THEBOOKOF

E S T H E R IN THE AGE OF REMBRANDT

The biblical Book of Esther was especially popular in the age of the Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). Queen Esther, the story's main character, has long been held in Jewish tradition as the quintessential heroine. She has also been a subject in Christian art for hundreds of years. This exhibition explores how different artists, patrons, and audiences in Rembrandt's time fashioned their own imagery from the Book of Esther.

The Book of Esther recounts the queen's heroic salvation of the Jewish people from near annihilation in ancient Persia. Today Jewish communities throughout the world congregate twice in synagogues on the holiday of Purim, which takes place annually in February or March, to hear a public reading of Esther's story as written in the Megillah (scroll). Through fasting and feasting, Purim commemorates both the solemn and joyous aspects of the story.

In the 1600s immigrant Jewish communities in the Netherlands had the liberty to celebrate Purim more openly than in their previous homelands, including Spain, Portugal, and Central and Eastern Europe, among other places of religious persecution. Their celebration of the holiday became symbolic of this freedom and marked their presence in Amsterdam.

Widely read in the seventeenth century, the Book of Esther offered a dramatic biblical subject for Dutch artists. The Dutch interpreted the story of Esther's bravery as a symbol of the Netherlands' newly won independence from Spain. Rembrandt was part of a larger cultural trend that reimagined this story for the new century, new secular art market, and new national purpose. Rembrandt's naturalistic approach to biblical paintings and his talent for capturing human emotion made Esther highly accessible to his audience.

Against this backdrop, Rembrandt and his contemporaries expressed Esther's story in paintings, prints, drawings, objects for the home, Jewish ceremonial art, and theater. Presenting works that range from portraits of Queen Esther to Purim plays, this exhibition illuminates the Book of Esther's meaning in Rembrandt's time and for generations to follow.

Abigail Rapoport
Curator of Judaica, Jewish Museum
Michele Frederick
Curator of European Art, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh



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Insights from the co-curators Abigail Rapoport and Michele Frederick and the art historian Stephanie Dickey.



Audio Descriptions that translate the visual into spoken word, designed for individuals who are blind or have low vision

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QUERN

ESTHER RINTHE NETHERLANDS

In Esther's story, Rembrandt and other artists of his generation found a beautiful and courageous heroine. They often depicted her as a contemporary Dutch woman integrated into the world around them. Through imported objects such as Middle Eastern carpets, artists envisioned the story's ancient Persian setting.

The Netherlands, once part of the Spanish Empire, fought for and eventually won its independence in the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648). As the Dutch secured political and financial autonomy, they expanded their global reach and colonial power. They also gained religious freedom and offered a safe haven for many. Amsterdam gave refuge to large numbers of immigrants, including Sephardic

Jews whose families had been forced to convert to Catholicism in Spain and Portugal (called *conversos*), as well as Ashkenazic Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. Christian immigrants from Northern and Central Europe and the British Isles also settled in the city, fleeing religious persecution, searching for economic opportunities, or relocating after being displaced by war.

The Book of Esther was apt, then, to express Dutch national identity: the evil Haman symbolized Catholic Spain, while Esther and Mordecai in their bravery and triumph represented the Dutch. Amsterdam was framed as the new Jerusalem, a symbol of God's favor and the Netherlands' hardfought independence.