Rembrandt as Seen by Jewish Museums

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares two exhibitions dedicated to Rembrandt held at the Jewish Historical Museum (JHM) in Amsterdam and the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme (mahJ) in Paris, in 2007, and their forerunners. The JHM challenged the idealized notion of Rembrandt's connection with his Jewish environment and dismissed many portraits of Jews, while the Paris exhibition explored the reinvention of Judaism in seventeenth-century Amsterdam and Rembrandt's allegorical approaches to biblical themes, influenced by millenarianism.

The current publication adds new investigations into Rembrandt's reception by Jewish collectors, artists, and art historians. Archival research sheds light on the Jewish Quarter's social reality. The present volume offers a comprehensive understanding of Rembrandt's art and its connection to the Jewish imagination.

KEYWORDS

Rembrandt exhibitions, Jewish perspectives, iconography, sources, identification

In the framework of the four-hundredth anniversary of Rembrandt's birth, the Jewish Historical Museum (JHM) in Amsterdam (now the Jewish Museum) and the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme (mahJ) in Paris almost simultaneously devoted an exhibition to the master (figs. 125 and 126).

The curators of both exhibitions agreed that the time had come for a reappraisal of the all too rose-colored view of Jewish society in Amsterdam, and of the exaggerated story of the love between Rembrandt and the Jews and vice versa. Although there was a great

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Rembrandt, *Portrait of a Man,* traditionally identified as Menasseh ben Israel, 1636
Etching, 14.9 × 10.3 cm

Amsterdam, Jewish Museum (MB01884; L. Schloss-Polak Collection)

Mirjam Knotter 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
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deal of overlap between the two exhibitions, they took different approaches. In Amsterdam, Mirjam Knotter, Jasper Hillegers and Edward van Voolen undertook, with the encouragement of advisers who were not the least in the field—Bob van den Boogert, Doron Lurië, Gary Schwartz and Jaap van der Veen—to re-examine the commonly held view of Rembrandt's sympathy for the Jews. The curators of the exhibition were convinced that only a Jewish museum could engage in such a re-examination without being suspected of malicious or even antisemitic intentions.

By the turn of our century, the number of Rembrandt sitters and models that were said to be Jewish individuals had been radically pruned, in correction of the situation prevailing in the nineteenth century. Almost all "Rabbis" and "Old Jews" had been assigned to their rightful place as anonymous figures or tronies. In a rather daring move, the Jewish Museum of Amsterdam proposed a revised history of the "Judaization" of Rembrandt through an interrogation of the grounds on which this construction was based. The title of the exhibition was quite provocative: *The "Jewish" Rembrandt: The Myth Unravelled*. The JHM undertook a step-by-step investigation into the relationship between Rembrandt and what is summarily referred to as his Jewish environment; was it reality, exaggeration or even legend? The short multimedia presentation and the map that opened the exhibition perfectly illustrated this meticulous fact-checking approach, a kind of Jewish Rembrandt Research Project.

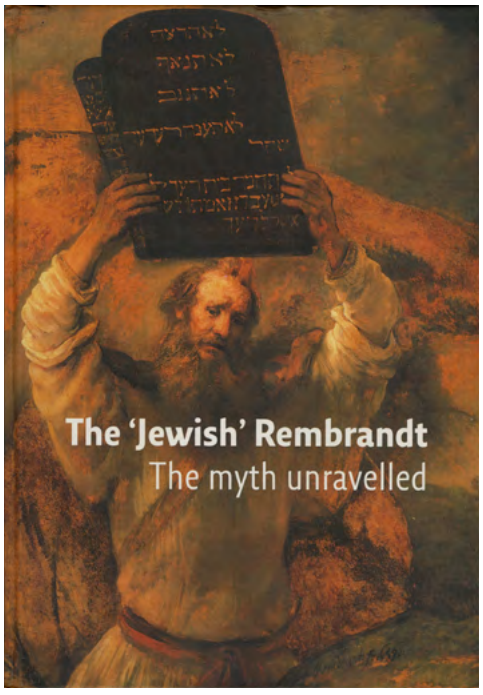
Re-examining the legend of an overly Judaized Rembrandt required a precise methodological framework. The exhibition was constructed around a series of questions scrutinizing all the themes that had been developed about Rembrandt and Jewish figures from the end of the seventeenth century to the seminal work published in 1946 by Franz Landsberger, *Rembrandt, the Jews and the Bible*:

- Rembrandt's neighborhood being a Jewish neighborhood;
- Rembrandt's conflicts with his Jewish fellow Amsterdamers;
- his relationships with Menasseh ben Israel and other rabbis, with Ephraim Bueno and his putative relation to Spinoza;
- his use of Jewish models for images of Christ;
- portraits said to depict old Jews and rabbis.

The exhibition also dealt with the master's impact on Jewish artists during the nineteenth century, notably Maurycy Gottlieb and the great Dutch painter Jozef Israëls. (There are many others, as Larry Silver and Simon Schama show in their contributions to the present volume.)

The opening section was centered around a map of the Jewish quarter, which set the tone for the museum's method. Mirjam Knotter's study in this publication goes even deeper into the matter, drawing a fascinating portrait of the Jewish quarter based on the incisive use of archival documents and topography.

In Paris, the exhibition entitled *Rembrandt and the New Jerusalem: Jews and Christians in Amsterdam Golden Age* implemented a different approach, nourished by major scholars, of whom I name Yosef Kaplan, Christian Tümpel, Albert Blankert and our Amsterdam colleague Mirjam Knotter herself, all of whom contributed to the comprehensive catalogue. With my co-curator, Alexis Merle du Bourg, we wanted to examine the



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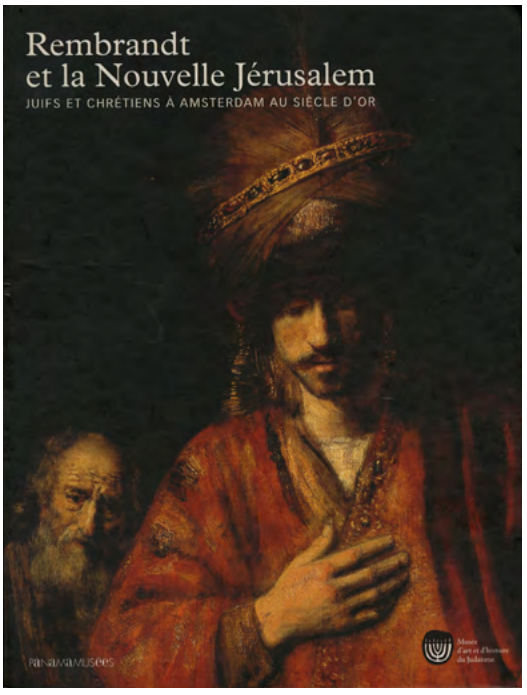
Exhib. cat. *The "Jewish" Rembrandt: The Myth Unravelled*

Amsterdam, Jewish Historical Museum, 2006 [English edition 2008]



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Exhib. cat. *Rembrandt et la Nouvelle Jérusalem: Juifs et Chrétiens à Amsterdam au Siècle d'Or*

Paris, Musée d'art et histoire du Judaïsme, 2006

biblical and Jewish elements in Rembrandt's work as symptoms of the encounter of old with new religions, and of the widening of the universe, both geographical and mental, in which it developed. This context was essential, we felt, for a correct understanding of the resurrected Judaism in Rembrandt's Amsterdam, and what made it modern.

In more ways than one, the ideas behind the project at the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme coincided with issues raised in recent publications, in particular Michael Zell's *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (2002) and Steven Nadler's *Rembrandt's Jews* (2003). The exhibition was greatly indebted to their analyses.

Our main interest was in demonstrating, through the paintings of Rembrandt and his contemporaries, the centrality of religious and patriotic effervescence in the Netherlands. Rembrandt's work, we felt, offered a unique distillation of the values involved. In contrast to the Jewish Historical Museum, where the permanent display deals with the history of the Jews in Amsterdam and the Netherlands, Paris could not proceed without telling the story of how new Christians became new Jews and of, in the apt words of Yosef Kaplan, the reinvention of Judaism in Amsterdam.

This led us to divide the exhibition into four distinct parts:

- Being Jewish in Amsterdam in Rembrandt's time;
- The Jews as seen by Rembrandt (in the Gospels, portraits and expressive figures);
- Rembrandt and his contemporaries as interpreters of the Old Testament;
- Rembrandt and images of the Messiah.

The closest and apparently only predecessor of these two projects was *The Jews in the Age of Rembrandt*, an exhibition curated in 1981 by Susan W. Morgenstein and Ruth E. Levine for the Judaic Museum of Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington,

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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)

which toured to the Jewish museums of Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. This precursor was far less ambitious than its two followers. It was limited to etchings by Rembrandt purporting to depict Jews or Jewish types, and to some prints by the master's contemporaries illustrating Old Testament scenes. The catalogue included a seminal paper by Simon Schama, opening with the following words:

> Michelangelo's Moses has horns; Rembrandt's does not. With this minor act of iconographical surgery, the image of the Jew was translated from the realm of monsters to the realm of men. In Dutch art, unlike any other Christian art before it, the Jew is readmitted to the company of humanity.

Schama concludes: Jews loved Rembrandt because the master depicted them as they *wished* to be represented. Forty years later, Gary Schwartz and Mirjam Knotter still refer to this striking overture. Schama's essay was the first text in a museum publication to revisit the so-called empathy of Rembrandt towards Amsterdam Jews. He carefully examined the supposed "polyglot humanism" of Amsterdam and reviewed the economic facts and figures that call for a reconsideration of the true role of Jews in the bustling commercial development of the city.

Whether idealized or not, Schama quotes the words of praise in 1616 by Rabbi Isaac Uziel, the Moroccan rabbi who was called to the rabbinate in Amsterdam in 1610: "At present people live peaceably in Amsterdam. The inhabitants of this city, mindful of the increase in population, make laws and ordinances whereby the freedom of religions may be upheld. Each may follow his own belief, but may not openly show that he is a different faith from the inhabitants of the city."[1]

Although Schwartz and Knotter cite Schama approvingly, there is a wide gap between his balanced analysis, which focused mostly on Amsterdam economy and society, and their more revisionist approach, which, except for crediting a handful of paintings, virtually undoes the documented and certified Jewish dimension in Rembrandt's oeuvre.

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Detail from: Yaakov ben Abraham Tsaddiq (Jacob Justo) and Abraham Goos, *Palestine or the Holy Land* (Hebrew), 1621

Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des cartes et plans (GE C 4921 rés)

One more significant detail: the Washington catalogue had a detail of the etching known as *Jews in the Synagogue* on its cover, with the entire etching opposite the title page, as if the whole "family" of supposedly Jewish types were gathered there. And opposite the beginning of Simon Schama's essay is the so-called portrait of Menasseh ben Israel. Forty years ago, we were still far from a reappraisal of Rembrandt's affinity with the Jews.

While exhibiting and providing in-depth discussion of Rembrandt's works in the catalogue, the Paris project laid down some guiding principles with regard to the relevant intellectual and religious context.

A NEW PASSION FOR IMAGES AND SELF-REPRESENTATION SHARED BY JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

In a novelty for both the Jewish and the Protestant worlds, which are principally antagonistic to images, portraits of Jewish rabbis and Calvinist theologians begin to appear in the early seventeenth century. In 1621, the first map of the Holy Land in Hebrew included a self-portrait of its author, Jacob Justo (Yaakov ben Abraham Tsaddiq), who justifies himself saying that since his publication was "a great innovation, […] I decided to include my portrait" (fig. 128).[2] A section in the Paris exhibition and catalogue presented portraits commissioned by rabbis: Leon Templo, Menasseh ben Israel, Isaac Aboab, Jacob Sasportas; and physicians: Joseph Delmedigo, Abraham Zacuto, Ephraim Bueno, all men of learning, who could have seen themselves as borrowing a trick from the well-established tradition, practiced with great success by Luther, of publishing printed portraits of leading Protestants (fig. 129).

THE REINVENTION OF JUDAISM AND PREMODERNITY

The forced conversion of Jews in the Iberian Peninsula had naturally created a deep hostility towards Catholicism, and possibly affinities with Amsterdam Christians. Amsterdam may not have been the heaven that some authors have described (Panofsky for instance), but Portuguese Jews had truly escaped from hell and its flames. We tried to put the famous phenomenon known as "La Convivencia," the (supposedly) peaceful coexistence of faiths in Muslim Spain and Portugal, into perspective.

READING AND REINTERPRETING THE BIBLE

Looking back at the catalogue, one of the key points in the Paris exhibition was the examination of the principle of "identification." We looked at it from all directions: the identification of Portuguese Jews with the ancient Hebrews and the Judean exiles in

Babylon, of the Dutch with figures of the Old and New Testaments, and on a different level the way art historians identified images of old men as Jews. Insofar as we were making an argument, it was to show how these different readings were constructed.

The Rembrandt paintings and etchings in the exhibition were displayed and described in the catalogue mainly through the prism of Bible interpretation. The desire to see Rembrandt's compositions as sophisticated hermeneutic images may have led to an exaggeration of his status as *pictor doctus*. For the interpretations of some art historians to be true, Rembrandt will have had to have read more deeply than a student of theology at a Dutch university or a rabbinical seminary, or to have consulted their teachers. Shelley Perlove's essay in the present book takes this tack.

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View of the section displaying documented portraits of Jewish rabbis, doctors and scholars

Paris, Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme, 2007

MILLENARIANISM AND MESSIANISM

Another key argument structuring our approach to Rembrandt's work was its relation to millenarianism in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. Several of his works, we felt, reflected the impact of this messianic atmosphere on various religious denominations in the Low Countries. Inspired by Shelley Perlove's illuminating article "Perceptions of Otherness: Critical Responses to the Jews of Rembrandt's Art and Milieu (1836–1945),"[3] we tried to single out which personages from the Old Testament—in particular Daniel, Esther and Mordecai, all heroes of the Portuguese Jews—were seen as figures of salvation. Insofar as these figures allow for personal and religious identification by Christians as well as Jews, they transcend their immediate iconography.

Though Paris and Amsterdam showed some similar works, Amsterdam concentrated on a different and more focused demonstration. By gathering works that had been falsely referred to as Jewish portraits, it traced the process by which Rembrandt's work became Judaized. A spectacular series of more than a dozen paintings of this kind was the climax of the exhibition. Interestingly, none of them are still regarded as works by Rembrandt himself. Seven are now given to his circle and two to his atelier, one being by Willem Drost (figs. 130 and 131). These paintings, as well as some etchings, were titled in catalogues from the eighteenth century onward, mainly those of Edmé-François Gersaint and Charles Blanc, as portraits of rabbis and old Jews. The curators took radical exception to these assertions, in the spirit of, and accepting, Adri Offenberg's disqualification of the supposed portrait etching of Menasseh ben Israel (fig. 124).[4]

The Paris exhibition too devoted a section to the Judaization of Rembrandt since the seventeenth century, mostly based on what has been written about the etchings. Fol-

lowing Michael Zell, the exhibition included the etching by J.G. van Vliet after Rembrandt's *Man with a Turban*, which is inscribed "Philon le Juif" in the plate. Though it was not the central topic of our exhibition, in the foreword to the catalogue my co-author Alexis Merle du Bourg and I referred cautiously to what is called Rembrandt's "empathy," stressing the psychological dimension as a driving force of the Judaization process:

> Since the nineteenth century, those involved with Jewish art—artists, historians, collectors and museums alike—have shown a particular predilection for Rembrandt's work because of the empathy with the Jews the master was supposed to have had. It seemed to be taken as a given that Rembrandt had lived among Jews, had loved them, and that their presence permeated his work […]. This perception was fueled by a surge of gratitude from those who were aware of the many pejorative representations of the Jewish people in Western art and who wanted to see in the paintings of this genius a reflection of benevolent humanism on the part of a Christian artist.[5]

In analyzing the variety of motivations that brought different authors to assert that Rembrandt found Jewish models appealing, it is interesting to go back to the strong impact of Panofsky's lecture "Rembrandt und das Judentum," which he gave on 4 January 1921 at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. He stated his case quite strongly:

> Rembrandt seems to be the only artist of whom it can be said that he was a pioneer in this Judaizing trend […]. His need for an art that would be religious as well as realistic, historical as well as tangible, led Rembrandt with a certain inevitability, and from the beginning of his career, to pay attention to the Jewish essence. […] As early as 1636 we encounter the portrait of a man who seems to have remained a good friend for the rest of his life and who was one of the foremost figures in the Amsterdam [Sephardi] community: Menasseh ben Israel.[6]

Panofsky then offers a reading of the evolution of the painter's work through three stages, from a strong characterization of Jews by features, gestures and the picturesque, to psychological and dramatic portraits, and finally to metaphysical meanings. He evokes a process by which the idea itself transcends the individual. He uses the supposed portraits of Jews, overdetermined by details, to show that in his late work the genius reaches a point where he is able to capture in paint the very essence of the human being, *sub specie aeternitatis*.

In Panofsky, this great mind, we find the perfect embodiment of the strong desire to see Jewish figures in Rembrandt's work. As an epitome of his thinking, he uses *The Disgrace of Haman* (ca. 1665), from which, he wrote, all narrative aspects have faded, along with the psychological and dramatic elements we are used to in Rembrandt's biblical paintings: "there is no longer a villain, nor an angry

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View of the section dedicated to portraits of old bearded men once attributed to Rembrandt

Amsterdam, Jewish Historical Museum, 2006

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Willem Drost, *Bust of a Man Wearing a Large-brimmed Hat*, 1654 or 1655
Oil on canvas,
73.1 × 62 cm

Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland (NGI 107)

character, nor a triumphant one" (fig. 132).[7] Iconology as a method was certainly at the core of Paris exhibition, and many of our choices resonated with it. Nevertheless, when it came to *The Disgrace of Haman*, which was shown as the conclusion and the climax of the exhibition, we related it to the central narrative of Esther, with its resonance for Protestants as well as Jews, and not to the mystery that radiates from this painting and that inspired Panofsky.

We wish to turn attention to how the critical method used by the Jewish Historical Museum of Amsterdam has renewed the debate concerning the etched portrait that for several centuries has been identified as Menasseh ben Israel. The exhibition credits the doubts that had been cast on the identification by several authors, based on discrepancies with Salom Italia's captioned portrait of Menasseh. The curators stressed the lack of evidence concerning the actual interaction between the famous rabbi-philosopher and Rembrandt.

As frustrating as it is not to be able to resolve the central question of the relationship between the two heroes of this story, the discussion can be fed with a few remarks. As we noted, one objection to the identification of Rembrandt's etching as Menasseh ben Israel is its limited resemblance to Salom Italia's portrait, which is taken to be the only proven likeness of the rabbi. How valid is this argument? It can be said that Salom Italia's portrait of Menasseh (like the one of Leon Templo) is too naïve to be faithfully realistic (fig. 133). The fact that Menasseh had sent it to his German correspondence

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Rembrandt, *The Disgrace of Haman*, ca. 1665
Oil on canvas,
128 × 116.5 cm

St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum (752)

friend, the mystic Abraham von Frankenburg, might be a sign of approval but not as proof that it was the only one he accepted as a portrait of himself.

Not enough attention has been paid to the closeness of the dates of the portrait etching, 1636, and the publication of Menasseh's treatise *De creatione problemata,* his first philosophical work in Latin, in 1635. Dealing with the question of creation ex nihilo, it was clearly intended for Christians, as evidenced by Menasseh's dedicatory epistle to David de Wilhem.

The book included an *Epigramma in problemata clarissimi viri Menassis ben Israel de creatione* by Caspar Barlaeus, whom Schama calls "an immensely influential […] writer and orator."[8] As early as 1985, Gary Schwartz suggests in his *Rembrandt, His Life, His Paintings* that Caspar Barlaeus was Rembrandt's adviser on religious matters.[9] Does this not add to the plausibility of the 1636 portrait being Menasseh?

Steven Nadler has just published an exhaustive article with Victor Tiribàs on Rembrandt's indisputable tie to Menasseh, which has major difficulties of its own: "Rembrandt's Etchings for Menasseh ben Israel's *Piedra gloriosa*: A Mystery Solved?"[10] The authors quote a document dated 6 May 1655, in which the Mahamad, the board of the Amsterdam Sephardi community, formally forbids Menasseh to print any more copies of his book. The reason is not specified, but the prohibition is taken to have been occasioned by the inclusion in the book of an etching by Rembrandt showing God

with recognizable features, as the "Atiq Yomin," the Ancient of Days. As the authors admit, this wonderful source does not really solve the problem of the anteriority of the Rembrandt series or the engravings found in other copies. One indication that Rembrandt's came first is that uncut sheets of all four etchings for *Piedra gloriosa* are preserved. (They are not rare. There are impressions in the Dutuit collection in the Petit Palais, the Edmond de Rothschild collection in the Louvre, the British Museum, the Rembrandt House Museum and other repositories.) It seems like a reasonable assumption that these sheets had been printed but not yet inserted into copies of the book when the Mahamad issued its decree, and that they remained unused.

The attribution of the engraved series to Salom Italia having been rejected, the search is on for another name, which may be found among other engravers who worked on subjects of Jewish interest or who had contact with Jews. It should also be kept in mind that these engravings were an unusual move on the part of Rembrandt, who was not keen on producing etched illustrations for books. Apart from the *Piedra gloriosa*, he made a total of three prints for books, including the one for *Medea or the Marriage of Jason and Creusa* by his eminent and dear friend Jan Six in 1648 (B 112).

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Salom Italia, *Portrait of the Rabbi, Diplomat and Printer Menasseh ben Israel*, 1642
Engraving, 19.2 x 13 cm

Amsterdam, Jewish Museum (M007548)

The exhibition that was scheduled to open in October 2022, made impossible by the Russian "special military action" against Ukraine, would undoubtedly have decisively brought to the fore the issues outlined by the previous three exhibitions we have discussed here. The present publication bears witness to the rich possibilities that archival research provides for nailing down the topography and social realities of the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam. Bringing to light the details of the lawsuits, harassments and rivalries marking relations between the master and his neighbors in the Jodenbreestraat district deals an additional blow to the idea that Rembrandt's relation with his Jewish neighbors was harmonious, even blended.

This approach, as meticulous as it is essential, does not impinge on a fact of a different order—the painter's truly extraordinary attraction to allegorical and mystical understandings of biblical motifs. That aspect is dealt with through attention to the millenarianism and mysticism that so strongly penetrated Jewish and Protestant communities, features that underlie Rembrandt's fascination with images of divine revelation and of the messiah. The corpus of painted and etched works adumbrating this phenomenon was defined by the 2007 Paris exhibition and the previous works of Perlove, Zell and Nadler, as well as their contributions to the present book. The work of these three authors confirms once again the vitality of theological debate in the crucible that was pre-Enlightenment Amsterdam. Their emphasis on Rembrandt's choice and treatment of biblical themes, and the depth of interpretation contained in his representations, raise the master's encounter with the Jewish world to a higher conceptual level.

In this light, the disqualification of pseudo-portraits of Jews or rabbis, boldly insisted on by the Jewish Historical Museum in 2006, is not all that relevant. The real innovation of the present volume lies in the comprehensive view of Rembrandt's reception

by generations of Jews, collectors and dealers, artists and art historians. In his article, Gary Schwartz sketches the personalities of some Portuguese Jewish collectors of Rembrandt's time, extending his examination to the present day. Dominated by such memorable figures as Sampson Gideon and the Rothschilds, this fastidious overview becomes fascinating when it meets up with the antisemitism expressed by German and French art historians. The impression left by Schwartz's research is that, a small number of specific documented cases aside, Jewish collectors showed no lasting interest in biblical subjects or Jewish portraits or themes. They were guided, like other buyers, by the search for excellence in the work of the greatest of Northern European painters.

This broadening of perspective includes Larry Silver's article on the master's marked influence on Jewish artists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Jozef Israëls to R.B. Kitaj, Maurycy Gottlieb to Soutine. The very naming of their names conjures up a concept of what Rembrandt represented for them: the pinnacle of painting, not only because of his genius, but also because of his treatment of Jewish figures and religious scenes, in a way they did not find in the art of other European masters.

This publication (and the exhibition it should have accompanied) has the virtue of offering a kaleidoscopic view, starting from documented *facts* about Rembrandt's urban and social environment, to the—sometimes fantastical—*constructions* of those who seized upon his work to laud or malign its supposedly omnipresent Jewishness. This back and forth in time and space, between subjects and models, dealers and clients, collectors and art historians or curators, between Jews and antisemites, helps us to appreciate in an all-encompassing way a monument of European art and of the Jewish imagination.

NOTES

1 Los Angeles-Chicago-New York 1981–82, 5.
2 Paris 2007, 194, cat. no. 88.
3 Perlove 2001.
4 Offenberg 1992a.
5 Paris 2007, 8.
6 Panofsky 1973, 79.
7 Ibid., 104.
8 Los Angeles-Chicago-New York 1981–82, 10.
9 Schwartz 1985b, 123.
10 Nadler and Tiribàs 2021.

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Laurence Sigal-Klagsbald graduated from the Ecole Normale Supérieure and Sorbonne University. She was the founding director of the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme, where she curated the exhibition *Rembrandt et la Nouvelle Jérusalem*. After 2012 she led the Department of Education at the Centre des Monuments nationaux and was the general manager of the Fondation du Judaïsme Français.