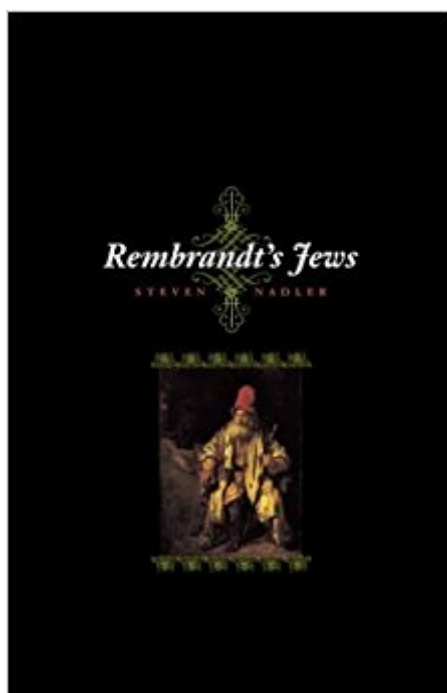


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Rembrandt's Jews



Synopsis

There is a popular and romantic myth about Rembrandt and the Jewish people. One of history's greatest artists, we are often told, had a special affinity for Judaism. With so many of Rembrandt's works devoted to stories of the Hebrew Bible, and with his apparent penchant for Jewish themes and the sympathetic portrayal of Jewish faces, it is no wonder that the myth has endured for centuries. Rembrandt's Jews puts this myth to the test as it examines both the legend and the reality of Rembrandt's relationship to Jews and Judaism. In his elegantly written and engrossing tour of Jewish Amsterdam--which begins in 1653 as workers are repairing Rembrandt's Portuguese-Jewish neighbor's house and completely disrupting the artist's life and livelihood--Steven Nadler tells us the stories of the artist's portraits of Jewish sitters, of his mundane and often contentious dealings with his neighbors in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, and of the tolerant setting that city provided for Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews fleeing persecution in other parts of Europe. As Nadler shows, Rembrandt was only one of a number of prominent seventeenth-century Dutch painters and draftsmen who found inspiration in Jewish subjects. Looking at other artists, such as the landscape painter Jacob van Ruisdael and Emmanuel de Witte, a celebrated painter of architectural interiors, Nadler is able to build a deep and complex account of the remarkable relationship between Dutch and Jewish cultures in the period, evidenced in the dispassionate, even ordinary ways in which Jews and their religion are represented--far from the demonization and grotesque caricatures, the iconography of the outsider, so often found in depictions of Jews during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Through his close look at paintings, etchings, and drawings; in his discussion of intellectual and social life during the Dutch Golden Age; and even through his own travels in pursuit of his subject, Nadler takes the reader through Jewish Amsterdam then and now--a trip that, under ever--threatening Dutch skies, is full of colorful and eccentric personalities, fiery debates, and magnificent art.

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Customer Reviews

Seventeenth-century Amsterdam was home to a remarkable Jewish community unique in all of Europe. Nadler has made this intriguing world his specialty, first in his acclaimed *Spinoza: A Life* (1999), and now in this enlightening inquiry into the depiction of Jews in Dutch art. Using Rembrandt's profoundly human portraits of his Jewish neighbors and depictions of Old Testament stories as his base, Nadler elucidates both the inner dynamics of Jewish Amsterdam and its interactions with the city at large. Rembrandt was not alone in his interest in Jewish life, and Nadler's disquisition on why Dutch theologians studied Judaica, and on why Dutch artists eschewed the blatant anti-Semitism found elsewhere in Europe, is profoundly intriguing. Nadler portrays both Rembrandt and Menasseh ben Israel, a friend of the artist whom Nadler believes was a crucial resource for Rembrandt's knowledge of Jewish culture and possibly "the most famous Jew in all of Europe." Rich in compelling detail and surprising disclosures, Nadler's discourse greatly deepens our understanding of the role of art in both Dutch and Jewish history. Donna Seaman

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This was great reading after just having visited Amsterdam and touring the Rembrandt house - which we found worthwhile. Don't miss the introductory film. The writing style is okay. Lots of research went into the writing of this book.

The Spanish and Portuguese Jewry in Rembrandt's Amsterdam is the ultimate paradigm of Sephardic rebirth. It was realized at the heels of the demonic relentlessness, notoriously known as the "holy office" of Spanish Inquisition. However, in Amsterdam the doors were open to members of the Portuguese Nation to reinvent themselves, to live in relative peace amongst their correligionist. These merchants and their families brought with them strong ties to overseas commerce but most important of all, the unyielding need to shed the dark cloak of Christianity, and worship in their ancient way. Many brought with them the noble bearing of the Hidalgo, With it's love for the better things in life such as; art, literature, and fine dress. Yet, besides bringing Iberian refinement to the Netherlands, together with the need to pursue a better economic life, their greatest achievement was that they built from the ashes of persecution, a lasting memoire, of Sephardic survival. It is From Amsterdam that the spark of Judaism branched out to England and the Americas, The Spanish and Portuguese Jews being historically speaking, some of the first Hebrews to bring Judaism west of Europe. This testimony of Sephardic grandeur survives within the confines of Art and literature. Here we see Rembrandt in a sense, inadvertently chosen, to be a chronicler of the survival and rebirth of a proud and prominent people. In Nadler's book we read this episode in Sephardic history unfolding in a very eloquent way. Nadler's research into this perplexing Jewish phenomena is noteworthy and I enjoy reading Nadler's account of interaction between The Spanish and Portuguese Jews and their Protestant neighbors from Amsterdam, specifically Rembrandt, who

I have an artistic affinity towards. My only complaint being that Nadler could have given us more color plates to appreciate and mull over, while turning the pages. Shmuel Fuentes Hazzan

just what we expected, when we expected

Great read

Part Art History, part Jewish history, and with beautiful illustrations, this book tells the story of the Jews who were expelled from the Catholic countries of Southern Europe, and how they were fortunate to find a home in Holland for the 400 years up until the Nazis. Rembrandt did quite a few Old Testament paintings and had Jewish neighbors and patrons, thus the connection. This is more a Jewish history than a Rembrandt biography.

"Rembrandt's Jews" is a carefully researched history of the influences on the Dutch painter as he made his home in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam. It is true that Rembrandt often painted the faces he saw around him, and I believe that as an artist he was fascinated by the exotic appearances of his Jewish neighbors as contrasted with the plain Dutch faces that he observed everywhere else. Rembrandt was entranced by light and shadow; his chiaroscuro paintings of the faces of elderly Jewish men testify to the delight he took in the play of light and darkness on facial planes. His treatment of Jewish subjects and themes is always respectful; one even senses a certain awe on his part. His paintings of the local Jews are somber most of the time, the faces staring out from their frames present an alien race, patient, stubborn, mysterious, dignified, and solemn. Rembrandt's own turbulent life is well-documented in the book but by far the most interesting aspect of his life remains these sensitive portraits of Jewish faces, a legacy to the world and a worthwhile study in their own right. The author also goes the extra step in explaining the background of some of the Biblical paintings, for example, Belshazzar's Feast, for a reading public that may not be all that familiar with the Hebrew Bible. Altogether this is an excellent book for the serious student of history, art, or Judaica.

Very interesting book; fast reading. Strays from the subject at the end. Casual touch of tourist viewpoint fits in with the general mood. It referred me to Schama's The Embarrassment of Riches, which was HEAVY.

I could not find info on this print nowhere. I have been to the actual studio owned by the decendents and many many websites. This book tells a little about it. Im going to have this appraised since I have more info.

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