The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt

The Jewish Museum

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300. Introduction

JAMES S. SNYDER: Hello, I'm James S. Snyder, Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director at the Jewish Museum. I'm pleased to welcome you to *The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt*.

The biblical Book of Esther tells the story of an heroic queen of Persia – present-day Iran– celebrated today during the Jewish holiday of Purim. When Queen Esther discovers a plot to annihilate the Jewish people, she risks her life by appearing before her husband, the King, unsummoned, pleading with him to spare them. In doing so, she reveals her Jewish identity, persuades the king to intervene, and saves the Jewish people.

In the Netherlands of the 17th century, this story found a particular resonance. The Dutch had recently overthrown the Spanish Catholic monarchy, and the newly formed Protestant state did not promote the same degree of bias against Judaism and other religions. In Amsterdam, the Jewish community could practice its religion more openly, including the observance of Jewish holidays like Purim. And it was during this moment of heightened tolerance that Queen Esther's heroism came to represent the Dutch people's emerging identity.

In the Book of Esther, Mordecai, encourages her to take her brave action in the presence of the King, with the words, "For such a time as this," resonating movingly and meaningfully with the liberated Dutch spirit of the time.

Our exhibition explores how different communities – both Jewish and Christian – took inspiration from the Book of Esther. At the start of the 17th century, the Netherlands, particularly Amsterdam, was a center of world trade – and also a center for the arts. This was the age of Rembrandt van Rijn, arguably the Netherlands' most celebrated artist to this day. Rembrandt and his contemporaries interpreted and foregrounded Queen Esther's story through painting, printmaking, domestic craft, Jewish ceremonial art, and theatre.

You will be joined on your tour by the exhibition's co-curators, Abigail Rapoport, Curator of Judaica at the Jewish Museum, and Michele Frederick, Curator of European Art at the North Carolina Museum of Art. You will also hear from Stephanie Dickey, Professor Emerita and former Bader Chair in Northern Baroque Art at Queen's University. Together we will explore the meaning of Esther's story for the Dutch people in Rembrandt's time and also in resonance with our own times today.

301. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Great Jewish Bride (Probably Esther)*, 1635

NARRATOR: Many people interpret the figure in this print as that of Esther. She is holding a scroll, which could represent the news about the decree ordering the murder of the Jewish people. Esther is preparing to confront her husband, King Ahasuerus, to beg him to overturn the decree. Abigail Rapoport, co-curator of the exhibition.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: So Rembrandt is really focusing you on her expression: how does she feel at this pivotal moment? And you might notice how, while she's holding that scroll so tightly, she's also holding onto the chair itself. She's really bracing herself for what's to come.

NARRATOR: The focus on Esther's inner thoughts, rather than on dramatic action, was a new way of fashioning her image.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: This humanized Esther is encouraging viewers to identify emotionally with her. And for the Dutch, they're viewing Esther as a model for them – for their courageous battle against the Spanish monarchy.

NARRATOR: Printmaking was an important medium in Rembrandt's time, as it allowed an image to be distributed widely. Rembrandt's mastery of the technique has captivated viewers for centuries.

Here's art historian Stephanie Dickey.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: Rembrandt was one of the most accomplished and inventive printmakers, probably ever, but certainly in his own time.

And he had a way of using the etching needle to score the copper plate over and over again; it's called crosshatching. So he uses this in a very subtle way in this image to describe the different textures that we see: the rich, dark velvet of her costume and then probably silk or some other shimmering fabric for her blouse, and then the very delicate curly strands of her long hair.

302. Salom Italia, *Esther scroll*, Amsterdam, 1640s

NARRATOR: This engraved scroll is by the Italian-born Jewish artist Salom Italia, who enjoyed great success in Amsterdam. The scroll is full of intricate details. But it was not purely decorative. Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: This is an Esther scroll, or a Megillah in Hebrew. And it tells the story of Esther, which is read annually in February or March for the holiday of Purim. Purim commemorates Esther's story on this scroll and celebrates her heroism.

The story of Esther needs to be read from a scroll, specifically: one of the few ritual obligations for the holiday is to read the story aloud. The prayer leader in the synagogue stands at the central reading platform and he reads the scroll aloud for all to hear. It's likely that the patrons who commissioned an Esther scroll like this one would have brought them to the synagogue to read along in a quiet voice.

NARRATOR: The scroll introduces the four key characters: Esther herself; her husband, King Ahasuerus; Haman, the king's chief adviser, who plots to annihilate the Jewish people; and Esther's cousin Mordecai, who urges her to go before the king to intercede. The text is framed and separated by illustrated triumphal arches.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: Characters from the story of Esther are actually nestled between these arches. King Ahasuerus is facing Queen Esther. Mordecai is facing Haman. And it's as though they're in dialogue with one another. They're animating, or giving voice, to the text itself.

I like to also imagine unrolling this scroll and following the text and revealing one arch at a time. And I think that Salom Italia's scrolls are bringing the story to life.

303. Jan Theunis Dextra, manufactured by the Greek A Factory, Delft. *Hanging Sabbath/Festival Lamp*, 18th century

NARRATOR: This decorative lamp for Sabbath and holidays provides a unique insight into Jewish life in Amsterdam.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: It would have been used to light candles in the home to usher in the Sabbath, the sacred day of rest, and other Jewish festivals.

NARRATOR: The lamp may have belonged to a member of the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam. From around the 1590s, Jews from Spain and Portugal immigrated to the Netherlands, fleeing persecution from the Spanish monarchy and seeking religious and cultural safety and economic opportunity.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: We can imagine how owning and lighting such a striking lamp would have stood in stark contrast to the Portuguese Jewish community's roots and ancestry, who were persecuted for openly practicing their Jewish holidays and customs.

NARRATOR: The lamp also reveals how this community was integrated into the cultural and economic life of the Netherlands.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: The blue-and-white pattern we see here is called Delftware. It is a hallmark of Dutch art. This Delftware became very popular – really a fad – in the early 1600s. It was a locally made competitor against the more expensive imported Chinese porcelain.

NARRATOR: The story of Queen Esther has a resonance here as she had initially concealed her Jewish identity from her husband, King Ahasuerus but then bravely came forward. This struck a chord with these immigrants.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: For the first time in a long time, they can commission beautiful objects like this Delftware lamp. They can be quite visible in their Jewish practices.

It really offers the hope of warmth and peacefulness.

304. Gerrit van Honthorst, *Elizabeth Stuart as Esther*, c. 1632

NARRATOR: This portrait by Gerrit Van Honthorst is of Elizabeth Stuart.

Elizabeth was the daughter of King James I of England. She and her husband Frederick had briefly reigned as King and Queen of Bohemia, but in 1620 their Protestant armies were defeated by Catholic Spain. Having lost her throne, Elizabeth fled to the Netherlands, where she lived in exile – hoping one day to have her fortunes restored.

MICHELE FREDERICK: And so here we see her in really regal clothing.

NARRATOR: Michele Frederick, co-curator of the exhibition.

MICHELE FREDERICK: She's wearing a gold gown that is lined with ermine fur, that white fur with black dots in it, and that's really a symbol of European royalty: it's an aspirational image for what she really wants to return to. And the scepter she's holding is a symbol of her power, in this case her hoped-for return to royal power.

NARRATOR: Interestingly, the portrait presents Elizabeth as Queen Esther.

MICHELE FREDERICK: What really makes her Esther is the striped sash that's wrapped around her crown. It's kind of evoking a turban. So Elizabeth is really seeking out equivalences between herself and this biblical figure.

NARRATOR: Unlike Esther, Elizabeth was a Protestant queen, not a Jewish one. The small cross on the top of her crown emphasizes this. She saw herself as a new Esther for the Dutch Republic.

MICHELE FREDERICK: She really positions herself as a Protestant warrior. So ironically, she's embodying this Jewish heroine in her role as this warrior for the Protestant cause.

305. Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Jewish Heroine from the Hebrew Bible*, 1632–33

NARRATOR: Here, Rembrandt shows an elaborately dressed woman, often identified as Esther. An attendant is combing her hair. The setting suggests she is preparing to go before her husband, King Ahasuerus, to plead for his help in saving her community. Stephanie Dickey.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: The idea of a woman dressing up in fancy clothes in order to catch the attention of a man is sometimes seen as frivolous, but in this case it's anything but. We can think about the fact that men and women both often like to look their best before they go and do something really important. It can make you feel in control. And that's what Esther's doing here.

NARRATOR: By following Mordecai's advice and going before the king uninvited, Esther is breaking royal protocol and risking death. For the Dutch people, she served as a role model of strength and courage. What makes Rembrandt's image of Esther innovative is that he focuses on the psychological complexity of her inner life, rather than on showing the drama unfold.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: She seems very confident; she's looking right out at us. And that direct gaze is one of the things that draws us in. It almost inspires us to think about what might we do if we put ourselves in her place.

And, while we know that this is clearly a biblical figure, when you just look at her face and hair, you really feel like you're looking at someone you could bump into on the street today. And this is because Rembrandt has based this figure on a model who he depicted from life. And that model could even be his own sister, someone who was willing to sit there for the laborious work of posing in this elaborate costume, so that he could paint directly from what he saw with his own eyes. That makes this character from thousands of years ago come to life right in front of our eyes.

306. Fred Wilson, *Queen Esther/Harriet Tubman*, 1992

NARRATOR: The heroic figure of Esther is still powerfully resonant in modern times. In 1992 the Jewish Museum invited the artist Fred Wilson to create a work of art as part of the Purim celebration that year.

Wilson took as his starting point a 16th century Dutch engraving of Queen Esther. He then layered it with a photograph, printed on acetate paper, of the anti-slavery activist Harriet Tubman, who rescued more than 70 enslaved Black people in the mid-1800s.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: This image suggests the similarities of the two heroines of Black and Jewish histories, who risked their lives to save their persecuted peoples.

NARRATOR: Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: And I think the result is quite amazing. People are often surprised to even learn that it's a layered image. It's almost like the scepter that she's holding, it looks like Harriet Tubman is holding it, when really that's Queen Esther holding it underneath Tubman. I love the way the veil is sort of like this ghost behind Harriet Tubman, glorifying and elevating her.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: I think it really took an artist's eye to find two images that would work together so brilliantly.

NARRATOR: Stephanie Dickey.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: It literally visually conflates the two women and suggests that both of them have something very important in common.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: The most beautiful part, about this image – and at the core of this exhibition – is how one figure can unite many different communities and cultures.

I think in a lot of ways, Queen Esther is like a vessel for many people, even today. The visitor will see there's lots of Queen Esthers. Queen Esther has very different faces, has very different costumes.

307. Jan Lievens, *The Feast of Esther*, c. 1625

NARRATOR: The Feast of Esther is the climax of the Esther story. The drama takes place at a banquet, hosted by Esther for her husband the king, and his chief adviser Haman. Michele Frederick.

MICHELE FREDERICK: Because it was so dramatic, Dutch artists really loved to paint it. That's why you're standing in a gallery of *Feast of Esther* paintings.

NARRATOR: This example is by Rembrandt's contemporary, Jan Lievens. Esther – in the center – reveals her Jewish identity at the feast. King Ahasuerus – on the right – reacts with horror at Haman's plot to kill his wife and annihilate her people. Stephanie Dickey.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: It's probably the 17th century equivalent of watching a film today. It's large and colorful and theatrical, and when you look at it you are drawn right into the story, as if you were witnessing it unfolding in front of your own eyes.

NARRATOR: Costume is also important.

MICHELE FREDERICK: Take Esther, for example. She's dressed completely as a contemporary Dutch woman. Her clothing is very nice: she's dressed as a queen. But there's nothing Persian about what she's wearing.

NARRATOR: Now look at Ahasuerus, to the right.

MICHELE FREDERICK: What Ahasuerus is wearing has nothing to do with ancient Persia, but it actually has a lot to do with 17th century Persia, which was a trading partner with the Netherlands. Lievens would have seen people wearing that clothing, walking around the streets of Amsterdam, but it's not ancient Persian.

They're seeing all these new things in Amsterdam and in other parts of the Netherlands and so there's a lot of things that clearly spark their imagination; but they want to make this scene and its themes relevant to their contemporary viewer.

308. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait, Age 23*, 1629

NARRATOR: Rembrandt painted this self-portrait when he was just 23 years old. But it already shows the hallmarks that would make him one of the most revered figures in the history of Western art. For example, the exploration of contrasting light and shadow, and the focus on facial expression. Michele Frederick.

MICHELE FREDERICK: Rembrandt really viewed himself as his best and most available model, so I think he portrayed himself more than anyone else. He really studied the expressive potential of the human face through himself, and so this starts very early.

And something else that he's very interested in is the expressive and fun possibilities of costume, and so that's really what we're seeing here.

He's wearing a beret with a very large feather in it, and a gold chain. It's very theatrical, and so it mirrors the dramatic light and shadow that we have here. And tied around his neck is a striped scarf which is probably a similar type to the kind you find all over Esther paintings and other biblical paintings of these striped sashes that were imported from the Middle East.

And in many of the *Feast of Esther* paintings in particular, striped sashes or scarves like this are worn in the more traditional Middle Eastern way of being tied around the waist, and so it shows some artists are interested in using them for their quote unquote original purpose, and others like Rembrandt are more interested in adapting them for their own purposes, and giving some visual interest to a self-portrait and showing that he is a man of the world.

309. Jan Steen, *The Wrath of Ahasuerus*, c. 1670

MICHELE FREDERICK: Jan Steen is maybe the best storyteller in Dutch art.

NARRATOR: That was Michele Frederick. In these paintings, Jan Steen depicts the moment King Ahasuerus learns of his wife's Jewish identity, and realizes, to his horror, that she too would be killed as part of Haman's plot to massacre the Jewish people.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: Each painting is showing a slightly different moment unfolding, almost in a cinematic way.

NARRATOR: The dramatic facial expressions owed a lot to the theatre of the day. Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: Dutch artists in general were advised, to imitate theater, even to work as actors, in order to represent emotions as faithfully and convincingly as possible.

NARRATOR: Steen also uses other storytelling techniques. Let's focus on the central painting.

MICHELE FREDERICK: What I find particularly great is how dramatically Ahasuerus is flinging his arms out, and everything's getting knocked off the table. So right in the foreground you have a gigantic peacock pie on a silver platter that's just falling to the ground.

NARRATOR: Peacock pie was a luxury item – a dish fit for a king.

MICHELE FREDERICK: And on the ground in front of the table is a shattered porcelain vessel, and this would be Chinese porcelain. So this is something that was an expensive import to the Netherlands.

And so the combination of this broken, luxurious vessel and the peacock pie tumbling over are symbols of Haman's broken pride as well. It's a really playful combination of these two modes of storytelling: I'm showing you these rich things so you know it's a rich setting, but yet they have symbolic value, and I'm telling you something about the story as well.

310. Unknown artist/maker, *Tebah Cover (Dotar Society lectern cover for the Portuguese Synagogue used on Purim and during the drawing of lots)*, Southern Europe, 17th century

NARRATOR: This vibrantly decorated cloth is a lectern cover, for the central reading platform in the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam. The cloth, called Harlequin's cloth, dates from Rembrandt's time, but is still used in the synagogue today – specifically during the holiday of Purim. The cover has another special association. Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: This one in particular was used for a lottery held on Purim by the Dotar society. The Dotar society was established in 1615 as a charitable society that provided dowries for young Jewish women looking to marry and settle in Amsterdam.

NARRATOR: The root of the word "Purim" refers to the lots Haman cast determining the annihilation of the Jewish people.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: Like Queen Esther, many of these women had been forced to hide their own Jewish identity. They immigrated to Amsterdam from regions where it was unsafe to openly practice as a Jewish person.

NARRATOR: These orphaned young women lacked the dowry for a marriage settlement. They applied to the charity to be entered into a lottery, in the hope of a better future. The Dotar society chose Purim as the date to announce the winners, and their names were drawn from silver tureens, like the one displayed here, which was placed on the colorful cloth in the synagogue.

The society is still active today, and it uses this cloth and silver tureen for its ceremonial lotteries on Purim.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: Its activities were halted for the Holocaust. And if you open up the book, they have a registry of all of the girls who entered the lottery – you have blank pages for the years where the society was halted. And it picks up.

For me, it's the tangibility of this object, it's that it's a living tradition. And the artistic technique and the sheer beauty of it helps you feel that livingness of the piece.

311. Attributed to Frans Francken the Younger, *Cabinet with scenes from the Book of Esther*, c. 1620

NARRATOR: This spectacular cabinet was designed to display the owner's prized possessions. And the cabinet itself is a work of art. Curator Abigail Rapoport.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: All the key Esther scenes from the Book of Esther that we've been seeing and talking about can be seen on this fantastic cabinet. At the very bottom, we also see allegorical figures symbolizing the four elements of the world. From left to right, we can see water, air, fire and earth. And I love that juxtaposition, where it's like Esther is in the world, she's infused with the very elements of the world.

Another aspect of it is the way the architecture of the cabinet is sort of in sync with the story setting itself: like, in the very center of the cabinet we can see this archway, and then there's these little columns and pillars that are flanking that moment from the story of Esther.

NARRATOR: The cabinet was not just ornamental.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: There is this really kind of theatrical element in how you're using it, how you're engaging with it, how you need to unlock parts of it to uncover the story and to work through it.

I think there's also this idea that this cabinet is a domestic object, too. That you're seeing Queen Esther above your fireplace, that you're seeing Queen Esther in your cabinet. It encapsulates living with Queen Esther.