

C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
19 May 2021

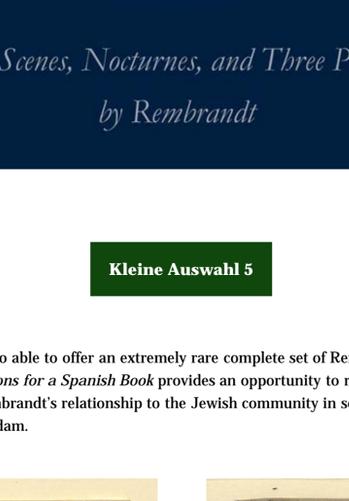
Today's *Abwechslung* serves three purposes. It is meant as a reminder that there are two online print fairs concurrently open for browsing at the moment:

IFPDA Fair

NY Satellite Print Fair

We would also like to use it to present a new *Kleine Auswahl*. This one features prints by Rembrandt: two portraits as well as a group of works that are linked not by style or subject but by the time of day they depict.

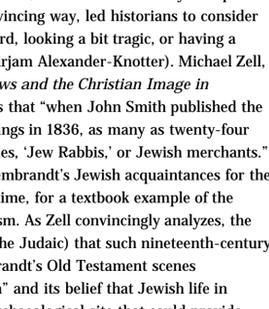
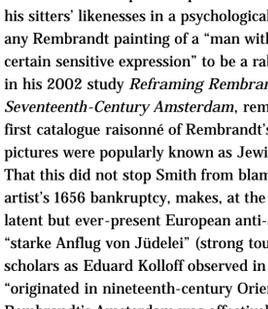
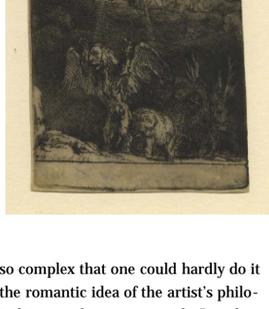
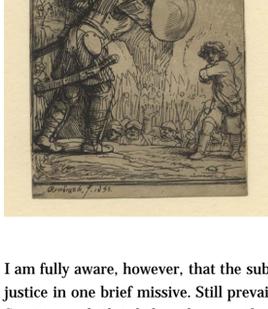
It (Mostly) Happened at Night



Night-Scenes, Nocturnes, and Three Portraits
by Rembrandt

Kleine Auswahl 5

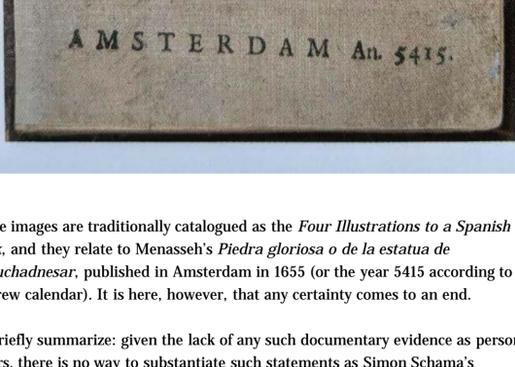
Lastly, being also able to offer an extremely rare complete set of Rembrandt's so-called *Illustrations for a Spanish Book* provides an opportunity to revisit the question of Rembrandt's relationship to the Jewish community in seventeenth-century Amsterdam.



I am fully aware, however, that the subject is so complex that one could hardly do it justice in one brief missive. Still prevailing is the romantic idea of the artist's philo-Semitism, which is believed to manifest itself in his taste for picturesquely Jewish subjects. This philo-Semitism is very much part of the "Rembrandt myth." Rembrandt's indisputable qualities as a portraitist, his unmatched ability to capture his sitters' likenesses in a psychologically convincing way, led historians to consider any Rembrandt painting of a "man with a beard, looking a bit tragic, or having a certain sensitive expression" to be a rabbi (Mirjam Alexander-Knotter). Michael Zell, in his 2002 study *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam*, reminds us that "when John Smith published the first catalogue raisonné of Rembrandt's paintings in 1836, as many as twenty-four pictures were popularly known as Jewish brides, 'Jew Rabbis,' or Jewish merchants." That this did not stop Smith from blaming Rembrandt's Jewish acquaintances for the artist's 1656 bankruptcy, makes, at the same time, for a textbook example of the latent but ever-present European anti-Semitism. As Zell convincingly analyzes, the "starke Anflug von Jüdelei" (strong touch of the Judaic) that such nineteenth-century scholars as Eduard Kolloff observed in Rembrandt's Old Testament scenes "originated in nineteenth-century Orientalism" and its belief that Jewish life in Rembrandt's Amsterdam was effectively an archaeological site that could provide authentic insights for the depiction of Biblical scenes. This perspective was similar to that of the artist Horace Vernet (1789–1863) who saw, as he wrote in a letter from Smyrna in 1840, "the connections between the actual state of the mores and habits of the Arabs" and biblical descriptions of the ancient Hebrews as "a mine to exploit."

That "the Romance of Rembrandt and the Jews" was perpetuated throughout the twentieth century is equally a reflection of historic circumstances. Working against the rising tide of anti-Semitism, German Jewish scholars in particular were looking at Rembrandt as "a man of Germanic ancestry who did not regard the Jews in 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" (Franz Landsberger). This led even the great Erwin Panofsky, otherwise known for his rationalism and highly analytical approach to art, to hold onto the romantic notion that "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." In a letter to a friend in 1944 Panofsky confesses, "My personal sympathies are with, let us say, Holland in the seventeenth century."

Mirjam Alexander-Knotter, whom I have quoted above, stands for a more sober, decidedly revisionist approach to this subject. In 2007 she was one of the curators of the exhibition *The "Jewish" Rembrandt: The Myth Unravelling* at Amsterdam's Jewish Museum. The show tried to examine, and often debunked, those time-worn fanciful identifications of Rembrandt's imagery. Yet it also ran the risk of, as Steven Nadler wittily put it, "throw[ing] out the tulips with the vase water." What Nadler specifically refers to is Rembrandt's relationship with Menasseh ben Israel, the Sephardic rabbi of Amsterdam's Portuguese congregation. Even if this might not have been the close friendship that some historians to this day have fashioned, Rembrandt *did* collaborate with the rabbi in the creation of these unusual prints shown above. Or did he?



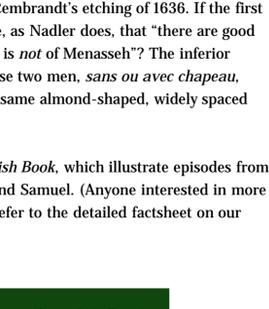
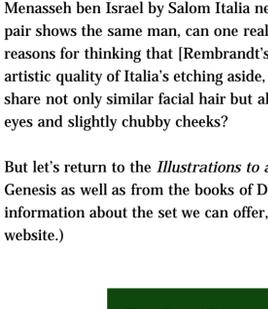
These images are traditionally catalogued as the *Four Illustrations to a Spanish Book*, and they relate to Menasseh's *Piedra gloriosa o de la estatua de Nebuchadnesar*, published in Amsterdam in 1655 (or the year 5415 according to the Hebrew calendar). It is here, however, that any certainty comes to an end.

To briefly summarize: given the lack of any such documentary evidence as personal letters, there is no way to substantiate such statements as Simon Schama's characteristically apodictic generalization: "The relationship with Menasseh was real and it was serious." Nor were the artist and the rabbi ever neighbors. Yet, questioning the identity of the sitter in Rembrandt's 1636 portrait etching—traditionally believed to be Menasseh ben Israel—gives one pause. This identification is not solely based on Gersaint's first catalogue of Rembrandt's prints from 1751, which describes the print as "Le portrait du Juif Manassé, Ben-Israel." The name also appears, as Erik Hinterding has pointed out, in a 1755 sale catalogue that decidedly did *not* consult Gersaint's book. While both eighteenth-century sources were, of course, posthumous, they nonetheless chronicled "the existing knowledge of Rembrandt's graphic oeuvre." Gersaint, "where he did not know the name of the subject of a portrait . . . entered the sitter as unknown" (Hinterding).

Since the one undisputed Jewish sitter in a portrait print by Rembrandt is the Jewish doctor Ephraim Bueno, it might be useful to briefly look at these two pairs of images:



Seen here is Jan Lievens's portrait of Bueno next to Rembrandt's etching of 1647.



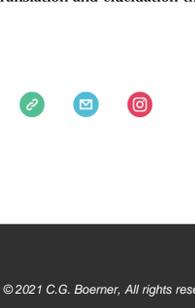
The second pair shows an annotated and thereby clearly identifiable portrait of Menasseh ben Israel by Salom Italia next to Rembrandt's etching of 1636. If the first pair shows the same man, can one really state, as Nadler does, that "there are good reasons for thinking that [Rembrandt's print] is *not* of Menasseh"? The inferior artistic quality of Italia's etching aside, do those two men, *sans ou avec chapeau*, share not only similar facial hair but also the same almond-shaped, widely spaced eyes and slightly chubby cheeks?

But let's return to the *Illustrations to a Spanish Book*, which illustrate episodes from Genesis as well as from the books of Daniel and Samuel. (Anyone interested in more information about the set we can offer, may refer to the detailed factsheet on our website.)

The Four Illustrations to a Spanish Book

Nadler's biography *Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi of Amsterdam*, published in 2018 as part of Yale's prestigious *Jewish Lives* series and hence readily available for a wider public, is only the latest of numerous studies intend on downplaying the collaboration between rabbi and artist in the creation of these book illustrations. What concerns me here is the sleight of hand that I believe makes up at least part of Nadler's argument.

It hardly needs pointing out that Rembrandt's experimental combination of etching, drypoint, and engraving would never have been suited for any significant edition of the prints that would accompany Menasseh's book. Nadler is therefore onto something when he suggests that the prints might have been meant to add "that extra *je ne sais quoi*" to copies of the book. (German antiquarian book dealers tend to describe such fanciful embellished books as "getrüffelt"—a surprising culinary flourish coming from members of a people not much known for its cuisine.) One has to be careful, though, not to make too much of the fact that Rembrandt's prints are merely loosely inserted in all but one of the five known complete copies of Menasseh's book. As intaglio prints, they would have to have been printed separately anyway, and the same is true for the engravings attributed to Salom Italia that later functioned as their replacements. It is these artistically pedestrian substitutions, however, that mark the weakest point in the revisionist theses that doubt that Rembrandt worked at Menasseh's request. They are outlined by Nadler, who then adds his own theory: "So perhaps Rembrandt had nothing directly to do with Rembrandt on this project after all. Rather, Isaac Vossius himself [to whom the book was dedicated and whose copy, preserved in the University of Leiden library, is the only one that has Rembrandt's prints bound in] could have prompted Jan Six to ask Rembrandt if he would produce some illustrations for the new book by Vossius's rabbi friend." Furthermore, Nadler writes, "Vossius may have directed Six to ask Rembrandt to base his etchings on the 'four sketches on sheets of paper,' no longer extant, that Menasseh says he himself had provided for the book." Apart from a not insignificant number of conjectures needed to make this argument work, I think that a closer look at Rembrandt's creative process makes for the best counterargument here.



The first two states of *The Statue of Nebuchadnezzar Overthrown* depict the figure's legs shattered through its upper thighs. Only in the subsequent third state did Rembrandt alter the image to correspond to the biblical text of Daniel 2:34, which describes that the statue was struck at its feet. It is this final state on which Salom Italia's engraving is based. Who—if not Menasseh himself—could have intervened to suggest the change? While impressions of the first two states are exceedingly rare, enough survive to prove that these were not merely working proofs and that Rembrandt thought the composition sufficiently resolved to print a small edition. Nadler seems to anticipate this objection and suggests that Rembrandt might have based his illustrations "on the text itself." The text, however, was written in Spanish. Whom better to ask then for translation and elucidation than the author?