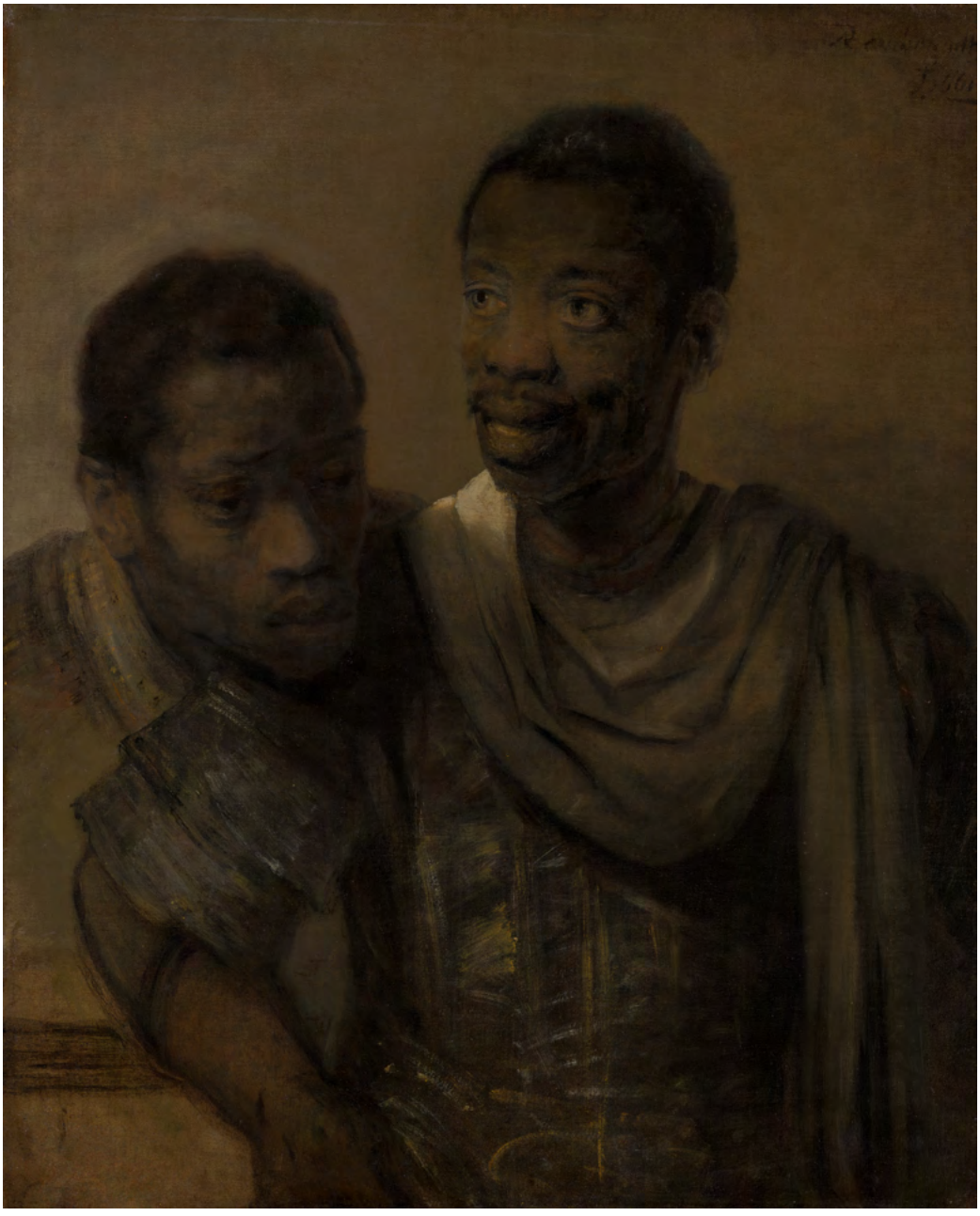
44
Rembrandt, *Bust of An African Woman*, ca. 1631
Etching, 11.2 × 8.4 cm

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum
(RP-P-OB-754)



45
Rembrandt, *Two African Drummers*, ca. 1638
Pen and brown ink and red chalk with brown wash, touched with white and yellow, 23 × 17.1 cm

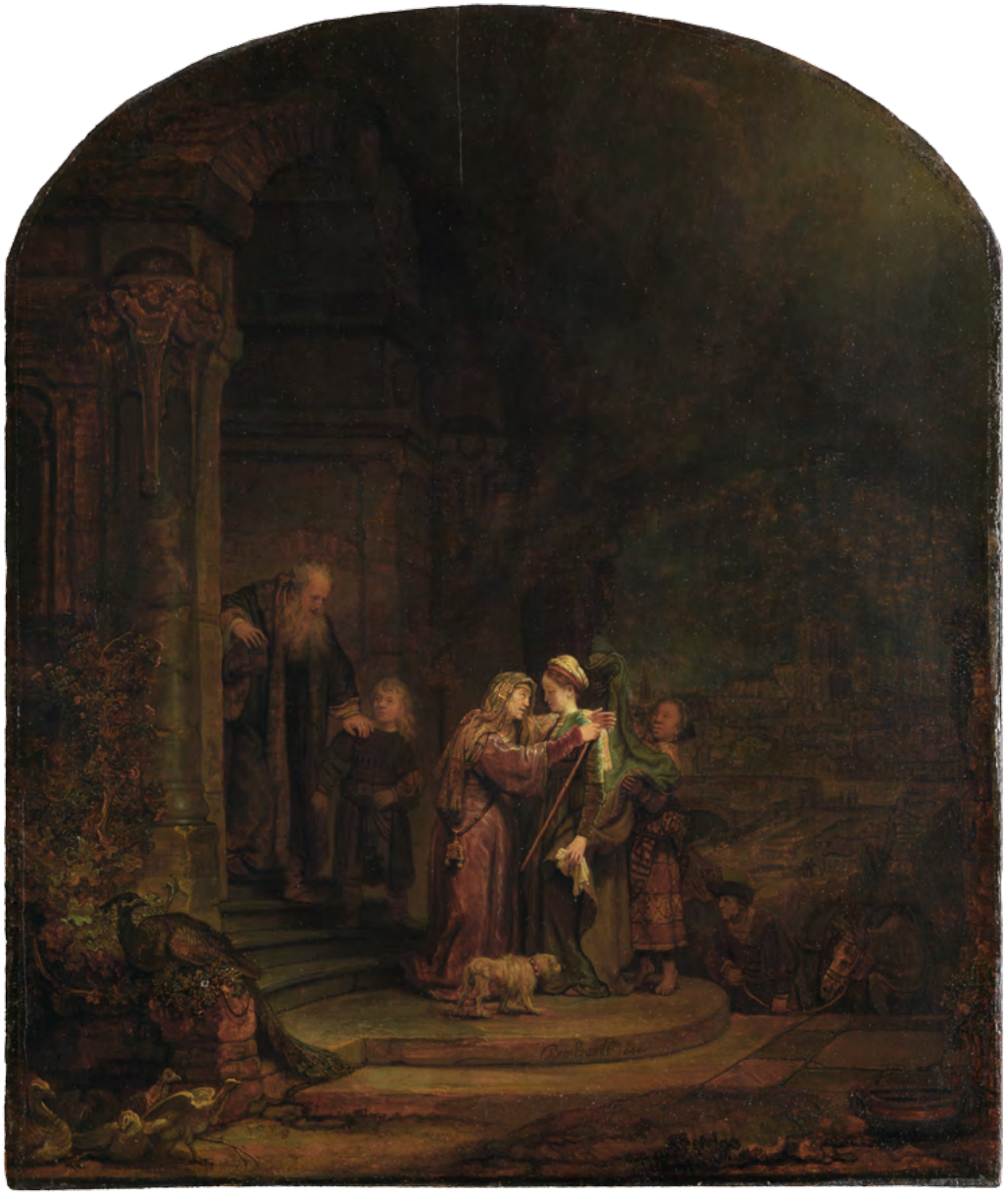
London, British Museum
(Oo,10.122; © The Trustees of the British Museum)



46
Rembrandt, *Two African Men*, 1661
Oil on canvas,
64.4 × 77.8 cm

The Hague, Mauritshuis
(685)

(*servo*)" next to that of his master de Pina and alongside Jacob Israel Belmonte, one of the Sephardi community's most prominent members.[22] Elieser also attended the funeral of his master's wife Sarah when she died in 1621, pledging on that occasion to contribute 6 *stuivers* in her memory. As the Netherlands' oldest known grave of a former enslaved person, Elieser's grave has since become the site of an annual pilgrimage in his honor, and in 2013 a statue of Elieser by the Surinamese sculptor Erwin de Vries was erected at the entrance to the cemetery. Controversy between Jewish and Black leaders has also flared over whether the site marks the atrocities of slavery or the possibilities of tolerance.[23] While Elieser was assigned a grave in the cemetery's prestigious section, other converted Black or Mulatto formerly enslaved people or servants were buried in

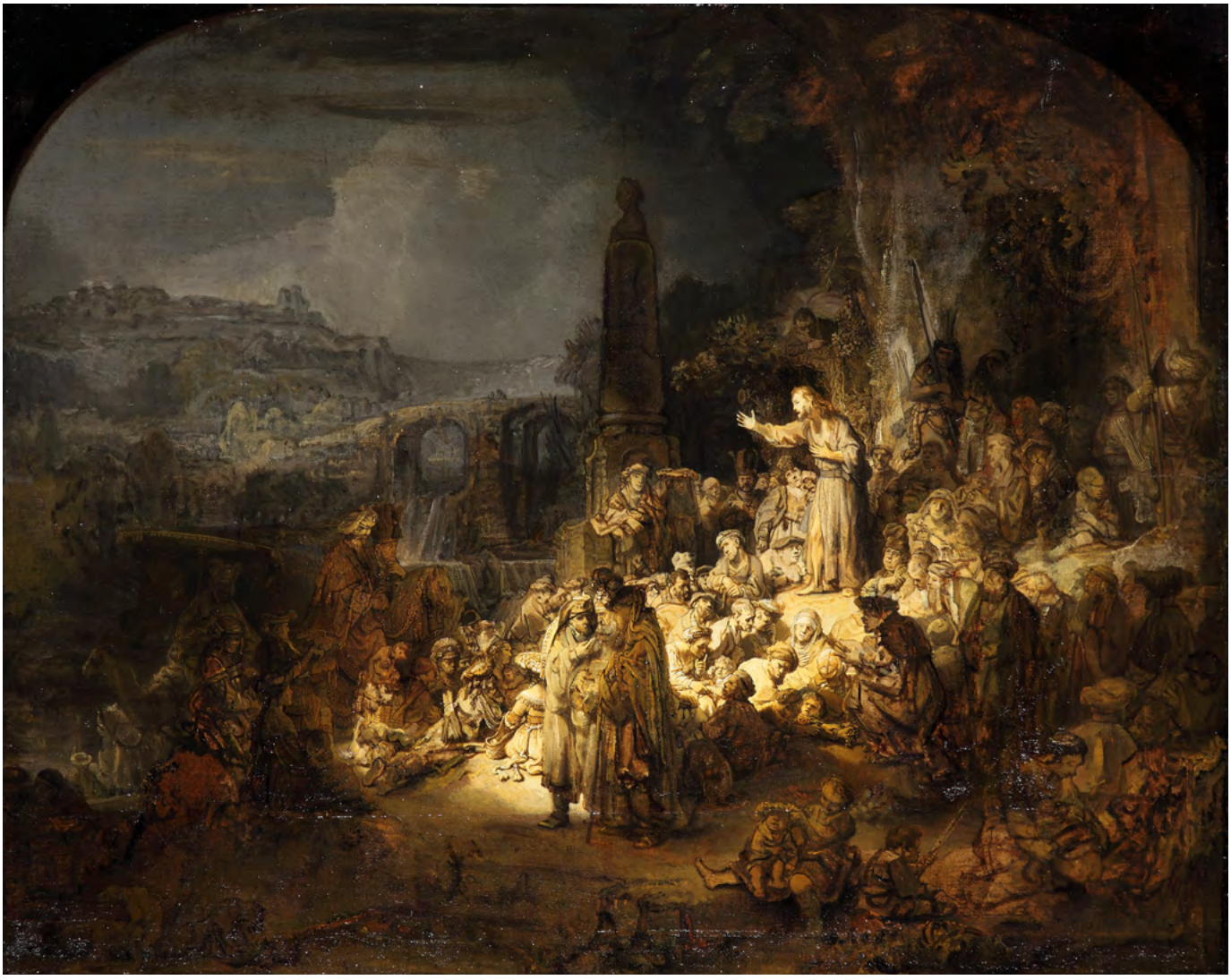


47
Rembrandt, *The Visitation*, 1640
Oil on panel, 56.5 × 47.9 cm

Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts (27.200; City of Detroit Purchase)

a part of the cemetery reserved for servants and non-Sephardi Jews. In 1647 a segregated section was designated for Black and Mulatto Jews.[24]

What bearing does awareness of this population of Black Africans—mostly interwoven with the Sephardi Jews—have for our understanding of Rembrandt and the environment in which he lived? As with the Jews he encountered in his neighborhood, Rembrandt was drawn to the Black people he observed in the streets as models for his art.[25] Among these works are the etched tronie of an African woman from about 1631 (fig. 44);[26] an unusually elaborate colored drawing of two African drummers in exotic headgear and costumes riding mules in a parade from about 1638 (fig. 45); and several small, informal sketches of Black men and a Black woman. Most extraordinary is *Two*



48
Rembrandt, *St. John the Baptist Preaching*, 1634–35
Oil on canvas stuck on panel, 62.7 × 81.1 cm

Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (828K)

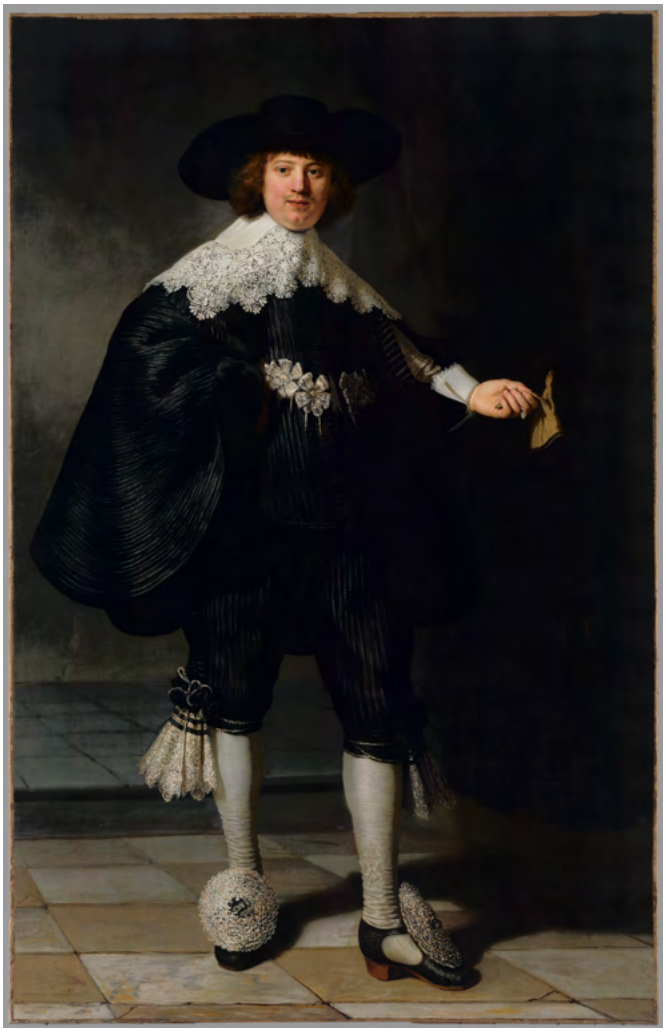
*African Men*, dated 1661, in the Mauritshuis (fig. 46), which like many of Rembrandt's late paintings appears partly unfinished, heightening the impression of immediacy.[27] Rembrandt's exceptionally sensitive, lifelike portrayal of the two men suggests his direct observation of live models, though they wear vaguely antique garb, not contemporary clothing.[28] Ponte has tentatively identified the models as the brothers Bastiaan and Manuel Fernando from the island of São Tomé off the coast of Africa, who served the Amsterdam Admiralty as sailors.[29] In 1657 Bastiaan is recorded as residing at the end of the Jodenbreestraat, down the street from Rembrandt, together with his wife Maria from Angola and their daughter Lucia. It is a stunning possibility, even if impossible to verify. In fact, Rembrandt depicted Black people more often and in more varied ways than any other seventeenth-century European artist.[30] Like the Jewish figures in Rembrandt's work, although less frequently, Black Africans feature most regularly in biblical scenes, including in *The Visitation* of 1640 where a young Black woman servant stands on her toes to remove Mary's mantle (fig. 47). As Shelley Perlove has recently pointed out, the blue-striped textile tied around her waist was commonly worn by West Africans on the

Guinean coast.[31] Jews and Black Africans appear together in *St. John Preaching* of about 1634–35, an elaborate grisaille probably painted as the model for a print that was never executed (fig. 48).[32]

Three men in the foreground dressed in orientalizing garb are marked explicitly as Jews—one wears a shawl resembling a tallith over his head inscribed with legible Hebrew script.[33] At least two Black men are behind John and another in an exotic headdress is closer to the trio of Jews, next to the recumbent figure of an Indian with a quiver of arrows. In this unprecedented composition containing nearly a hundred figures, Rembrandt also introduced among the crowd a soldier in Japanese armor, a Muslim in a turban, and an Indigenous American identified by his feathered headdress, signifying St. John's preaching to the entire known world. I will return below to the distinctive role he assigned to the Jewish figures.

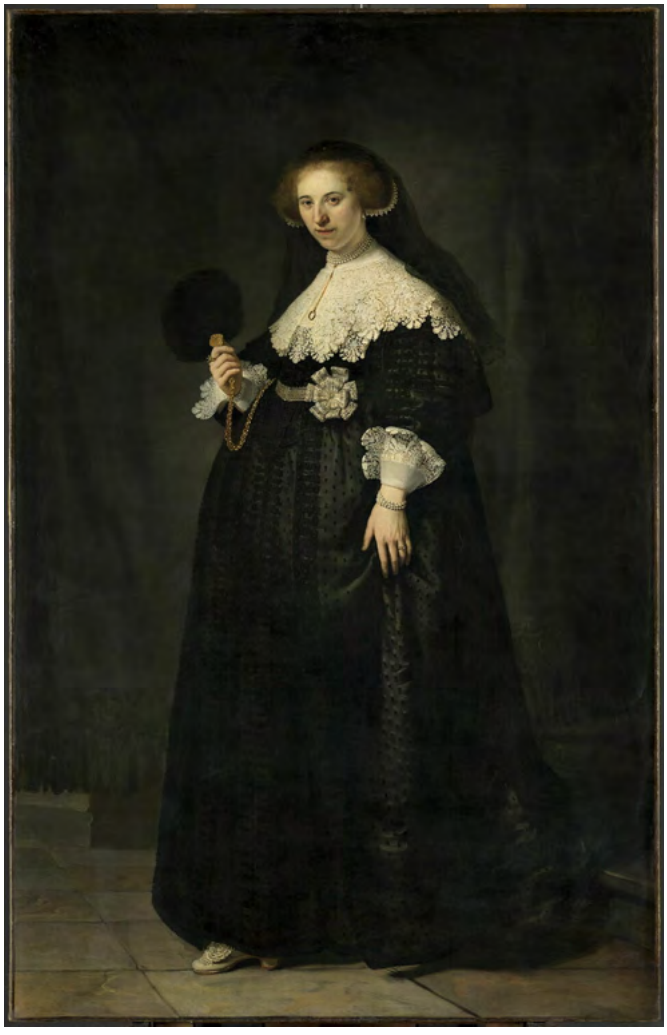
This convergence of Jews and Black Africans in Rembrandt's art and the disturbing truth of the two communities' ties through the institution of slavery complicates profoundly the application of the label *multicultural* to Rembrandt's neighborhood. Clearly the modern idea of multiculturalism—or the social and political inclusion of people of diverse ethnicities, races and faiths—falls far short of the lived realities of Black Amsterdammers, Black–Jewish relations and the experiences of the Dutch Sephardim. Despite enjoying unparalleled freedoms—they were not confined to a district of the city nor required to wear distinguishing dress—Jews were still prohibited from practicing trades and professions regulated by the guilds, among other restrictions. Jonathan Schorsch has also demonstrated that as Blackness became inextricably linked with slavery and servitude as the century progressed, the Amsterdam Sephardim introduced ordinances precluding Black and Mulatto Jews' access to certain ritual privileges and honors, such as the 1647 segregation of the Beth Haim cemetery mentioned above.[34] The Sephardim's increasing efforts to dissociate themselves from Black people may have been motivated in part by their ambivalent color status in the eyes of non-Jews in Western Europe. William Brereton, who as we saw published his impressions of Amsterdam's Sephardi community in 1634–35, wrote that the Jewish men are "most black […] and insatiably given unto women";[35] Peter Mundy, who as we also saw visited the city in 1640, described Sephardi men as "swart [black] and thereby knowen From others: Not by their habitt."[36] In 1643 the Frenchman Isaac de la Peyrère even predicted that once the Jews convert to Christianity "they will no longer have this dark complexion […] they will change faces, and the whiteness of their complexion will have the same brightness as […] an extremely white pigeon."[37]

It is critical to acknowledge, moreover, that Dutch Jews saw no contradiction between their struggle for equal status and their enslavement of Black Africans. While the exaggerated claims of Jewish representation in the Atlantic slave trade of the 1990s have thankfully receded, the fact remains that Jews participated actively in this barbaric system.[38] Christians overwhelmingly dominated the slave trade, but Jews, who made up about a third of the "White" population in the Dutch colonies of Brazil, Suriname and Curaçao, maintained a high profile in the slave system.[39] Unsurprisingly, the deeply hierarchical social structures of early modern Europe, including the Dutch Republic, were self-perpetuating, and Jewish slaveholding, as Schorsch writes, "marks a superb



49
Rembrandt, *Portrait of Marten Soolmans*, 1634
Oil on canvas,
207.5 × 132 cm

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum
(SK-A-5033; joint acquisition by the Dutch State and the French Republic, collection Rijksmuseum/collection Musée du Louvre)



Rembrandt, *Portrait of Oopjen Coppit*, 1634
Oil on canvas,
207.5 × 132 cm

Paris, Musée du Louvre
(RF 2016-2; joint acquisition by the Dutch State and the French Republic, collection Rijksmuseum/collection Musée du Louvre)

instance of the power of hegemonic discourse at work."[40] Natalie Zemon Davis has also recently shown that the Sephardim in Suriname made a clear distinction between their own biblical exodus out of slavery and the fate of the Africans they enslaved.[41] While the aforementioned David Nassy criticized the Danes' "execrable inhumanity" in 1659 for kidnapping and brutalizing the indigenous people (the Kalaallit) of Greenland, he apparently gave no thought to the Black people he had contracted with the WIC to transport forcibly to Cayenne.[42]

How can we accommodate Rembrandt in this emerging picture of Black presence in the Jodenbreestraat area and the disturbingly entangled histories of Dutch Jews and Black people? The stakes are high, given Rembrandt's continued stature as an artist whose work is believed to transcend stereotyping and social and ethnic difference to reveal the commonalities between all people. However true or untrue, Rembrandt's reputation for compassion and empathy is bound up with the possibilities of tolerance, as is Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, the institution that initiated the present project *Rembrandt Seen Through Jewish Eyes*. Such questions have become more urgent in the wake of the important recent exhibitions *Black in Rembrandt's Time* at the Rembrandt House Museum in 2020 and *Slavery* at the Rijksmuseum in 2021. In these public reckonings with Dutch colonial history and involvement with slavery, Rembrandt and his Amsterdam neighborhood took center stage.

The monumental and opulent pendant portraits of Marten Soolmans and Oopjen Coppit from 1634, which commemorate their marriage in the previous year, were displayed prominently in the Slavery exhibition (fig. 49). Marten owned a sugar refinery in Amsterdam, fittingly called "The Fires of Purgatory," so the couple's wealth derived from the slave labor used on the sugar plantations of Dutch Brazil. Marten died young in 1641, and six years later Oopjen married Maerten Daey, a soldier who had served in Brazil from 1629 to 1641, during which time he fathered a daughter with an African woman named Francisca, whom he had held captive and raped.[43] In centering the role of slavery in the lives of these people, the exhibition curators hoped to change visitors' perceptions of Rembrandt's paintings. "Do we now look differently at the portraits of Oopjen and Marten?" the catalogue asks, and adds in response, "Probably, we do."[44] That the sitters' obvious affluence depended upon the slave system is indeed difficult to ignore.

Yet Jonathan Jones, art critic for the *Guardian* newspaper, was shocked by Rembrandt's inclusion in the exhibition.[45] "After all," he writes, "there is no artist more overflowing with compassion and empathy than Rembrandt. Yet this exhibition [...] reveals a side of the painter's career that sits badly with our view of him as an artist with an expansive vision of what it means to be human." Was Rembrandt in some way complicit by showcasing Marten and Oopjen's wealth with the blingiest, most extravagantly expensive clothing and jewels, given that they owed their prosperity to the horrors of slavery? Struggling with the implication, Jones appeals to Rembrandt's depictions of Jews to come to the rescue: "[Rembrandt] is credited with a moral insight that goes beyond the conventions of his day. He portrayed Jewish people with sensitivity in an

age of antisemitism […]. Surely he didn't just happily take the sugar money and give the couple what they wanted?"

Rembrandt's reputation as a moral exemplar still hinges, then, on his portrayals of and presumed sympathy for Jews, whose history in the Dutch Republic and its colonies is hopelessly intertwined with the slave trade. Jones mobilizes this interrelationship, though he does not acknowledge its complexities, when he turns to *Two African Men* (fig. 46) as evidence of Rembrandt's morality. The subjects, Jones writes, "may be [Rembrandt's] neighbors. Anyway, he portrays them intimately." The two men, he continues, project "an overpowering air of loss, as if […] trying to find their place in a broken world. Rembrandt never went to Brazil […] or any of the other sites of Dutch enslavement. But that did not stop him sensing the stain of slavery on Europe and its ramifications. He could see it in these men's eyes […]." The contrast with Rembrandt's portraits of the "sugar-rich couple" Marten Soolmans and Oopjen Coppit, Jones emphasizes, could not be more striking. In these grand assertions of wealth and status derived from slave labor, he writes, "Rembrandt shows us exactly what they are: rich non-entities using the veneer of wealth to conceal their vacuity, or something much worse."

Setting aside for the moment whether Jones's position can be sustained on historical grounds, Rembrandt emerges here as a heroic figure whose images transcend social as well as artistic conventions to reveal a deeper truth beyond religious, ethnic and racial difference and therefore beyond the contingencies of history itself. It is a powerful proposition rooted in the afterlife of Rembrandt's portrayals of and relationship with Jews, especially among German-Jewish scholars before and especially after the Second World War.[46] In a 1920 lecture delivered to the Berlin Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Higher Institute for Jewish Studies), published posthumously, Erwin Panofsky transformed Rembrandt into a paragon of humanitarianism whose late images of Jews (see fig. 134) erase ethnic and religious difference to reveal a universal human essence:

> Here we see expressed the timeless and unfathomable depth of a soul which, beyond the borders of individual consciousness, has been subsumed into a consciousness of all, now appearing only as a form of that ancient substance which metaphysics, depending on its standpoint, denoted as being or *divinity*. The late Rembrandt *gives the human being such depth* as to make it give up its individuality in God. Conversely, from this time he discovers *God in the human being itself*.[47]

Franz Landsberger made his personal attachment to this construct explicit in the foreword to his *Rembrandt, the Jews, and the Bible*, first published in 1946:

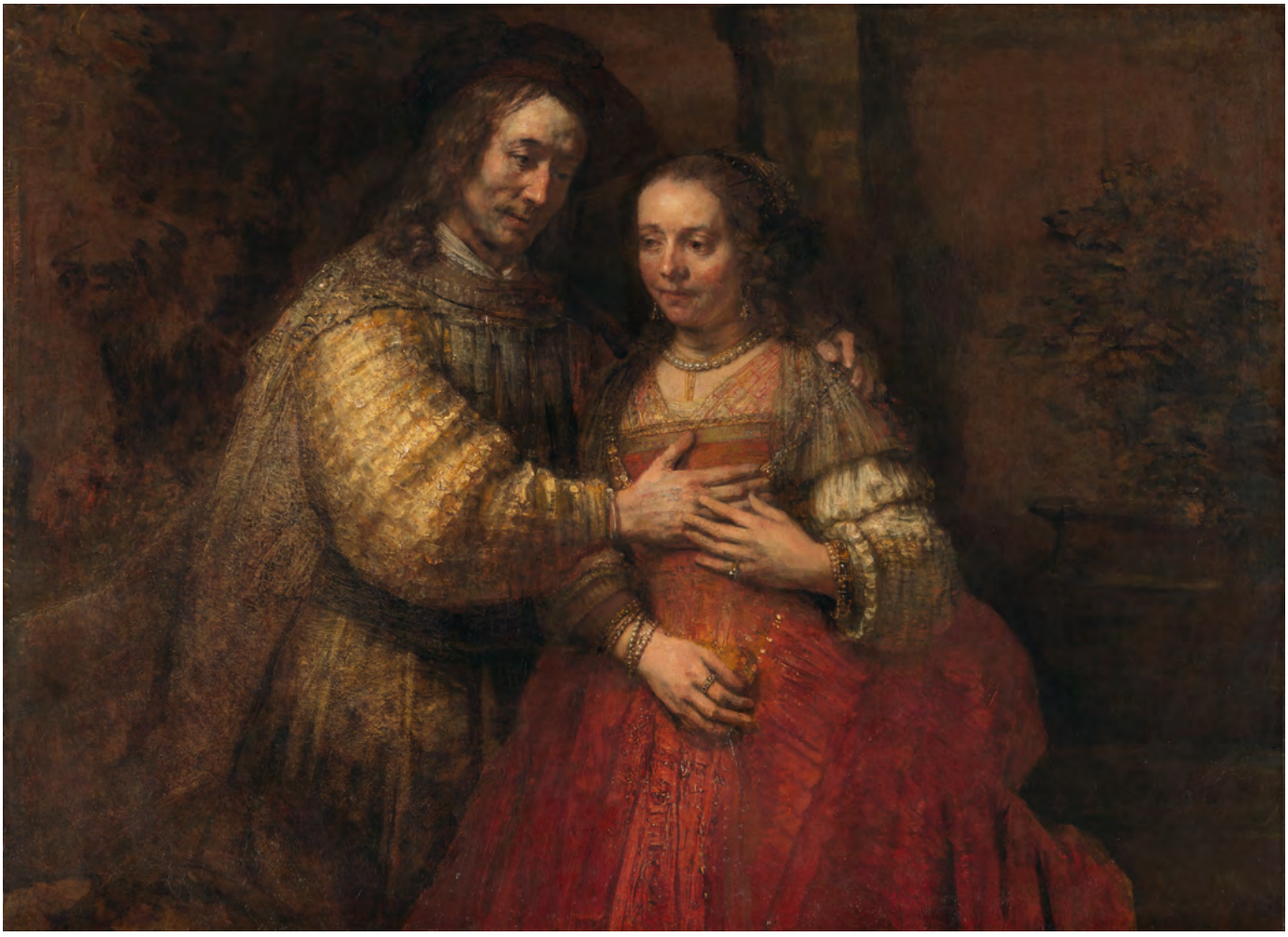
> It has often proved a comfort to me, in this era of European Jewish tragedy, to dwell upon the life and work of Rembrandt. Here was a man of German ancestry who did not regard the Jews of the Holland of his day as a "misfortune," but approached them with friendly sentiments, dwelt in their midst, and portrayed their personalities and ways of life […]. He was the first to have the courage to use the Jews of his environment as models for the heroes of the sacred 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 to them a recognition of their debt to his art.[48]

Landsberger's book exerted an enormous impact on subsequent Rembrandt scholarship. Writing in 1948, Jakob Rosenberg, another German-Jewish immigrant, championed the "sensitive objectivity" of Rembrandt's portrayals of Jews, stressing that he avoided "caricature as well as idealization" and asserting: "there remains the indisputable fact that the artist's attitude to the Jewish people was an unusually sympathetic one."[49]

The post-Holocaust elevation of Rembrandt as a paragon of morality whose art could serve as a source of consolation and inspiration for Jews resonates strongly with Rembrandt's reception amidst today's effort to highlight dignified portrayals of Black people as alternatives to the dominance of their stereotyping in the history of art. Stephanie Archangel, one of the curators of *Black in Rembrandt's Time*, stated explicitly: "For years I have been searching, from my Curaçao background, in paintings and other art works for Black people in which I could recognize myself. In Rembrandt's work, I finally found them."[50] She concludes that "Although Rembrandt did not record any thoughts about Black people in writing, his paintings, drawings, and prints make it clear that he paid little if any heed to slavery or black humility either."[51] *Two African Men* (fig. 46) presumably epitomizes for Archangel Rembrandt's non-stereotyped, true-to-life, and dignified treatment of Black models. In 1995 Seymour Slive characterized the painting in similar terms, echoing Panofsky, Landsberger and Rosenberg's praise for Rembrandt's capacity to rise above prejudice and convention in his late images of Jewish models: "the magnificent picture of *Two Black Men* [...] brings no suggestion of a stereotyped conception of a black man [...]; in both heads Rembrandt has captured what we feel is the spiritual and moral substance of these men."[52]

Thus, just as the histories of Dutch Jews and Black people are inescapably linked to slavery, the afterlives of Rembrandt's representations of Jews are implicated, consciously or not, in the desire to enlist his work in today's post-colonial project to confront Dutch participation in the slave trade and the enduring effects of racism. Yet while Rembrandt's portrayals of the Jews and Black Africans he encountered in his neighborhood bear witness to the interconnections, however fraught, between these two communities, looking at his artworks from a strictly historical vantage point challenges their utility as paradigms of morality and tolerance. Rembrandt sometimes cast Jews in biblical scenes as hostile to the Christian message of salvation, as is the case in *St. John the Baptist Preaching* of 1634–35 (fig. 48), as we saw earlier. The isolated, caricatured group of three Jews in the foreground are the only figures in the crowd to turn their backs on John and speak conspiratorially among themselves. These are the Pharisees and Sadducees whom the Baptist condemns as "vipers" (Matthew 3:7). The Jews' enmity is reinforced by the Hebrew inscription on one of their shawls which refers, sardonically, to Deuteronomy 6:5: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."[53] This alienation of Jews from the Gospel's salvation message persists in the later etching *Peter and John Healing a Cripple* of 1659 (fig. 40), albeit in subdued form. Rembrandt similarly complied with stereotyped convention when depicting Black people as servants to elite whites, as in *The Visitation* from



50
Rembrandt, *Isaac and Rebecca* (known as *The Jewish Bride*), ca. 1665–69
Oil on canvas, 121.5 × 166.5 cm

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (SK-C-216)

1640 (fig. 47).[54] As Perlove demonstrates, Rembrandt's novel introduction of the Black maidservant in this painting alludes to the universalist claims of Christianity and resonates with the missionary goals of some Dutch Calvinists, who justified the trafficking in human beings providing that slaves were treated humanely.[55] Likewise, in *St. John the Baptist Preaching* (fig. 48), the Black men in the crowd, unlike the Jews, listen attentively to John's words, signaling their potential incorporation as converts to Christianity within the increasingly interconnected commercial and colonial world of Rembrandt's time.

Paintings such as *Bust of a Young Jew* (see fig. 134) and *Two African Men* (fig. 46) are therefore exceptional, even within Rembrandt's own work. In contrast to other artists' stereotyped renderings of Jews and Black figures, which usually emphasize exoticism and otherness, Rembrandt sensitively focuses on the men's facial expressions and inner lives. Yet this, of course, is a typical feature Rembrandt's later art, exemplified by the so-called *Jewish Bride* (fig. 50), probably the biblical couple Isaac and Rebecca, in which the figures' intimacy and interiority is subtly evoked through their downward gazes and gentle touch of the hands.[56] Both paintings are fully consistent, moreover, with Rembrandt's combination of vivid lifelikeness, based on direct observation of the model rather than

convention, and bold painterly virtuosity. To interpret them as uncomplicated evidence of Rembrandt's sensitivity to or compassion for people of color, or his sympathy for Jews, is therefore selective and largely ahistorical.[57]

However, as Elmer Kolfin rightly argues in relation to *Two African Men*, "paintings carry many truths […]; they have a unique capacity to become a mirror that brightly reflects our own concerns, helping us to deal with them. And that is invaluable."[58] Artworks of this caliber have the power to defy the fixity of their historical origin points and to operate in multiple temporalities. Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood have written compellingly about the capacity of artworks to belong to more than one historical moment simultaneously, functioning as material artefacts that collapse past and present through their effects of immediacy and exercise of agency.[59] Introducing the term "anachronic" as an alternative to "anachronistic" in order to evoke the ability of the work of art to move freely in time, Nagel and Wood challenge the historicist insistence on situating art rigidly within an objective and linear conception of time. We as viewers activate and reactivate the artwork, Nagel and Wood suggest, entering into conversations across time that are potentially "more meaningful than the present's merely forensic reconstruction of the past."[60] If we choose to partner with Rembrandt's exceptionally and inarguably sensitive portrayals of Jews and Black people in works such as these, by suspending an exclusively historicist mindset in favor of one shaped by other priorities, the possibility of their symbolic reach extends beyond seventeenth-century Amsterdam to encompass possibilities unknown even to Rembrandt himself.

## NOTES

1 Gaehtgens 1987, 438, cited in van der Veen 1997, 73. The statement is from van der Werff's authorized biography written by the artist's son-in-law in about 1720, based on firsthand information, perhaps from Rembrandt's former pupil Cornelis Brouwer.

2 On tronies, see in particular Gottwald 2011.

3 See in particular Amsterdam 2006, 66–88. As Gary Schwartz notes in his essay in this volume, John Smith included in the first published catalogue raisonné of Rembrandt's paintings of 1836 the index category "Portraits of Jews and Rabbis." See Smith 1836, 272–73.

4 See Amsterdam 2006, 87–88.

5 "Een contrefijtsel van een Polacqse smous," cited in Melbourne 1997, 176, no. 25. Inventory dated 29 September 1681, NAA 2639, notary G. Steeman.

6 Brereton 1844, 60; Mundy 1925, 70. My thanks to Mirjam Knotter for the Brereton reference.

7 Ponte 2020, 45–57. See further Hondius 2008 and Ponte 2018. For an example of the use of "multicultural" to describe Rembrandt's neighborhood, see Nicholls-Lee 2020.

8 Quoted in Ponte 2020, 49: "In die breestrate wonen meest alle Portugijsen, sijnde meest Joden, hebbende oock in een huys haer vergadering. Vast alle hare dienstboden zijn slaven end moren."

9 Ponte 2020, 52; Amsterdam 2021, esp. 124.

10 Ponte 2020, 52, citing SAA, NA 5075, inv. no. 1555B, fol. 1829.

11 Schorsch 2004, 97; Ponte 2020, 49 (with date mistakenly given as 1629). For the burial record, see Pieterse 1970, 91. Hagoort 2005, 38, notes this is the last time the word slave appears in the cemetery's records.

12 Hagoort 2005, 57; Ponte 2020, 52, citing SAA, NA 5075, inv. no. 2271, fol. 764–66.

13 Bloom 1937, 152; Schorsch 2004, 95; and Ponte 2020, 52, citing SAA, NA 5075, inv. no. 2888, fol. 693: "sijnde een bruijn vrouwspersoon ofte mulata […]. in vrijhejit geteelt & gebooren & als soodanigh oock opgevoet, sonder dat iemant ter werelt op haer persoon iets heeft te pretendeeren."

14 See Ponte 2020, 52–53; Amsterdam 2021, esp. 36, 71–83; Postma 1990; and Emmer 2006.
15 On David Nassy, see Davis, 2016. For the Jews of Suriname, see Vink 2010.
16 Davis 2016, 26.
17 On Valkenburg and Witsen, see Kolfin 1997, 23–29, 56; Ford 2002; Brienen 2007–8; and Amsterdam 2021, 94–104.
18 Schorsch 2004, esp. 93.
19 Ibid., and https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/a-memento-mori-192076
20 Schorsch 2004, 101.
21 See in particular Schorsch 2004, 95; Hagoort 2005, 36–38.
22 Hagoort 2005, 36.
23 Liphshiz 2021.
24 Schorsch 2004, 97–101.
25 For Rembrandt's depictions of Black people, see in particular Kolfin 2010; Kolfin 2020a; and de Witt 2020. For overviews of Dutch images of Black figures, see Blakely 1993, 78–170; Kolfin 2008; Kolfin 2020b; Kolfin 2021a; and Kolfin 2021b.
26 According to Kolfin 2010, 300, the "awkwardly rendered eyes" of the woman in this etching may reveal Rembrandt's familiarity with an ancient stereotyped and racist description of a Black person, published by the artist's pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten in his *Inleydinge tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst: anders de zichtbaere wereldt* of 1678: "a Moor, even if drawn in white, will appear black because of his flat nose, short hair, fat cheeks and certain stupidity in the eyes." As Perlove 2022 notes, though, Celeste Brusati and Jaap Jacobs translate van Hoogstraten's "zekere dommicheit ontrent zijn oogen" as "a dazed look about the eyes." See Brusati and Jacobs 2021, 79, n. 32, 90–91. De Witt 2020, 97, suggests the woman's exaggerated facial features indicate that Rembrandt may have based the etching on a bust recorded in his possession in 1656 as "a Moor['s head] cast from life" ("Een moor nae't leven afgegooten"). See Strauss and van der Meulen 1979, 365, document 1656/12, no. 161. As de Witt also notes, the artist Jacob de Gheyn III owned a bust of a Black man, inherited from his father Jacob de Gheyn II, which he drew several times.
27 *Two African Men* is probably the picture recorded as "Twee mooren in een stuck van Rembrandt" (Two Moors in a piece by Rembrandt) in the 1656 inventory drawn up in connection with Rembrandt's bankruptcy. See Strauss and van der Meulen 1979, 385, document 1656/12, no. 344; Kolfin 2010, 299; and de Witt 2020, 115. Since the painting bears an authentic signature and the date of 1661, Rembrandt likely kept it in his possession and later added the signature and date, perhaps when he sold it. Although he could have created more than one painting of two Black men, it is unlikely given the very uncommon subject, as pointed out by both Kolfin and de Witt. On the other hand, van de Wetering 2015, 670–71, no. 295, considers it "perfectly conceivable" that Rembrandt painted another picture of two Black men after selling the painting recorded in the 1656 inventory. According to Kolfin, 297–99, the Mauritshuis canvas was intended principally as a study and demonstration piece of how to render Black skin convincingly. Van de Wetering characterizes the painting as part of Rembrandt's "image archive" for historical compositions.
28 See in particular Kolfin 2010, 275; Kolfin 2020. Despite the painting's lifelike effect, Kolfin 2010, 297, leaves open the possibility that one or both of the men could have been based on a sculpted bust recorded in the 1656 inventory of Rembrandt's possessions as "a Moor['s head] cast from life" ("Een moor nae't leven afgegooten"). See Strauss and van der Meulen 1979, 365, document 1656/12, no. 161.
29 Ponte 2020, 56–57.
30 Kolfin 2020a.
31 Perlove 2020 offers a compelling and imaginative exploration of the Black maidservant in this painting.
32 For the painting, see Bruyn et al. 1989, 70–88, no. A106; van de Wetering 2015, 533–34, no. 110. The picture was in the possession of Rembrandt's patron Jan Six in 1658. See Strauss and van der Meulen 1979, 422, document 1658/18. For the composition's Black and non-European figures, see in particular Kolfin 2010.
33 On the Hebrew inscriptions in *St. John the Baptist Preaching* and other works by Rembrandt, see Alexander-Knotter 1999; Sabar 2008; and Alexander-Knotter 2009.

34 Schorsch 2004, esp. chap. 7, "Inventing Jewish Whiteness: The Seventeenth-Century Western Sephardic Diaspora, Part I," 166–91.
35 Brereton 1844, 61, cited in Schorsch 2004, 180.
36 Mundy 1925, 70.
37 La Peyrère 1643, 81, cited in Schorsch 2004, 180.
38 The fundamental study of Jewish slave trading in the early modern era is Schorsch 2004. He also addresses the tensions in Black–Jewish relations that followed the "specious" and antisemitic charges of the Nation of Islam's *Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews* of 1991. See ibid., 1–2.
39 Schorsch 2004, 7.
40 Ibid.
41 Davis 2016, 26.
42 Ibid., 20–22. Nassy contributed this comment on Danish mistreatment of Indigenous Greenlanders to Joan Blaeu's Spanish translation of his *Grand Atlas*, published in Amsterdam in 1659: Joan Blaeu, *Nuevo Atlas o Teatro del Mundo, en en* [sic] *qual, con gran cuydado, se proponen las Mapas y Descripciones de todo el Universo*, vol. 1, Amsterdam (Joan Blaeu) 1659.
43 See Amsterdam 2021, 110–21.
44 Ibid., 121.
45 Jones 2021.
46 See in particular Zell 2000–1 and Perlove 2021. For Aby Warburg's reflections on Rembrandt in the context of rising German antisemitism, see Schoell-Glass 2008, esp. 126–33.
47 Panofsky 1973, 98, quoted and translated in Melbourne 1997, 177. A discussion of the lecture appeared in the *Vossischen Zeitung* on 4 January 1921, and Panofsky repeated the lecture on March 2 of the same year in Gießen for the Vereinigung der Gießener Kunstfreunde (Gießen Art Lovers' Association).
48 Landsberger 1961, ix.
49 Rosenberg 1948, vol. 1, 61.
50 Amsterdam 2020, 4.
51 Archangel 2020, 68.
52 Slive 1995, 78; also cited in Kolfin 2010, 271.
53 See Alexander-Knotter 1999, 141–44; Sabar 2008, 383–86; and Alexander-Knotter 2009, 25–32. Christ uses these very words to admonish the Pharisees in Matthew 22:37.
54 Kolfin 2021a and 2021b.
55 Perlove 2022.
56 On the compositional and formal parallels between *Two African Men* and *The Jewish Bride*, see de Witt, 113–15; and especially Kolfin 2021b.
57 For the complexities of interpreting Rembrandt's interactions with and portrayals of Jews, see in particular Zell 2002. For an alternative perspective, see Amsterdam 2006.
58 Kolfin 2021b.
59 Nagel and Wood 2010.
60 Ibid., 18.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Michael Zell** is Associate Professor of Art History at Boston University. He is the author of *Rembrandt, Vermeer, and the Gift in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (2021) and *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (2002), and co-editor of *'Ut pictura amor'* (2017) and *Rethinking Rembrandt* (2002).