

The Jewish Museum

The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt

Verbal Description Guide

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

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: So this is an Esther scroll, or a Megillah in Hebrew. It tells the story of Esther and celebrates her heroism. This engraved scroll is the work of a Jewish artist, Salom Italia.

NARRATOR: That was curator Abigail Rapoport. This Esther Scroll was made around the 1640s and is about 8 inches high and 98 inches long. Around 30 inches are on display here, with the remaining length rolled on the left side around an acrylic cylinder. It is displayed in a glass case against a warm grey fabric backing. The parchment surface of the scroll, aged with time, features an off-white background and light brown marks along its bottom and right edges—perhaps signs of where it was once held during reading. Across it, images and text are printed in delicate black lines.

As it would have been traditionally read, let's start at the right edge, and work our way left. The right edge is elegantly shaped, with decorative curves that slope to a domed point at the center. Along this edge,

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: We can see parrots, even a peacock. And peacocks were considered to be delicacies, so it actually makes sense that we're seeing that in a scroll that also relates to the feast of Purim.

NARRATOR: In the center of this decorative element are densely curled shapes and more birds in the shape of a rectangle, like a thick opulent picture frame. Next, to the left, is an urn with oversized flowers erupting from the top.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: Flanking this elaborate urn with flowers, there's even a delightful squirrel attempting to crack open a nut. And that squirrel is facing a monkey reaching at its paw where the artist purposely signed his name in Hebrew here.

NARRATOR: Across the rest of the unrolled scroll, we see drawings of four connected stone arches, in the style of ancient Greek or Roman architecture. The arches are made of thick columns and a half-circle of large stones, their sturdy construction conveying a sense of grandeur and permanence. There is a person in between each arch. The tops of the arches are highly decorated with animals and landscapes.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: We can see here in this dynamic scroll these grand triumphal arches, framing the text of the entire Esther scroll. Then we see here characters from the story of Esther are actually nestled between these arches. They're turning toward the text. King Ahasuerus is facing Queen Esther. Mordecai is facing Haman. And it's though they're in dialogue with one another. They're animating, or giving voice, to the text itself. Below them are really meticulously rendered scenes visualizing the story. Above the figures we have Dutch cityscapes. There's lions resting on top, and pots of flowers really adding to this

dynamic rhythm of these elaborate decorative borders.

I like to also imagine the reader or the user or the viewer unrolling this scroll and following the text and then revealing one arch at a time. I like to imagine how they would have symbolically passed through each portal, maybe reenacting the triumph of Mordecai and Queen Esther's big, bold move that saved her people.

NARRATOR: This scroll was from the Danzig Jewish Community. In 1939 as war loomed, the community there sent their remarkable collection of Jewish Ceremonial objects to the Jewish Museum for safekeeping. This scroll came from the great collection of Lesser Giełdziński, who donated his objects to the Great Synagogue in Danzig.

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

NARRATOR: We are looking at the painting *A Jewish Heroine from the Hebrew Bible* by Rembrandt van Rijn. It is an oil on canvas and was painted between 1632 to 33. The vertically oriented work is about 43 inches high and 37 inches wide, displayed in a thick dark wood frame.

Here is art historian, Stephanie Dickey.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: This is a painting in which Rembrandt has depicted a young woman seated in a chair, and there's an older woman behind her combing her hair. The young woman is looking right out at the viewer.

NARRATOR: This young subject is bathed in a glowing light that stands out against Rembrandt's characteristic darkly lit background. In fact, the whole painting is luminous; the light of the room reflecting off of the shine of the oil paint. Rembrandt's dramatic lighting draws our attention to the woman's pale smooth skin and luxurious, bejeweled clothing. Her face is round and calm, with dark eyes and long strawberry blonde hair. Her right-hand rests across her stomach, her left on the arm of the chair which she leans against slightly.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: She seems to be quite comfortable sitting there, as she's being groomed. The young woman wears incredibly opulent robes, a red velvet over-garment embroidered with gold, whites and colorful silk undergarments, pearls on her neck, pearls at her ears. And gold embroidery on her slippers.

NARRATOR: Her cranberry red dress has a neckline that exposes the tops of her shoulders. Her sleeves are white silk encased in a voluminous swoop of translucent fabric covered in glittering embroidery. These hang to the tops of her legs, adding to the luminescence and drama of this character. She wears a string of pearls at her throat and a small band of jewels across the crown of her head.

The older woman behind her is dressed much more plainly, in a jewel-toned teal robe, with a hood or matching scarf over her hair. She leans slightly to her right, all attention on the incredibly fine toothed golden comb she runs through the hair of the woman in front of her.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: In the background we see what might be a bed on the right, with bed hangings covering it. So she may be in her own private chamber. And on the left we see a desk on which is a book or some kind of document that lies open. And a pitcher and basin, which is something that might be used for washing up, but in this case very beautifully made out of gold. There's seems to be a piece of jewelry or some sort of adornment that's hanging from the table. The table is covered with a Turkish rug because the Dutch often used those for table coverings.

This is one of a number of paintings in which Rembrandt depicts a figure whose costume is strange enough that we know right away she's not a 17th Century Dutch woman, although the model certainly was.

The best argument is probably that she's Esther, because she is wearing garments that often appear in other depictions in which the Dutch artist intended to represent figures from the Bible. And in the background, that piece of paper or document or whatever it is on the table, that could be the decree by which the king has ordered the extermination of the Jews.

I think Rembrandt presents Esther here as a very self-contained figure. She seems very confident the way she's sitting there, she's looking right out at us. And that direct gaze is one of the things that kind of draws us in. It almost inspires us to think about what might we do if we put ourselves in her place. If this was our decision to make, do we go out and risk our lives for something we know is important?

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

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: The contemporary American artist, Fred Wilson, created an ink-on-acetate print that combines a 16th Century engraving of Queen Esther and he layers it with the image of Harriet Tubman. The Black woman born enslaved who escaped to freedom and then returned to the South at least 13 times to free more than 70 enslaved Black people.

NARRATOR: That was curator Abigail Rapoport. This print, titled *Queen Esther/Harriet Tubman* was made in 1992. It is 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches high and 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide and is displayed within a white mat and a thin light wooden frame. The image comes from layering prints on translucent acetate of the two women on top of each other. The base layer of this work references a print titled *Esther Holding a Scepter and an Open Book*, from the series *Exemplary Women from the Old and New Testament*, created circa 1560 and displayed below.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: The engraving itself that he's using as a starting point was made by the Dutch artist, Maarten van Heemskerck, an artist whose work was quite influential for Rembrandt and his contemporaries.

NARRATOR: Art Historian, Stephanie Dickey.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: It's a very finely worked engraving, in which there are delicate lines. We see Esther herself standing in the foreground wearing a breastplate that seems to be made of metal over an elaborately embroidered dress, and below that, a petticoat of soft, rippling fabric. She has a crown on her head over a veil which runs down her back. She's holding a scepter, which is another sign of her regal or queenly status. And she's holding a book on her left-hand side.

NARRATOR: Laid over this image, on transparent paper, is an iconic image of Harriet Tubman. She stands with her hands clasped in front of her in a long black dress, buttoned up to the neck with long sleeves. She looks out at the viewer, a serene but stoic look on her face.

The line quality of this image is darker and thicker than van Heemskerck's delicate etching, giving the impression of layered lines or an image xeroxed many times.

While we cannot see Queen Esther fully, elements of her show through to this image. Her right arm, holding a scepter, emerges from Tubman's shoulder, giving the impression at first glance that she is holding Esther's scepter. Her left arm, holding the open book, fades into the background behind vertical black lines. Her veil flows off of Tubman's head.

ABIGAIL RAPOPORT: I love the way the veil is this ghost behind Harriet Tubman, really glorifying and elevating her. I think Wilson is also getting at this sort of accidental quality of

layering these women it's purposefully not perfect because it's this collision that's enabling this dialogue.

And I think, this image, as the artist himself has talked about, suggests the similarities of the two heroines of Black and Jewish histories who risked their lives to save their persecuted peoples. Wilson, he's thinking about widening representations of history and pointing to realities that plagued both Black and Jewish communities it's honoring these inspiring acts of courage.

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

NARRATOR: This painting, titled *The Feast of Esther* is by the Dutch artist Jan Lievens. This horizontal oil on canvas was made around 1625 and is 51 ½ inches high by 64 ½ inches wide and displayed in a dark wooden frame. Here are co-curator Michele Frederick and art historian Stephanie Dickey.

MICHELE FREDERICK: In *Feast of Esther*, what we're seeing is one of the most dramatic parts of Esther's story.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: The moment when Esther reveals to her husband, King Ahasuerus, that Haman has this insidious plan to assassinate her people, the Jews. Prior to this, the king didn't even know that Esther herself was Jewish.

The scene is dramatically lit. It's focused on these figures which are all depicted in half or three-quarter length so you really zero right in on the faces and the actions that are taking place among these figures.

NARRATOR: Esther, King Ahasuerus, and Haman are sitting around a table in this composition. Esther is in the center of the painting, on the far side of the table. She is looking at the King, who is positioned on the right side, and pointing at Haman on the left. The King looks fiercely at Haman who sits with his back to us on the lower left side of the canvas. In the background, between Esther and the King, a man stands ready to interrupt the conversation. Esther is depicted as a young woman with light skin, soft rounded features, and a rosy blush on her cheeks.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: Esther is brightly lit. He's used beautiful blue pigment to depict her dress, and she's wearing layers and layers of jewelry, and a gold crown on her head. Clearly, she is queenly in her dress, and this helps us right away to identify that she stands in relationship to the king, almost as an equal because they are both regal figures.

NARRATOR: To her left, King Ahasuerus stands, a serious look on his lined face directed at Haman, both strong fists clenched at his sides.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: King Ahasuerus has a brocaded cloak with an ermine lining. These are fabrics that probably someone in Biblical times would never have worn, but for a person in the era of Rembrandt and Lievens, these kinds of fabrics immediately signaled somebody who was of regal status. Then the rest of his costume, the embroidered or patterned silk of his jacket, the striped sash around his waist, and especially the turban that he wears on his head, these are elements that would have looked a bit more foreign and intriguing to a Dutch eye. They probably reflect the artist's attempt to try to make this figure look Middle Eastern. And you can see that he reacts with anger. He's looking straight at Haman, Haman's

looking at him and almost jumping out of his chair in fear because he knows that when the king is angry with you, you are in trouble.

The figure of Haman, with his striped red and black jacket, reflects an awareness of a kind of theatrical dress that you see in Italian art of this time, especially in the work of the painter, Caravaggio. By dressing Haman this way, the artist is telling us that this is not somebody who is particularly dignified or trustworthy.

MICHELE FREDERICK: We know he's a villain because he's in the shadows.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: The figure in the background is the king's servant, Harbona, and you can see that he's wearing much simpler dress.

NARRATOR: He is depicted in a black hat, white scarf, light blue shirt, and a reddish brown cloak or wrap.

STEPHANIE DICKEY: There are no patterns on his costume, no fancy fabrics. And so right away, we see that he is a secondary figure. He fills in the story because it may be that he has just arrived in order to tell the king that the gallows that was erected for Mordecai is ready.

MICHELE FREDERICK: I think every time I look at this painting, I see a new detail, something like, the use of impasto on the knife handle that's kind of on the edge of the table. There are lots of moments like that where when you look close, it's almost impressionistic. It's like a mess of brushwork but when you pull back from it a little, the details come into view.

Lievens' style really lends itself to this dramatic moment. He really likes over-life-size figures. This is a big painting with big people in it and they're right up against the picture plane. There's this curtain that cuts off the background. So there's nothing else for us to focus on but this really tense moment where the fortunes of the characters in the story and the figures in this painting are changing.

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

NARRATOR: We are looking at a painting titled *Self-Portrait, Age 23*, painted by Rembrandt van Rijn in 1629. It is an oil on oak panel, and measures 35 ¼ inches high by 29 inches wide. It is displayed in a gilded gold frame in the center of the wall, the frame mimicking the original architectural details of the Jewish Museum. Here is co-curator Michele Frederick.

MICHELE FREDERICK: We're looking at a self-portrait that Rembrandt did very early in his career when he was just 23 years old. And Rembrandt really viewed himself as his best and most available model. We have a three-quarter length portrait. It's almost like we're looking in a mirror as he would have to paint this.

NARRATOR: Rembrandt's body is turned towards the right side of the canvas, with his dark eyes wide and gazing directly at the viewer. The skin of his oval face is smooth, showing his youth. His eyebrows are raised slightly, and his lips are parted, giving the impression of relaxed but intent observation. He has a light brown trimmed mustache, and his textured brown hair puffs around his face and neck.

MICHELE FREDERICK: He's against the plain background you see a really strong light coming from the upper left. So the left half of his face is completely in light, and the right half of his face is completely in shadow. So that really helps with the three dimensionality that we feel, it makes it feel like we're really there with him.

NARRATOR: There is a soft mossy green color that imbues almost the entire painting, except for his skin. At the darkest points, across the background and the bottom of his clothing, it is a smokey forest green, almost black. The lightest parts of the painting, such as his robed shoulder, glow with a hint of sage, giving the impression of a serene, wisened image.

MICHELE FREDERICK: Something else that he's very interested in is the expressive and fun possibilities of costume he's wearing a beret with a very large feather in it. Tied around his neck is a striped scarf which is a similar type to the kind you find all over Esther paintings and other biblical paintings these striped sashes that were imported from the Middle East which Dutch artists often wear them as scarves around the neck. So it's hinting at the increasing use of these global goods in even something as simple as a self-portrait of an artist. And then he's wearing what looks to me like a fur robe. It could be kind of thick wool but it's a very fancy cloak.

NARRATOR: The robe is voluminous with heavy fabric; no sleeves are distinguishable from the body. Draped over his shoulders and across his chest is a gold chain of thick ornate circles and curved shapes.

MICHELE FREDERICK: This mirrors what an artist would be given if they reach the esteem of a king. So this is a complete fiction but it's part of a larger tradition of other artists working

at the same time. I don't think it's really reflective of Dutch clothing at the time, but it's kind of like an amped-up version of it. It's very theatrical, and so it mirrors the dramatic light and shadow that we have here.

From the beginning, as we see in this self-portrait, he's interested in expression. He's interested in visible brushwork and how that can help aid this idea of expression. And what he does better than any other painter before or maybe even since, is conveying this idea of human emotion. We feel a connection with the figures in a Rembrandt painting, no matter what they're doing and no matter who they are from a painting of Esther to an intimate self-portrait like this.