Jan Lievens, *The Feast of Esther*, c. 1625, reproduction, original: oil on canvas, 51½ × 64½ in. (130.8 × 163.8 cm). North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606–1669

The Great Jewish Bride (Probably Esther), 1635
Etching; second state
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606–1669

The Great Jewish Bride (Probably Esther), 1635
Etching, engraving, and drypoint; fifth state
Morgan Library and Museum, New York

Seen here in two versions, or states, Rembrandt's print now known as *The Great Jewish Bride* is probably Esther. The earlier state looks half-finished, featuring a woman with long, unruly hair—likely modeled on Rembrandt's wife Saskia—in a shallow space.

The final composition has much more detail. Esther now wears a rich velvet gown and fur cloak and is seated in front of a table piled with books and letters. Importantly, she also grips a scroll in her left hand: news about the decree to destroy the Jewish people. Rembrandt often focused his depictions of women on their inner life and character. Here Esther, fiercely determined, steels herself to fight for her people.

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606–1669

Saint Catherine ("The Little Jewish Bride"), 1638
Etching and touches of drypoint
Morgan Library and Museum, New York

Rembrandt enjoyed portraying his wife Saskia in various guises and costumes, from those of biblical heroines to mythological goddesses. In this print, Saskia wears a simplified version of the clothing worn by *The Great Jewish Bride* (on view nearby), with the same long, unbound hair and a similar contemplative expression. Her character is the Christian Saint Catherine—the wheel upon which she was meant to be killed in the bottom right corner represents her martyrdom. Typical of Rembrandt's depictions of biblical women, Saint Catherine is shown deep in thought, considering the sacrifice she is going to make for her faith.

However, early writers identified the woman as the daughter of Ephraim Bueno, a Jewish physician who was a neighbor of Rembrandt. This led to the print being called *The Little Jewish Bride*, emphasizing its connections to *The Great Jewish Bride*.

Aert de Gelder
Dutch, 1645–1727

Esther, 1665
Oil on canvas
Private collection, London

Here Esther appears in clothing fit for a queen, positioned in front of what is presumably Ahasuerus's throne. This painting seems to commemorate her marriage to Ahasuerus in the fashion of seventeenth-century Dutch portraiture. In her left hand, she holds a pair of elaborately embroidered gloves: her wedding gloves. These are a common feature in Dutch portraiture of the 1600s, used to memorialize the occasion of a woman's marriage.

De Gelder was Rembrandt's last and most dedicated pupil. In this painting, Esther's luxurious robes were directly inspired by the clothing de Gelder would have seen on models in Rembrandt's studio. In Esther's story, she wore this kind of royal attire when she interceded with Ahasuerus on behalf of the Jewish people.

Making and Using Illustrated Esther Scrolls

The reading of the Esther scroll (Megillah) aloud in synagogue, by a designated reader, is one of the few ritual obligations of Purim and the central event of the holiday, taking place in the evening and on the following morning. Traditionally this kind of scroll is unadorned. As Jewish law requires, the text is handwritten in ink on parchment (animal skin) and sewn together with sinew. The scrolls were often backed with silk, curled around a roller, and placed in elaborate cases.

Illustrated Esther scrolls gained new popularity in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. Innovative printing technologies were used to decorate these pieces of ceremonial art. Details such as architectural borders could be added more quickly than previously. Affluent Spanish and Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam established a market for such Esther scrolls, allowing more people to own one. These prized objects were often stored at home and were brought to the synagogue to follow along with the public reading.

Salom Italia

Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, 1640s

Amsterdam

Printed border, handwritten text, and ink on parchment

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of the Danzig Jewish Community, D 76

Provenance: Lesser Gieldziński (1830–1910); donated to the Danzig Synagogue; transferred by the Jewish community of Danzig to the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, 1939; accessioned by the Jewish Museum, 1954

In this scroll, elaborately engraved arches frame the text of the Book of Esther; figures from the story appear between the arches: King Ahasuerus is facing Queen Esther, and Mordecai is across from Haman. These borders were made by the Jewish artist Salom Italia, who was born in the Italian city-state of Mantua and eventually settled in Amsterdam.

Among Amsterdam's Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community, he found a robust market for his works as a young printmaker. Here portals derived from Italian-style triumphal arches surround each block of text, with Dutch cityscapes above.

Attributed to Jacob van der Ulft
Dutch, 1627–1689

Dam Square with the New Town Hall under Construction, 1652–89
Oil on canvas

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Private Gift, 1900; on long-term loan to the Amsterdam Museum

This dynamic painting captures Amsterdam's rapid growth. City Hall—under construction in the background—still stands today in Dam Square, the vibrant center of the Netherlands' largest city. In the bottom right, goods are offloaded from boats and taken to the Weigh House (Waag) in the center of the square.

Throughout the scene, groups of merchants and Dutch citizens suggest the diversity and energy of this city. Figures with turbans demonstrate the Netherlands' trade with the Middle East—including Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Persia. The imported luxuries for sale in Amsterdam and unfamiliar types of people circulating through the city had a dramatic impact on the interpretations by Dutch artists of the Book of Esther's ancient Persian setting.

Adolf van der Laan
Dutch, c. 1690–1742

View of the Portuguese and German synagogues in Amsterdam, c. 1710
Etching
Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

This monumental print depicts the Sephardic Portuguese Synagogue (left) and the Ashkenazic Great Synagogue (right) as they appeared in Amsterdam of the early 1700s. Most Jewish immigrants settled in Vlooienburg—a man-made island that became the epicenter of Jewish life—where they lived alongside Rembrandt and a diverse community. The mostly impoverished Ashkenazim (Jews from Eastern and Central Europe) remained rather secluded and set themselves apart from the rest of Dutch society. Meanwhile the more affluent Sephardim (Jews from Spain and Portugal) were better culturally integrated.

For the Sephardic community, life in the Netherlands stood in stark contrast to their Iberian heritage. Holland offered relative freedom with limited liberties: Jews were not required to wear identifying badges or other distinctive markings, as they were throughout Europe, or live in a Jewish ghetto, as they did in the Italian city-states and Frankfurt.

ABOVE THE FIREPLACE

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Dutch, c. 1690–1742

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Frederik de Wit
Dutch, active in the mid-seventeenth century
After Romeyn de Hooghe
Dutch, c. 1645–1708

Dedication of the Portuguese Synagogue, 1675
Etching
Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

This commemorative print highlights the weeklong dedication of the magnificent Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam. The community's excitement and joy are apparent: a choir sings, young men hold lit candles, and community leaders carry bedecked Torah scrolls in procession while Protestant attendees mingle in the foreground. At this grand event, the hazan (cantor)—pictured at center—recited prayers thanking the Dutch government. Inscribed in medallions flanking the scene are names of the *mahamad* (Jewish community's governing board) and the building committee.

At the top of the print, a celebration of Dutch religious tolerance is centered between an exterior view and a floor plan of the synagogue. From left to right, female personifications of Judea with the Tablets of Law, Amsterdam, and the Dutch Republic are depicted above the phrase "Freedom of Worship Is the Mainspring of the Republic."

Cornelis Janson van Ceulen the Younger

Flemish, active in England, before 1634–before 1715

Portrait of Gualterus Boudaan (1637–1684), c. 1665

Oil on canvas

Joods Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt

This portrait of the Dutch preacher Gualterus Boudaan highlights the appeal of newly printed Hebrew Bibles for Dutch Protestants and emphasizes Amsterdam's role as the emerging center of publishing.

As translation and printing made the Hebrew Bible more widely available, it became a popular symbol of status, wealth, and knowledge. This portrait depicts Boudaan posing with a Hebrew Bible displayed on a satin-covered table while gesturing to the frontispiece with his index finger. This frontispiece matches an edition of the Hebrew Bible published in 1635 by the great rabbi and intellectual Menasseh ben Israel, the founder of the first Hebrew printing press in Amsterdam and a neighbor of Rembrandt.

Gerrit van Honthorst
Dutch, 1592–1656

Portrait of a Woman (possibly Amalia van Solms as Esther), 1633
Oil on panel
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, Gift of Stanley S. Wulc

Gerrit van Honthorst
Dutch, 1592–1656

Elizabeth Stuart as Esther, c. 1632
Oil on canvas
Private collection, courtesy of the Hoogsteder Museum Foundation, the Hague

▷ 304

Gerrit van Honthorst
Dutch, 1592–1656

Princess Elizabeth, Princess Royal, Abbess of Hervorden (Herford) (1618–1680), 1630–56
Oil on panel
National Trust Collection, Ashdown House, The Craven Collection, Oxfordshire, United Kingdom

Depicted here are three Protestant royal women in the guise of Queen Esther. Though the Book of Esther was a popular artistic subject, these are some of the only surviving Dutch portraits of women as the biblical queen. Publicly praised as a "new Esther" on several occasions, Amalia van Solms, the wife of the stadtholder (governor) of Holland, appears at left.

At center is Elizabeth Stuart, exiled in the Netherlands following her and her husband's loss of the throne of Bohemia and their ancestral lands in Germany at the hands of Spain; they forever after were warriors for the Protestant cause. At right is Elizabeth's daughter, also called Elizabeth, wearing a curled cap and veil—a Persian-style crown that Dutch artists often used to identify Esther—and carrying on her mother's legacy in identifying with Esther.

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Tiles with Scenes from the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha, 1740–1850

Dutch

Tin-glazed earthenware with polychrome decoration

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bequest of Mrs. Frederic Graff, 1897; Gift of Mrs. Francis P. Garvan, 1979

Blue-and-white ceramic Delftware is a hallmark of Dutch art. The pottery rose to popularity in the early 1600s as a locally made competitor with expensive, imported Chinese porcelain. Here a set of tiles is decorated with scenes from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles and Apocrypha (texts that were not in the Hebrew Bible). In the top row, the second tile from the left shows Esther kneeling before King Ahasuerus, inviting him to a banquet.

Throughout this set of tiles, moments from a variety of biblical stories remind viewers of their lessons, invite comparison across different texts, and—in the case of figures like Esther—model good behavior.

Unknown artist
German (Siegerland)

Fireback with Esther and Ahasuerus, 1640–59

Fireback with Esther before Ahasuerus, 1640–59
Cast iron
Centraal Museum, Utrecht, Acquired 1922; Transferred 1956

These two firebacks—heavy, cast-iron arches placed against the back wall of a fireplace to protect the stone and reflect warmth back into the room—feature Esther at their center.

In the fireback on the left, the king and queen walk together, presumably just after their marriage. In the fireback on the right, Esther kneels before Ahasuerus, who extends his scepter to her as a sign of his favor. A model of civic responsibility and good female behavior, Esther was a popular fixture on such domestic objects.

Jan Theunis Dextra
Dutch, 1759–1765

Sabbath and festival lamp, eighteenth century
Faience
Manufactured by the Greek A Factory, Delft
Private collection, New York

This rare Delftware Sabbath and festival lamp integrates Jewish ceremonial art with the fashionable trends of the period. Blue-and-white Delftware was an important innovation in Dutch art, beginning as a cheaper, locally made alternative to imported Chinese porcelain. Portuguese Jewish merchants were involved in the trade of such luxury goods.

From a practical standpoint, many lamps were needed to illuminate interiors of both public and private buildings before the use of electric light. Illustrations of Purim festivities depict less distinctive versions of Sabbath and festival lamps adorning the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam. This is an example of those that may have been lit to usher in Sabbath and holidays in the homes of Portuguese Jewish community members, giving a unique glimpse into the presence of Delftware in Jewish ritual life.

Menasseh ben Israel

Born in Lisbon, active in the Netherlands and England, 1604–1657

Menasseh ben Israel's Welcome Address, 1642

Frontispiece, 1636, by Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669)
Amsterdam
Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

This printed copy preserves Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel's 1642 welcome address delivered to the Dutch stadtholder (governor) Frederik Hendrik and the English queen Henrietta Maria upon their visit to Amsterdam's Talmud Torah synagogue, one of the city's first Jewish congregations. In this copy, an earlier Rembrandt etching traditionally identified as a portrait of Menasseh ben Israel was pasted in later.

Hugo Grotius
Dutch, 1583–1645

Remonstrance Concerning the Regulations to be Imposed upon the Jews in Holland, 1615
Ink on paper

Ets Haim Bibliotheek–Livraria Montezinos, Amsterdam, EH 48 A 02

Freedom of religion was a core principle of the new Dutch Republic. However, facing waves of Jewish immigrants, the Dutch struggled to balance their commitment to freedom with their fear of religious difference. The lawyer and theologian Hugo Grotius was asked to write this proposal, setting strict limits on Jewish people while permitting their settlement and freedom of worship. The treatise was influential for defining the legal status of the Jewish communities in Holland.

Crown of the Civic Guard, Amsterdam, 1628

Printed pamphlet, later bound with other pamphlets

General Research Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

This pamphlet expresses the deep connection that the Dutch felt with the protagonists of the Book of Esther, framing Esther's relative Mordecai as a prototype of a Christian patriot. The text equates the civic guard's defense of Amsterdam against Spain with Mordecai's rescue of the Jews from annihilation. It also compares Amsterdam with Jerusalem in ancient Israel: "God gave men this land and this city of Amsterdam through difficult and hard wars [just as] the Children of Israel had obtained the land of Canaan."

Order of Prayers, 1625–26 and 1641–42 (binding)

Amsterdam; binding: probably Hamburg
Embroidered and sequined green silk velvet and silver cover
Published by David Abenatar Melo (died c. 1646, active in the Netherlands)
Private collection, New York

Benjamin Senior Godines (scribe)

1643–1715

Isaac de Matatia Aboab (patron)

1631–1707

Esther scroll (in Spanish), 1684

Amsterdam
Ink on parchment, with wooden rod
Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, S 233

As Sephardic Jews settled in the Netherlands, they continued to pray in Spanish, including on Purim. This Esther scroll by Benjamin Senior Godines and festival prayer book owned by Dina Namias (whose name appears on its cover) are two striking examples.

Probably by Barend van Milanen

Tazza (Purim collection cup), c. 1657–60

Silver

Collection of the Cultural Heritage Foundation of the Portuguese Israelite Community (CEPIG), Amsterdam

Probably by Gerrit Pauw

Tazza (Purim collection cup), 1642

Silver

Collection of the Cultural Heritage Foundation of the Portuguese Israelite Community (CEPIG), Amsterdam

Probably by Abraham Gallus I

German, active in the Netherlands, 1599–before 1656

Tazza (Purim collection cup), 1637

Silver

Collection of the Cultural Heritage Foundation of the Portuguese Israelite Community (CEPIG), Amsterdam

Unknown artist (probably Dutch)

Tazza (Purim collection cup), c. 1640

Silver

Collection of the Cultural Heritage Foundation of the Portuguese Israelite Community (CEPIG), Amsterdam

Tazzas (Purim collection cups)
Silver

Probably by Barend van Milanen
c. 1657–60

Probably by Gerrit Pauw
1642

Probably by Abraham Gallus I
German, active Netherlands, 1599–before 1656
1637

Probably by an unknown Dutch artist
c. 1640

Jewish Cultural Quarter, Portuguese Synagogue, Amsterdam, donated in 1684 by Jacob Abenijacar Pimentel

Jewish Ceremonial Art in the Netherlands

Jewish rituals and traditions that had previously been banned in Iberia were now allowed in more tolerant seventeenth-century Holland. Whether used in the grand Portuguese Synagogue for ceremonies—including Purim—or in the privacy of the home, pieces of Jewish ceremonial art took on a new visibility in the Netherlands. These works were often made and embellished with the finest materials, including silver, silk, and ivory, imported from around the world.

Esther scroll, c. 1780

Probably the Netherlands
Engraving on parchment with silk and silver
Joods Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, M001543

Mural plate showing coat of arms of the de Pinto family, c. 1695 (Reign of Kangxi, Qing Dynasty, 1662–1722)

China
Porcelain
Joods Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, bought with the support of the Stichting Vrienden van het Joods Museum

This silver Megillah holder and Chinese porcelain plate—though made nearly a century apart—both feature the coat of arms of the influential de Pinto family: five upturned crescent moons beneath a crown. A monogram on the upper part of the Megillah holder bears the initials of Aron de Pinto Jr.

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China

Porcelain

Joods Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, bought with the support of the Stichting Vrienden van het Joods Museum

Raphael Montalto

Active in Amsterdam, mid- to late seventeenth century

Esther scroll, 1686

Amsterdam
Ink on parchment and silk backing, with wooden and ivory roller
Spencer Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, Hebrew MS. 2, 1113431

This Esther scroll was written by Raphael Montalto, a prominent Jewish artist and scribe in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. The scroll showcases Montalto's elegant calligraphy and creative illustrations, including animals, flowers, cityscapes, and vignettes of the story. Montalto—a first-generation Portuguese immigrant—poignantly connects Jewish communities seeking refuge in the Netherlands with the Jewish people's salvation from persecution in the Book of Esther.

De Klaauw Factory
Delft, 1661–1840

Marriage plate, early eighteenth century
Tin-glazed faience
Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of H. Lawrence Herring Family, 1981-28

Salom Italia
Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, 1640s
Printed border, handwritten text, and ink on parchment, with carved ivory roller
Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase, JM 36-64a-b

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Printed border, handwritten text, and ink on parchment, with carved ivory roller

Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase, JM 36-64a-b

Bible or, the Entire Holy Scripture, 1649

The Netherlands
Printed by Hillebrant Jacobsz. van Wouw (Dutch, 1577–1622)
Harvard Divinity School Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Special Collections

This Statenbijbel, or State's Bible, was commissioned by the Dutch government in 1618 as the first official translation of the Bible into Dutch. The publication took almost twenty years to complete.

The Calvinist Protestant Dutch privileged the word of God as transmitted in the Bible rather than images for worship. This conviction separated the faith practices of the Dutch from Catholic Spain, their enemy at the time. Following this Protestant tradition, there is only one small image in the entire Book of Esther: an illuminated letter H, in which Esther appears kneeling before Ahasuerus and inviting him to the banquet at which she will reveal her Jewish identity and save her people.

Philipp von Zesen
German, 1619–1689

Frontispiece with the Maid of Holland, from the Belgian Lion, Amsterdam, 1660

Rare Book Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

This frontispiece (an illustration facing the title page of a book) is from a 1660 history of Amsterdam. The lion, a symbol of the Netherlands, rests his paws on seven arrows that stand for the seven provinces of the united Dutch Republic. Above this demonstration of national unity sits the Maid of Holland, a woman dressed in everyday Dutch clothing.

Like Esther, the Maid of Holland was a female figure that represented greater ideals and became a symbol of the Netherlands, then a young nation. She reigns over a scene of good government below—the result of the type of virtuous citizenship that Esther also modeled.

Salom Italia

Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, 1640s

Amsterdam
Printed and hand-colored border, handwritten text, ink, and gouache on parchment and scroll, with carved ivory and silk roller
Jewish Museum, London, C 1973.4.2.4

This brightly colored Esther scroll features a striking illustration of a fashionably dressed woman in regal clothing, with a courtly hairstyle and elegant gloves—probably meant to represent Queen Esther.

Here the Dutch Esther proudly holds a blank, diamond-shaped cartouche with an elegant green ribbon, mirroring the green silk backing of the scroll. These cartouches were often left blank to be filled in by the owner with a dedicatory inscription or introductory blessings for the Megillah reading. The work was likely meant for an open market, where potential buyers were offered an option to customize the scroll.

Frans Francken the Younger
Flemish, 1581–1642

Esther before Ahasuerus, 1622
Oil on panel
Collection of Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam

This painting shows Esther before Ahasuerus in dramatic fashion. She has fallen to her knees so quickly that her veil billows out behind her, and she holds one hand to her heart and the other out to the king. She is desperately seeking his favor, as she could have been put to death for appearing before him uninvited.

Ahasuerus, wearing an elaborate turban and positioned on a raised platform, signals his favor by stretching his scepter out toward her. The turbans and belted tunics worn by both Ahasuerus and Haman, at left, are fairly accurate Safavid Persian (1501–1722) clothing. However, the painting is more fantastical than documentary and includes several symbols of European royalty, such as the crown on top of Ahasuerus's turban.

Studio of Salomon Koninck
Dutch, 1609–1656

Esther Reading the Royal Decree, mid-seventeenth century or later
Oil on cradled panel
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Gift of Mrs. George Khuner, 1962

In this scene Esther reads a letter—perhaps news of Ahasuerus's royal decree allowing the annihilation of all Jews in Persia. Similar to Rembrandt's important painting of the subject on view nearby, Esther here is shown in a moment of quiet contemplation. She is at her *toilette*—dressing and preparing to go before the king on behalf of her people.

As in Rembrandt's painting, Esther is shown in a mix of theatrical costume and luxurious contemporary attire. The objects on the table—a pitcher, a basin, a box, and fabric—are inspired by those in Dutch homes. Common in images of Esther, this combination of a historical subject with trappings of everyday Dutch life helped viewers relate to the story and reinforced the queen's association with the Netherlands' ongoing fight for freedom from Spain.

Johannes van Noordt
Dutch, c. 1620–c. 1675

The Toilette of Esther, c. 1660
Oil on panel
Private collection, courtesy of the Hoogsteder Museum Foundation, the Hague

This painting captures the luxury of Esther's *toilette*, her process of getting ready to appear before Ahasuerus. Esther's royal robes—a yellow silk gown and red velvet cloak—are pictured here as contemporary Dutch clothing, slightly altered to give it more dramatic flair and a semi-antique appearance.

Following Rembrandt's example, many Dutch artists depicted Esther's preparations as a moment of contemplation: she is steeling herself to intercede on behalf of her people and casting her eyes upward for divine assistance in her impending task. The objects on the table were typical in many seventeenth-century Dutch homes: a mirror, a book, a tray, a box, linens, and—for particularly affluent households—a distinct and elaborate silver pitcher made by the Van Vianen family, a dynasty of Dutch silversmiths.

Gabriel Metsu
Dutch, 1629–1667

Woman Reading a Book by a Window, c. 1653–54
Oil on canvas
Leiden Collection, New York

In this painting, a young woman in a luxurious red velvet gown and feathered beret sits at a writing desk. Though the room she occupies is from the 1600s, her clothing would have signaled to contemporary Dutch viewers that she was not of their time. She is likely an allegorical figure representing a concept such as reading or knowledge, in the way that Esther also came to represent the Netherlands.

Scenes of reading and letter writing were popular in the Netherlands, which had a high literacy rate relative to other European countries, especially among women. Rembrandt and his contemporaries drew upon these familiar scenes in their paintings inspired by the Book of Esther, in an attempt to render the story more realistic for and relevant to their audiences.

Gortzius Geldorp
Flemish, 1553–c. 1616

Esther and Ahasuerus, 1612
Oil on panel
Leiden Collection, New York

This intimate painting offers a close-up view of Esther and Ahasuerus. An unusual detail is a halo that shines brightly behind Esther's head. Gortzius, a Catholic, links Esther to a tradition reserved for images of Christian saints.

Especially in the Catholic tradition, Esther was often seen as a precursor to the Virgin Mary. Esther as intercessor on behalf of the Jewish people was likened to Mary as powerful mediator between God and humankind. The moment chosen by Gortzius emphasizes this connection. When Esther comes before Ahasuerus in his chamber, she fears for her life, as she could be put to death for appearing before the king uninvited. Instead, the king's love for Esther prevails, and he offers his scepter to her as a sign of his acceptance.

Philips Galle
Dutch, 1537–1612
After Maarten van Heemskerck
Dutch, 1498–1574

Esther Holding a Scepter and an Open Book, from Exemplary Women from the Old and New Testament, c. 1560

Engraving
British Museum, London, Lichtenstein Collection

Maarten van Heemskerck—an influential artist in the century before Rembrandt—glorifies Queen Esther in this print. Unlike the works in his later series about Esther (on view in this gallery), this image focuses on Esther as a heroine, holding a book of the decrees that saved her people in her left hand and receiving Ahasuerus's scepter in the background at right.

Esther is dressed as a warrior queen. The queen of Persia, the heroine is nonetheless frequently shown as a European-style monarch. Her skirt is covered in fleurs-de-lis, a stylized lily and symbol of European royalty; her crown is also European in design. Importantly, Van Heemskerck shows Esther wearing an armored breastplate and holding her scepter like a lance. She is the defender of her people, emphasizing her victory over Haman and establishing her as a model for female behavior, civic virtue, and the Netherlands' fight against the Spanish.

Fred Wilson

American, born in 1954

Queen Esther/Harriet Tubman, 1992

Ink on acetate

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of the Artist, 1992–35

In 1992 the artist Fred Wilson, known for his interventions that challenge assumptions about history, culture, and race, gifted a work of art to the Jewish Museum on the occasion of its Purim Ball.

The work is a two-layered, ink-on-acetate print that combines a sixteenth-century engraving of Queen Esther and an iconic photograph of Harriet Tubman, a Black woman who was born enslaved, escaped to freedom, and then returned to the Southern United States to free other Black people who were enslaved. This double portrait superimposes Tubman on Queen Esther, as if she were wearing a mask. The image posits the similarities of between the two heroines, who risked their lives to save their persecuted peoples, and the enduring legends that surround them.

Harvey B. Lindsley, *Portrait of Harriet Tubman*, c. 1871–76, printed c. 1895–1910. Matte collodion print, sheet 5⅜ × 3⅜ in. (13.7 × 8.7 cm). Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Prints and Photographs Division

Hans Burgkmair the Elder
German, 1473–1531

Jost de Negker (maker of block cut)
Flemish, c. 1485–c. 1544

Three Jewish Heroines, 1516–19
Woodcut

British Museum, London, Old Albertina Collection

Burgkmair's print of Esther from the early 1500s exemplifies the way she was depicted the century before Rembrandt's time. She is joined by Judith and Jael, two biblical Jewish women who saved their people from destruction, the trio called the "Jewish Worthies."

Esther, Judith, and Jael were also paired with trios from Christian and pagan history, making "Nine Worthies" who served as examples of virtuous behavior. This group was a female counterpart to the male "Worthies," also formed slightly earlier, in the late Middle Ages, based on biblical and ancient history.

Tankard with Judith, Esther, and Lucretia, 1566

Cologne, Germany

Stoneware, glaze, and engobe

Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap, on loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

A humble domestic object, this German mug takes a similar approach to presenting biblical heroines as prints like the one nearby that were produced around the same time. The object shows Esther as one of a trio of "Worthy Women," whose exemplary deeds were held as models of proper behavior.

Esther and Judith are joined by Lucretia—an ancient Roman noblewoman whose rape and suicide helped spark the revolution that made Rome a republic. Positioned under labeled decorative arches, the women's presence reminds the drinker of moral behavior.

TOP ROW

Philips Galle
Dutch, 1537–1612
After Maarten van Heemskerck
Dutch, 1498–1574

From The Story of Esther, 1564
Esther Crowned by Ahasuerus
Engraving; first state of four
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Harry Shaw Newman, 1941

Mordecai Overhearing the Treason of Bigthan and Teresh
Engraving; first state of three
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1963

Ahasuerus Commissions to Destroy the Jewish People
Engraving; first state of three
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Harry Shaw Newman, 1941

MIDDLE ROW

Esther's Servants Telling Her of Mordecai's Refusal of the Raiment
Engraving; first state of three
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Harry Shaw Newman, 1941

Esther before Ahasuerus, Inviting Him to a Banquet
Engraving
British Museum, London, Lichtenstein Collection

Ahasuerus Consulting the Book of Chronicles
Engraving; first state of three
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1958

BOTTOM ROW

Ahasuerus Consulting Haman
Engraving
British Museum, London, Given by R. Noel Middleton, Esq., 1923

Esther Accusing Haman at the Banquet
Engraving
British Museum, London, Lichtenstein Collection

Maarten van Heemskerck, one of the most important Dutch artists in the age before Rembrandt, designed this series based on Esther's story. Heemskerck's images are full of dramatic action, often featuring a primary event in the center and then the moments that precede or follow it in the background. Rembrandt owned an album of Heemskerck's prints, which presumably included examples of *The Story of Esther*.

The series begins with Esther being crowned queen and ends with the feast at which she reveals her Jewish identity to Ahasuerus, saving her people. Later Dutch images of Esther as a heroine and Persian queen often draw from the fantastical settings, rich ornament, luxurious textiles, and clothing in Heemskerck's prints.

Attributed to Ferdinand Bol
Dutch, 1616–1680

Rembrandt and His Wife Saskia, c. 1638
Oil on canvas

Royal Collection Trust, London, Lent by His Majesty King Charles III

This painting, once attributed to Rembrandt, is now attributed to Ferdinand Bol, one of his most talented pupils. In this double portrait, a woman sits at her *toilette* getting ready while her husband stands by, poised to put on the finishing touch by adorning her neck with a strand of pearls.

In this period, Esther was frequently depicted at her *toilette* in similar, elaborately ornamented cloaks and pearls. If the couple is indeed Rembrandt and his wife Saskia, the composition demonstrates how artists modeled Esther from contemporary life, combining elements from the ancient past and their present to highlight the continued relevance of this biblical story.

Jan Bernard Barckhuysen
Flemish, c. 1684–1760

Lid of a snuffbox showing Esther before Ahasuerus, 1700–1725
Mother-of-pearl

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Given by Alfred Behrens

Tobacco imported from the Americas was still a luxury in the 1700s, and new ways of consuming the substance were popularized in elite circles. One of these was snuff—finely ground tobacco consumed by sniffing or inhaling. As snuff consumption rose, the demand for luxurious snuff boxes with elaborate decorative lids also increased. Here Esther is seen kneeling before Ahasuerus, a scene skillfully carved on an expensive piece of mother-of-pearl, which would have been imported to the Netherlands from India.

Models for brackets of a book lock showing Mordecai before Esther and Esther before Ahasuerus, c. 1750–75

Amsterdam

Copper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

In the Netherlands, Esther and her story could be found in even the smallest places, such as these tiny models for book lock brackets. The brackets would have been part of the lock and clasp mechanism for an expensive book, possibly a prayer book, given the subject matter and small size.

On one model, Mordecai stands before Esther, begging her to intercede with her husband on behalf of her people. On the other, Esther has listened to and kneels before Ahasuerus, anxiously twisting her body as he extends his scepter to her.

Cabinet with scenes from the story of Esther, after 1665

England
Wood, silk satin, metal threads, linen thread, seed pearls, mica, feathers, and printed paper
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Irwin Untermyer

This cabinet was created in England, which had deep cultural and artistic ties to the Netherlands. The object is elaborately embroidered with scenes from the Book of Esther. On the lid—the most prominent surface—Esther pleads with Ahasuerus in his chamber.

Writing instruments were contained in this box, which was meant for the home, a space primarily occupied by women. This connection to writing is especially appropriate; at the end of the Book of Esther, she and Mordecai write the letters of Purim, instituting the holiday that commemorates their safe deliverance.

Michael Judah Leon (scribe)
Died in 1658

Salom Italia (illustrator)
Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, 1643
Amsterdam
Ink on parchment, with a silver-gilt roller
Victoria and Albert Museum/National Art Library, London, MSL/1879/36

Unknown Flemish or Dutch artist

Coffer, 1613
Gold-tooled leather on wood, gilt brass, and silk and metallic thread
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Susan Dwight Bliss, 1966

Scrolls such as this one were prized possessions, often carefully stored in chests in private homes, according to archival records. The Portuguese Jewish community may have used expensive leather caskets like the one seen here. Such leather objects were common in their previous Iberian homes and in their new homes in the Netherlands.

As befits a holiday centered on a female protagonist, Purim offered a rare occasion for women in the Netherlands of the 1600s to participate in services; Sephardic women owned Esther scrolls and—atypically for the time—attended synagogue in the evening for the Megillah reading.

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Tazza (Purim collection cup), 1590–1611

The Netherlands

Silver

Cultural Heritage Foundation of the Portuguese Israelite Congregation (CEPIG), Amsterdam

Purim plate, late seventeenth century

Hamburg

Repousséd, hammered, and engraved silver

Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Dr. Harry G. Friedman, F 4188

These two objects show different Purim customs: exchanging sweets with family and friends and giving charity to the poor. The Purim plate—used to offer food—features Esther approaching Ahasuerus surrounded by ornate flora and fauna. The tazza, used to collect donations, includes a central biblical scene of Samuel anointing David. Based on a design by the Dutch artist Maarten van Heemskerck, this decorative object has been repurposed for Jewish ritual use on Purim.

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Willem de Poorter
Dutch, 1608–after 1648

Mordecai Listening to the Conspiracy of Ahasuerus's Chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, 1629–48
Oil on panel
Royal Collection Trust, London, Lent by His Majesty King Charles III

Willem de Poorter was a contemporary of Rembrandt and was influenced by his style. This small painting is a study of the dramatic potential and heightened emotions that can be expressed using deep shadows and piercing highlights. The dark painting echoes its subject matter: the hatching of a conspiracy to murder Ahasuerus.

Beneath a stone statue, two elaborately dressed men—Bigthan and Teresh—whisper to each other. Their clothing is a mix of Middle Eastern fantasy and contemporary theatrical costume, a common way that Dutch artists expressed the ancient Persian setting of the Book of Esther. Behind them, in the shadows, Mordecai sits listening to their plans. He will foil their plot and gain the king's favor, deepening Haman's resentment against him and against all the Jews of Persia.

Hendrick van Steenwijk the Younger

Flemish, c. 1580–1649

Esther and Mordecai, 1616

Oil on panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Nell and Robert Weidenhammer Fund

This intimate painting, made by a Flemish painter working in the Spanish Netherlands (present-day Belgium), shows a rarely depicted scene from the Book of Esther. In a shadowy church Esther appears in completely contemporary clothing, and Mordecai in a fanciful robe and hat. He grabs Esther's hand and begs her to intercede with Ahasuerus on behalf of the Jewish people.

Though Flemish artists did not represent the Book of Esther as frequently as the Dutch, the story remained an important source of inspiration. For Flemish audiences, it is the Dutch who are equated with the evil, untrustworthy Haman and the Flemish with Esther and Mordecai, the heroes of the story.

Attributed to Jacob Gerritsz. van Hasselt

Dutch, 1597–1674

The Wedding Meal of Grietje Hermans van Hasselt (1613/14–1668) and Jochum Berntsen van Haecken (born in 1603/4), 1636

Oil on canvas

Centraal Museum, Utrecht, Bequest 1947

This imposing painting possibly depicts the artist's sister and her husband as Esther and Ahasuerus. If the artist intended the scene as the wedding feast of Esther, the moment chosen is unusual in Dutch art—the typical feast of Esther is one of accusation and anger. Instead, the banquet setting here captures the joy of the newlyweds, complete with a heart-shaped pie on the corner of the table.

What is probably a Persian rug hangs behind the couple, appropriate for the story. The textile emphasizes their importance, referencing both the cloth of honor hanging behind thrones in European courts and behind the Virgin Mary in many European images. In the central field of the carpet is a repeating pattern of large stars. This strengthens the identification with Esther; in Persian (Farsi), she is called Stara, meaning star.

Aert de Gelder
Dutch, 1645–1727

The Banquet of Ahasuerus, 1680s
Oil on canvas
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Aert de Gelder, Rembrandt's last and most dedicated pupil, painted more scenes from the Book of Esther than any other Dutch artist. Here one of the first events of the story is presented with all the rich colors and textures prevalent in paintings by Rembrandt and his circle.

At left Ahasuerus slumps in a drunken haze after days of imbibing, his unraveling turban signaling his inebriated state. On the final day of a seven-day feast, he demanded that his first queen, Vashti, appear before his guests to show off her beauty. Vashti refused, leading to her dismissal and banishment. To replace her, Ahasuerus gathered the most beautiful women in his kingdom and chose Esther—a Jewish orphan who hides her identity—as his next queen.

Lucas van Leyden
Dutch, c. 1494–1533

The Triumph of Mordecai, 1515
Engraving; first state
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1951

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1609–1669

The Triumph of Mordecai, c. 1641
Etching and drypoint
Morgan Library and Museum, New York

After Mordecai foils an assassination attempt on Ahasuerus, the king orders that Haman should honor him by dressing Mordecai in royal robes and leading him through the city on the king's horse. These two images show the difference in approach between Rembrandt at this moment and Lucas van Leyden, an influential artist from the previous century. Rembrandt kept a book of Van Leyden's prints as reference material.

While in Van Leyden's print the figures are dressed in early sixteenth-century clothing, Rembrandt's work includes a mix of seventeenth-century, antique, and Middle Eastern clothing. Van Leyden's print is more densely packed with characters, making it harder to identify the main subjects. Rembrandt situates Mordecai much higher than the other figures, with Esther and Ahasuerus watching the scene unfold from a balcony above.

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Dutch, 1609–1669

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Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1609–1669

Pharisees in the Temple, also known as Jews in the Synagogue, 1648
Etching and drypoint
Morgan Library and Museum, New York

Once thought to represent a scene of seventeenth-century Jews in a synagogue, Rembrandt's print of an airy interior merges people from Amsterdam with an imagined view of the ancient Temple of Jerusalem. Similar to images of the Book of Esther, the seated, turbaned figure at center signifies the setting's distant past through clothing from the faraway Middle East. The building does not match any known Amsterdam synagogue but does follow descriptions of the Jerusalem Temple as found in the biblical Book of 1 Kings—for example, the latticed windows of its side chambers.

Throughout the scene, men with full, untrimmed beards, long robes, and tall hats resemble the Ashkenazic Jews whom Rembrandt would have encountered in his neighborhood, and notably, would have migrated there the same year this print was produced.

Aert de Gelder
Dutch, 1645–1727

Ahasuerus and Haman, early 1680s
Oil on canvas
Henry Barber Trust, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

After Haman is forced to honor Mordecai for foiling an assassination attempt on Ahasuerus, Haman's frustration triggers a deeper anger at all the Jews of Persia. In this painting Haman poisons Ahasuerus's mind against the Jewish people, convincing the king to issue a decree allowing their annihilation.

Aert de Gelder was Rembrandt's last pupil, and the influence of Rembrandt's rich brushwork, moody colors, and elaborate costumes are on full display here. Haman's dark clothing identifies him as the villain, while Ahasuerus's tall, feathered turban, layered brocaded garments, and scepter signify him as the king of Persia. The white-and-black ermine fur draped over his shoulders, however, is a European symbol of monarchy.

Aert de Gelder
Dutch, 1645–1727

Esther and Mordecai, c. 1685
Oil on canvas
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Museum Appropriation Fund

Scenes of letter writing—both for biblical subjects and in everyday life—were a popular genre in the Netherlands. Dutch intellectuals were a key part of what was called the "Republic of Letters," an international community that spread new ideas via written correspondence. Here an older and scholarly Esther and Mordecai compose one of the letters of Purim, decreeing a day celebrating Jewish deliverance and instituting a holiday still observed today. Esther's bright clothing and jewelry spotlight her while the two discuss their compositions.

Long after Rembrandt's style had gone out of favor with most artists, de Gelder continued to emulate Rembrandt's interest in the play of lights and darks; de Gelder often used broad, thickly layered brushstrokes to emphasize the age and humanity of the figures, visible here in the expressive face of Mordecai.

Jan Victors
Dutch, 1619–after 1676

Esther Accusing Haman, 1651
Oil on canvas
Museum and Gallery at Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina

Jan Victors worked mostly in Amsterdam and likely studied with Rembrandt, though the emotions in his paintings are often more exaggerated than in Rembrandt's. Note especially the frozen gestures of the figures here: Esther points in calm accusation; Haman lifts his hand in shock and denial; and Ahasuerus stands clenching his fists in anger. The theatrical costumes and Dutch table settings are combined to situate this scene both in the seventeenth-century space of the viewer and the imagined Middle Eastern setting of the biblical story.

When Victors made this painting, he would have had access to imported goods only indirectly through Amsterdam merchants. In the 1670s, however, he gained firsthand knowledge of foreign cultures when he joined the Dutch East India Company (VOC), an international trading firm.

Jan Lievens
Dutch, 1607–1674

Man in a Turban Facing Left, seventeenth century
Etching; fourth state
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1970

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606–1669
After Jan Lievens
Dutch, 1607–1674

Bust of a Bearded Man with a Turban, 1635
Etching
Morgan Library and Museum, New York

These two prints document the rivalry between Rembrandt and Jan Lievens; Rembrandt (bottom) reinterprets Lievens's original image (top). These images are *tronies*, character studies with different facial types and exoticized costumes. Lievens's and Rembrandt's Dutch models are dressed in robes and turbans, leading to these prints later being called the "Turkish Tronies" or "Oriental Heads."

These studies influenced the figures in both artists' larger paintings, including those with scenes from the Book of Esther. For Dutch artists and audiences, the inclusion of Middle Eastern costumes from their own time set a biblical scene; cultural descriptors such as Turkish, Persian, and even Asian were often used interchangeably. Dutch collectors understood that these images were a form of playacting, not documentation. For example, a Lievens painting of a man wearing a turban and robe was described in 1629–30 as: "a picture of a Turkish sort of nobleman, done from the head of some Dutchman."

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Attributed to Ferdinand Bol
Dutch, 1616–1680

Banquet of Esther: Esther 7:1–8, seventeenth century
Quill and reed pens and dark brown ink, brown wash, on laid paper; correction in opaque white; framing line in brown ink
Morgan Library and Museum, New York, Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913) in 1909

This drawing is attributed to one of Rembrandt's most talented pupils, Ferdinand Bol. Ahasuerus, facing the viewer and wearing a turban, and Haman, at left in profile, are more fully finished than Esther at right.

Bol has chosen a moment of suspense: Esther lifts her hand to point at Haman in accusation but neither of the two men have had time to react. Will Ahasuerus rise from his seat and knock over the large goblet on the table, drawn in a few thick strokes of brown ink? While Ahasuerus's explosive anger is central to many of the other works in this gallery, here the image is left in the moment of anticipation.

Sash, seventeenth–eighteenth century

Probably Iran
Brocaded silk and metal-wrapped thread
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1915

This silk sash, luxuriously embroidered with stripes and flowers, was probably made in present-day Iran during the Safavid Persian Empire (1501–1722). It is the type commonly worn as part of Persian clothing and would have been tied and knotted around the waist.

Striped sashes such as this one are a constant presence in Dutch paintings. In many images illustrating Esther's story, such as Jan Lievens's nearby, they are tied around Ahasuerus's waist in the proper fashion. In others, such as Rembrandt's self-portrait at right, sashes are used as scarves and, elsewhere in this exhibition, are wound around European crowns in a semblance of a turban. While these images reference actual Persian textiles—from the same location as the Book of Esther's setting—they are not always shown accurately.

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1609–1669

Self-Portrait, Age 23, 1629
Oil on oak panel
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

In this self-portrait, the young Rembrandt plays with the expressive potential of light and darkness, with half of his face brilliantly highlighted and half sinking into shadow. Another of Rembrandt's trademark interests is on display here: a fascination with costume.

Rembrandt has presented himself in a fanciful combination of types of garments: a feathered beret, velvet cloak, gold chain, and striped scarf. The scarf is likely an imported luxury object and appears frequently in history paintings by Rembrandt and his contemporaries, as well as playful portraits and *tronies* (study images). It resembles the striped sashes from Safavid Persia (1501–1722)—an example of which is on view nearby—that are commonly found in Dutch images of the Book of Esther.

308 AD 405

Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606–1669

Daniel and Cyrus before the Idol Bel, 1633
Oil on panel
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

In this painting, Rembrandt's skilled manipulation of light and dark focuses our attention on the two main figures and captures their dramatic encounter. In a story from the Book of Daniel, which precedes the Book of Esther and is also set in the Jewish diaspora, Rembrandt evokes the majesty of ancient Persia. In depicting another biblical story set in this locale, Rembrandt features extravagant costumes inspired by the Middle East, combining them with European theatrical touches. For example, a luminous turban is capped with a jewel-like Western crown.

As though on a stage, the imposing Persian king Cyrus stands at the center of an opulent temple. He demands to know why the prophet Daniel refuses to worship the deity Bel. The prophet, humble yet determined in partial shadow at left, declares that Bel is an idol—a bronze statue—not a god.

Pieter Lastman
Dutch, 1583–1633

Haman Begging the Mercy of Esther, 1618 or 1619
Oil on wood panel
National Museum, Warsaw

This important painting by Rembrandt's teacher Pieter Lastman captures the final turning of the tide against Haman. After Esther reveals her Jewish identity, Ahasuerus, realizing Haman planned to kill his wife and her people, storms off in anger. Haman falls upon Esther, begging her for mercy. At that very moment, Ahasuerus returns and assumes that Haman is accosting Esther. Further enraged, the king orders Haman be hanged on the gallows he was building for Mordecai—a darkly ironic end to his story.

The table settings—including a peacock pie and white linen cloth over a Middle Eastern carpet—are taken directly from a wealthy Dutch table. At the same time, foreign motifs such as the turbaned figures (including Ahasuerus) push the scene further into the fantastical setting that Dutch artists often used when imagining the Book of Esther.

Richard Houston
Irish, 1721/22–1775
After Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606–1669

Haman's Condemnation, 1775
Mezzotint
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. R. Watkins, 1942

This eighteenth-century lithograph captures Rembrandt's painting of Haman's condemnation following the feast of Esther. Rembrandt's painting, now in the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, could not be lent for this exhibition. It is one of only three paintings of Esther's story by Rembrandt. One, of Esther preparing to go before Ahasuerus, is now in the National Gallery of Canada and is on view in this presentation. The third, of Esther's feast, in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, also could not be lent for this exhibition.

In this dynamic reproduction, the artist has captured the play of light and dark that highlights the three main figures, the sheen of the varied textiles, and the emotional impact of Rembrandt's original.

Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669), *The Downfall of Haman*, c. 1665. Oil on canvas, 50 × 45⅝ in. (127 × 115.9 cm). State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669), *Ahasuerus, Haman, and Esther*, 1660. Oil on canvas, 28¼ × 36⅝ in. (71.8 × 93 cm). Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

Esaias van de Velde
Dutch, 1587–1630

An Elegant Company in a Garden, 1614
Oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art, 2023

This work allows viewers to revel in the luxurious table settings, clothing, and pastimes of the Dutch upper classes in the early 1600s. These elements appear throughout the Esther paintings in this gallery: for example, the white linen tablecloth layered over Middle Eastern carpet, lavish game pies, elaborate metal and glass vessels, and even the wine cooler with vines on the ground behind the seated man in pink at center.

These motifs, when used in paintings inspired by the Book of Esther, give the scene a greater believability and familiarity to a viewer in the 1600s. Ultimately, this helps the biblical story and its lessons—set at a great distance from the Netherlands both in time and geography—feel more immediate and relevant.

Jan Lievens
Dutch, 1607–1674

The Feast of Esther, c. 1625
Oil on canvas
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina, 1952

Jan Lievens's vision of the climactic banquet of Esther combines the "Eastern" clothing of Ahasuerus with the contemporary Dutch clothing of Esther. Ahasuerus's brocaded robe, striped sash, and feathered turban depict seventeenth-century Persian clothing somewhat accurately—a contemporary version of this sash is on view nearby—while his crown and ermine-lined cloak add European symbols of royalty. Lievens would have encountered people, textiles, and objects from across the world in the shops and streets of Amsterdam, which helped him to picture the Book of Esther's biblical setting by way of distant eastern locales.

Lievens was two years older than Rembrandt, and at the beginning of their careers, they briefly shared a studio in their native Leiden. The two artists both apprenticed with Pieter Lastman—whose painting of Esther's feast is also on view in this gallery—and continued to influence each other throughout their lives.

307 AD 404

Caspar Jacobsz. Philips
Dutch, 1732–1789
After Pieter Wagenaar Jr.
Probably Dutch, 1747–1808

Masked ball, on the occasion of the Jewish Purim festival, 1781–91
Engraving
Joods Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, purchased with the support of the Foundation of Friends of the Jewish Museum

In this little-known print, well-dressed, gleeful people—likely representing members of the Portuguese Jewish community—mingle and dance in an elaborate, candlelit interior. Some wear costumes, wigs, and masks, marking the occasion as a masquerade ball. A full orchestra at right and figure making a toast in the central background convey the jovial atmosphere. At center, a jester in a motley coat with a cowl over his neck entertains the crowd and looks out at the viewer. Coyly smiling, he gestures with his hand toward the backdrop: wall decorations that illustrate pivotal scenes from the Book of Esther, the story commemorated during the Jewish festival of Purim.

This image was printed in the Dutch edition of the eighteenth-century anthology by William Hurd of religious customs throughout the world, which was intended for a Protestant audience.

Balthasar Bernaerts
Dutch, active in 1710–37
After Louis Fabritius Dubourg
Dutch, 1693–1775

The Festival of Purim, 1737
Copper engraving
Joods Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, purchased from the Collection Arthur and Jetty Polak with the support of the Sponsorbingo Loterij

Ceremonies of the Festival of Purim, 1650
The Netherlands
Copper engraving
Joods Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, purchased from the Collection Arthur and Jetty Polak with the support of the Sponsorbingo Loterij

This scene, along with the earlier Purim scene nearby, showcases the central event of the holiday: the public recitation of the scroll of Esther, the Megillah.

The reading takes place at the center of the sanctuary at the raised platform, where the designated reader—with his back facing us—chants the words of the Book of Esther from an unrolled scroll in the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, a magnificent building that here looks similar to how it appears today.

In the background, men wear draped prayer shawls over their fashionable caps as they participate in the service. In the foreground, people of different social classes talk with one another.

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Ceremonies of the Festival of Purim, 1650

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Salom Italia
Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, seventeenth century
Printed border, handwritten text, and ink on parchment, with wooden roller
British Library, London, Or 4786

Salom Italia
Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, 1640s
Printed border, handwritten text, and ink on parchment
Joods Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, donated by Edward van Voolen and Judith Frishman, M012276

Unknown Dutch or German artist

Esther scroll, c. 1630–40
Ink and gouache on parchment, with wooden roller
British Library, London, Or 1047

The final of these three scrolls—possibly made in Holland—captures the twists and turns of the story's plot. At top right is a scene uncommon in Dutch art: after the king is angered by his adviser, Haman, for plotting to kill his wife and her people, Haman unsuccessfully begs Esther for his life. The king nonetheless orders Haman, at upper center, hanged on the gallows Haman prepared for Mordecai. At left, Haman's ten sons are killed in battle and hanged from the gallows, too.

These scenes are surrounded by fauna and flora unfamiliar to European audiences at the time: elephants and rhinoceroses appear at lower left and an assortment of non-native plants such as palm trees are cultivated in the scroll's margins, nodding to the Netherlands as a hub of trade.

Salom Italia

Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, seventeenth century

Printed border, handwritten text, and ink on parchment, with wooden roller

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Abraham de Chaves

Born in London, c. 1647–1705, active in the Netherlands

Esther scroll with benediction sheet, 1687

Amsterdam

Ink on parchment and fabric, with wooden roller

Family property

A rich pattern of animal and floral imagery decorates this scroll and sheet of the Megillah blessing. Though engraved by Abraham de Chaves, the scroll was long thought to be made by Aaron de Chaves, who may have apprenticed with the Dutch painter Jan Lievens. According to the scant facts of his biography, Abraham was known as an erudite leader in the community, worked at the local Jewish school, and was a talented engraver.

Esther scroll, c. 1675

Amsterdam

Sepia ink on parchment

Braginsky Collection, Zurich, Megillah 17

This scroll is noteworthy for its delicate illustrations in sepia ink and the integration of sophisticated commentary at the bottom of each image. These are excerpts from the Targum Sheni, which consists of rabbinic interpretations (known as midrash) and an extensive Aramaic paraphrase of the Book of Esther. Two merrymaking dwarves dance and play stringed instruments in celebration of the Jews' safe deliverance, a theme drawn from European images. Classical architecture and costumes appear throughout the scroll, animating the story's characters.

The Art of Salom Italia's Scrolls

The Jewish engraver Salom Italia realized that creating decorated Esther scrolls—some of the finest examples are on display here—provided an opportunity to explore newly emerging printing technologies. These scrolls represent his characteristic style. Decorative borders in the form of architectural facades are reminiscent of triumphal arches. The borders are filled with Dutch cityscapes and landscapes, Italianate architecture, and flora and fauna interspersed with scenes from Esther's story. Characters from the Purim story, in dialogue with one another, appear nestled in niches, bringing the Megillah to life.

Salom Italia

Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, 1640s

Printed border, handwritten text, and ink on parchment

Joods Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, M012276

Salom Italia

Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, 1647

Copperplate print likely on parchment (without case), with wooden roller

Jewish Museum, London, JM 282

Salom Italia

Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, c. 1650

Amsterdam

Black ink on parchment

Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, S 38

Salom Italia

Born in Mantua, 1618/19–after 1664, active in Amsterdam

Esther scroll, 1640s

Amsterdam

Printed border, handwritten text, and ink on parchment

Braginsky Collection, Zurich, Megillah 101

Jan Steen
Dutch, 1626–1679

The Wrath of Ahasuerus, c. 1670
Oil on canvas
Henry Barber Trust, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

This chaotic scene focuses on Ahasuerus's anger. He stands up violently, making Haman cower in fear and upending a large peacock pie and a Chinese porcelain vessel. These are symbols of Haman's broken pride and were also prized additions to seventeenth-century Dutch tables.

In the background at left, two Black men look on in shock. Though there was a small Black community in Amsterdam, Steen never lived or worked there, and little is known about these communities in cities such as his native Leiden. Unlike in Rembrandt's paintings, Black figures in Steen's works are not included for their individuality or humanity. They instead are used to illustrate the biblical past through people and things that were not native to Europe.

Jan Steen
Dutch, 1626–1679

Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman, c. 1668
Oil on canvas
Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund

Jan Steen
Dutch, 1626–1679

The Wrath of Ahasuerus, 1668–70
Oil on canvas
Museum Bredius, the Hague

Jan Steen is one of the best storytellers in Dutch art, and his works are often inspired by the staging and narrative devices of contemporary theater. For example, in this painting, the central scene is framed by two bold red curtains, and a landscape peeks through the classical archway at left, both of which recall the stage of the Amsterdam Schouwburg, also depicted in a print nearby.

His lively paintings are always full of action, drama, humor, and satire, highlighting the absurdity of everyday life. From behind the column at right, a red-capped jester (a common sight in royal courts) slyly looks out at the viewer. Here, he signals the setting is the king's court, and just as Haman's fortunes have reversed because of the king's foolishness, Steen may encourage viewers to think about their own actions.

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Dutch, 1626–1679

Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman, c. 1668
Oil on canvas
Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund

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Salomon Savery
Dutch, 1594–1678

Stage of the Amsterdam Schouwburg Theater, 1658
Engraving
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

This image depicts the palatial backdrop of Amsterdam's first public theater, the Schouwburg. It opened in 1638 during a time when the Dutch Republic was establishing itself on the world stage. The story of Esther emerged as a new favorite, appearing for the first time at the Schouwburg during its inaugural season. Coming to life for audiences, it was acted out by real people inhabiting real spaces.

The site of this theater is now part of the National Holocaust Museum. Tragically, the Schouwburg, once a symbol of cosmopolitan Dutch intellectual culture, was seized by the Nazis and became a deportation site in July 1942. Tens of thousands of people were held in there, sometimes for weeks, awaiting transport to concentration or extermination camps.

Pieter van den Berge
Dutch, 1659–1737
After Gerard de Lairesse
Flemish, active in the Netherlands, 1641–1711

Esther and Haman before King Ahasuerus, c. 1694–c. 1737
Etching
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Private gift, 1904

This dramatic scene of Esther's feast may have been influenced by the world of the theater. Esther and Ahasuerus are set in an extravagant, palatial interior with many architectural features of the theater—most notably the curtainlike drapery. The print, like one of the Purim parodies in this gallery, is dedicated to Baron Manuel de Belmonte, a prominent Sephardic diplomat and patron of the theater.

An inscription from Proverbs 21:1 also appears in Latin and Hebrew: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord like the rivers of water: He turns it wherever He wishes." Presumably referring to Ahasuerus's change of heart after Esther's revelation, this verse places God, who is never mentioned explicitly in the Book of Esther, back at the center of the action.

Tebah cover (Dotar Society lectern cover for the Portuguese Synagogue), seventeenth century

Southern Europe
Embroidered silk, silk velvet, metal thread, and wool
Collection of the Santa Companhia de Dotar de Orphas e Donzellas, on loan to the Jewish Cultural Quarter, Cultural Heritage Foundation of the Portuguese Israelite Community (CEPIG), Amsterdam

The abundance of tassels and vibrant colors of this textile earned it the nickname "Harlequin's cloth." Since Rembrandt's time, this Tebah cover has adorned the Portuguese Synagogue's lectern, used for reading the Book of Esther on Purim. The Spanish and Portuguese community changes its cloth decoration to match the festival's season. The vibrancy of this work is fitting for the joyousness of Purim.

The "Harlequin's cloth" also provides a colorful backdrop for the dramatic drawing of lots from a silver tureen—like the one on display below—as part of the Dotar charitable society's dowry lottery, administered by the Sephardic community on Purim. This lectern cover was and is still used for that event.

Lottery list (Pauta) with the names of eligible dowry candidates of the Dotar society, 1616

Ink on paper

Santa Companhia de Dotar Orphas e Donzellas, Amsterdam

This object is the first of its kind—a signed list of candidates eligible for the Dotar society's charitable dowries. This rare document is dated 1616, tying it to the founding of the Dotar. Preserved in the archives of the society, this document demonstrates the longevity of the Dotar—still active today—and its charitable work.

Nicolaas Fonteyn (author)
Dutch, active in the seventeenth century

Esther, or the Picture of Obedience, 1638
Universiteit Leiden, Bibliotheek

In Fonteyn's play, Mordecai proclaims Esther's virtuous character as she prepares to become queen. In this way, the playwright foregrounds Esther's virtue as the source of her people's salvation. He then introduces a fictional female prophetess, Sophronia, taken from Torquato Tasso's 1581 epic poem "Jerusalem Delivered," to proclaim Esther's divinely ordained queenship and the eventual deliverance of the Jewish people.

Jacobus Revius (author)
Dutch, 1586–1658

Haman: A Tragedy, from Songs and Poems from Overijssel, 1634
National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC, David K. E. Bruce Fund

In Revius's *Haman: A Tragedy*, the author, drawing on Jewish sources, introduces a chorus of Jewish women who anticipate the better future awaiting them in Zion, the Jewish homeland. Though likely not performed, this work draws on the same theme of redemption popular in Dutch plays of the time.

Nehemia Publicola (author)

Mordechai, or the Christian Patriot, 1630

Published by Jacob van de Middelburg Vivere
Universiteit Leiden, Bibliotheek, Special Collections

The title of this work explicitly frames Mordecai as a Christian patriot, an exemplar for the Dutch Republic. Dutch writers often focused on Mordecai in addition to Esther, seeing in his heroic actions a guide for their own emerging sense of civic responsibility.

Cast list for Johannes Serwouters's Esther, or the Deliverance of the Jews, at the Amsterdam Schouwburg, 1658–59

*M*anuscript
Stadsarchief, Amsterdam, 429, 100–101

This book contains the cast list for the first performance of *Esther, or the Deliverance of the Jews*, which was based on an earlier Spanish comedia (a type of play from Spain that mixes comedy and tragedy). Unusual for the time, the list records female actors playing Esther and other roles. A ban on women appearing onstage at the Schouwburg had been lifted only a few years prior.

Serwouters's *Esther* was staged almost annually, marking the beginning of Esther's popularity on the Dutch stage. When the play was published, a dedication linked it to Purim celebrations in the Jewish community.

Performing Spanish Plays in Amsterdam's Jewish Neighborhoods

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, the most popular style of Spanish play was the comedia, defined by its mixture of comedy and tragedy. Several of the innovative plays, which were published by the Sephardim (Jews originally from Spain and Portugal) and in all likelihood were intended for Purim celebrations, took the form of the Spanish *comedia famosa* (famous play).

Many of the same biblical heroes and heroines in the comedias on display here—including Esther, Mordecai, Joseph, and Jacob—likewise appeared in Dutch plays and on the Iberian stage. Across these theatrical productions, biblical stories often centered on themes of persecution and redemption.

Isaac Cohen de Lara (author)
Active in Amsterdam, c. 1700

Famous Play (Comedia famosa) on Haman and Mordecai, 1698
Amsterdam
Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

This is one of very few comedias that explicitly draws on the story of Esther. The play, edited by the Sephardic author Isaac Cohen de Lara and published in Spanish, is filled with Jewish, Iberian, and Dutch traditions.

The comedia combines biblical figures from different stories not usually found together, inspired by Purim parodies of the Torah (Purim Torah). In the appendix, characters play a drinking game with Spanish coffee, and Dutch riddles are interspersed throughout, emphasizing Purim's carnivalesque celebrations.

Isaac de Matatia Aboab (author)
1631/32–1707

Harassed but Happy, 1685–86
Manuscript
Ets Haim Bibliotheek–Livraria Montezinos, Amsterdam, EH 48 D 21

Famous Play (Comedia famosa) on the Deeds of Jacob and Esau, 1699
Delft
Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

Though the biblical subject matter of these comedias is not the story of Esther, they were both produced around and intended for the springtime Purim season. As parodies, the plays would have matched the holiday's tone.

Isaac de Matatia Aboab (author)
1631/32–1707

Harassed but Happy, 1685–86
Manuscript

Ets Haim Bibliotheek–Livraria Montezinos, Amsterdam,
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Jacob Raphael Saraval (author)
Born in Venice, 1707–1782, active in the Netherlands and England

David Franco Mendes (copier)
1713–1792, active in Amsterdam

Hebrew translation of the libretto from Oratorio Esther, c. 1780

Manuscript

Ets Haim Bibliotheek–Livraria Montezinos, Amsterdam, EH 47 B 07

Abraham da Costa Abendana (copier)

Active in the Netherlands, c. 1700

Purim parodies (Who Is Like You: A Parody), c. 1700

Amsterdam
Handwritten title page and print on paper
Ets Haim Bibliotheek, Amsterdam

This Purim parody, bound with other parodies, features a dedication to Baron Manuel de Belmonte (Dutch, died in 1704). He was an important figure in the Sephardic community as a philanthropist and an enthusiastic benefactor of literature and theater.

Belmonte also played a pivotal role in preserving diplomatic relations between Spain and the Netherlands following the end of their conflict. In his message to Belmonte, the author calls him "a second Mordecai," praising his learning, generosity, and civic spirit.

Purim parodies, 1690

The Netherlands

Engraving and handwriting on paper

Ets Haim Bibliotheek, Amsterdam, EH 47 E 06

Purim parodies, 1698

Amsterdam

Manuscript with printed illustrations

Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, MS 10188

Purim poem (Simhat Purim), 1650

Amsterdam

Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York,
RB 5795, SHF 1880:6

Levi ben Gershom (author)
Born in Bagnols-sur-Cèze, 1288–1344

Abstracts from Megillat Setarim (Concealed Scroll) and Purim parodies, 1673

Amsterdam
Handwriting on paper
Ets Haim Biblioktheek, Amsterdam, EH 47 C 17 01

Kalonymus ben Kalonymus (author)
1286–1328, active in Avignon and Rome

Tractate (Masekhet) Purim, 1752
Amsterdam
Paper manuscript with gold-tooled red Morocco binding
Braginsky Collection, Zurich, 282

The game cards represented in this book are rendered in a hyperrealistic style that is unusual in Hebrew manuscripts. This text includes a Purim parody by the medieval scholar Kalonymus ben Kalonymus that discusses eating, drinking, and drunkenness during Purim. There was particular interest in this book among Amsterdam's Ashkenazic (Eastern and Central European) Jewish community in the eighteenth century, when Purim parodies and carnivalesque parades were especially popular.

Purim cup, c. 1690

Augsburg
Engraved and partially gilded silver
Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Richard Scheuer, 1981-6

Esther scroll, first half of the eighteenth century

Amsterdam
Brown ink on parchment
Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, S 34

Putting on comedic plays or skits (*shpiels*), masquerading, feasting, and drinking are common Purim celebrations. In this scroll, men and women in costume and on a checkered stage hold up oval medallions with the Esther scroll's concluding words: "Blessed is Mordecai" and "Cursed is Haman." These phrases are similarly inscribed around the rim of this Purim cup. It is a reference to the holiday's tradition of drinking to the point of not knowing the difference between the hero, Mordecai, and the villain, Haman.

Esther scroll, seventeenth century

Amsterdam

Brown ink on parchment

Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, S 34

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Johannes Leusden (author)
Dutch, 1624–1699
Johannes van den Aveele (engraver)
Dutch, died 1727

Jewish Rites, from Mixed Hebrew Philologist (Philologus hebraeo-mixtus), 1682

Utrecht
Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

This is one of the earliest representations of a Purim *shpiel* (play). The figures are shown in a checkered patio characteristic of Dutch houses in the 1600s. The figure at right holding a broom upside down and at left dancing on a hobbyhorse is the character of the fool—a common symbol of the theatrical world. The pairing of the fool and hobbyhorse additionally parodies the triumph of Mordecai. This book was written by Johannes Leusden, a Dutch Calvinist theologian who looked to widely circulated Jewish custom books—like the one presented alongside this one—for inspiration.

Isaac Tyrnau (author)

Born in Vienna, active in Austria and Pressburg (present-day Brataslava in Slovakia), c. 1400

Simon Levi Ginsburg (Yiddish translator)

Active in Venice, c. 1600

Sefer Minhagim (Customs Book), 1662

Paper, ink, letterpress, and woodcut

Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

This book introducing Jewish customs is part of a genre that originated in the Middle Ages. The volume was embellished in Italy with woodcut illustrations later in its history and was widely printed in Amsterdam in the 1600s. Rather than being from the formal theater, these figures seem to participate in the amateur Purim *shpiels* (plays) performed at home, or they may be the fools who paraded in the street and into feasts, where they invited the dinner guests to take part in such impromptu and comedic skits.

To read translations of the Dotar society applications in this case, scan the QR code below.

Translations courtesy of the historian Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld

Esther Pretta

Gentlemen, Treasurer, and Administrators of the Holy brotherhood of orphan girls,

Judiq Pretta, the widow of Benjamin Pretto, requests your favor to admit her daughter Esther Pretta to the lottery of this year, being in the second degree related to Jacob Pretto Henriques. . . . She will feel obliged to ask God for your life and good fortune. *Vesalom* [peace]

No. 5 Second degree [relation to] Jacob Pretto Enriqs

Esther Pretta

Gentlemen, Treasurer, and Administrators, of the *mitzvah* [good deed] to bestow dowries to orphan girls,

Esther, the orphan of Benjamin Pretto from Amsterdam, to the second degree related to Jacob Pretto Enriqs, of sufficient age to get married, thus requests and implores your favor to accept her [entry] to the lots that will be taken out [of the bowls] on the second day of upcoming Purim of this year 5427

f 800 [800 Dutch guilders]

Esther Mendes do Vale

Gentlemen, Treasurer, and Administrators, of the *mitzvah* [good deed] to bestow dowries to orphan girls,

Esther Mendes do Vale, an orphan from Amsterdam, begs your favor to accept her [entry] to the lots that will be taken out [of the bowls] on the second day of Purim in the year 5426 [1666], in the light of the fact that she is of adequate age marry and *Vesalom* [peace]

Subsequently on the list at number 42 for *f* 500 [500 Dutch guilders]

Clara de Almeida

Gentlemen, Administrators, and Treasurer, of the Holy brotherhood of orphan girls,

Clara de Almeida, who lives in Bayonne, an orphan on both her father's and mother's side, the daughter of Framco Rodrigues [de] Almeida whose relatives suffered [at the hands of the Inquisition] in Córdoba and the sister of the martyr Isaque Dalmeida Berl who suffered [at the hands of the Inquisition] in Santiago [de Compostela] in Galicia, glorifying the name of God. She is related in the third degree to Jacob Ysrael Bernal.

Dotar application of Esther Fonseca, 1668

Amsterdam

Ink on paper

Amsterdam City Archives, Collection of the Portuguese-Israeli Community, 11518, 629

Strikingly, this petition is signed by a Dotar applicant, Esther, showing that she was educated and literate. The petition reads: "Esther Fonseca from Livorno (who at present resides in this city), orphan without father or mother, once fortunate and wealthy while her parents were alive, but now in miserable state without any means, requests you also enter her lot with [those of] the other orphan girls. And she will pray to God for the life and prosperity of all of you. *Vesalom* [peace]."

Dotar petition, 1667, and notice of marriage of Clara de Almeida, 1673

Ink on paper

Amsterdam City Archives, Collection of the Portuguese-Israeli Community, 1151B, 586; 1152A, 212

Clara de Almeida won her dowry in 1667, the year her name appears in the inventory of the Dotar society. She had immigrated to Amsterdam from Bayonne, France, without her parents and had a particularly heartbreaking story. Her grandparents were killed by the Inquisition in Córdoba, Spain. Her brother was executed in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, for his loyalty to Judaism. Clara married a few years later.

Dotar petitions of Esther Pretta, the orphaned daughter of Benjamin Pretto, undated and 1669

Ink on paper

Amsterdam City Archives, Collection of the Portuguese-Israeli Community, 1151B, 531; 1151A, 112

Esther, identified as the orphan of Benjamin Pretto, applied to the lottery many times. These petitions are from two of Esther's applications. One of the petitions is undated, but it was written by or on behalf of her mother, Judiq; her father had died in 1660. Esther came from a large, impoverished family with at least four siblings. She seems to have died without getting married, based on a registry of 1712.

Dotar petition of Esther Mendes do Vale, 1666

Ink on paper

Amsterdam City Archives, Collection of the Portuguese-Israeli Community, 1151B, 462

Many stories of the women who applied to the Dotar dowry lottery are unknown and untold. While little is known of Esther Mendes do Vale, she appears to have applied to the lottery several times, including in 1663, 1666, 1667, and 1668.

Engelbart Joosten Sr.
Dutch, 1717–1789

Dotar lottery bowl (one of a set), 1763
Silver

Santa Companhia de Dotar Orphas e Donzellas, Amsterdam, Purchased from the Bequest of Moses and Judith Teixeira de Mattos

During the dowry lottery drawing on Purim, this tureen is placed on top of the red lecturn cover on display nearby. The bowl has been in continuous use from the eighteenth century to this very day, illustrating the unique, vibrant, and ongoing traditions of Amsterdam's Portuguese Jewish community and the Dotar's charitable mission.

Attributed to Frans Francken the Younger

Flemish, 1581–1642

Cabinet with scenes from the Book of Esther, c. 1620

Wood with painted panels

Private collection

This cabinet once belonged in a *Kunstkammer* (a cabinet or room of art and rare objects) in Flanders, now part of Belgium. Cabinets like this one were used to store small *Kunstkammer* items, such as coins or shells, which would be organized in the drawers.

These cabinets became sought-after luxury objects themselves, often elaborately decorated with either wood inlay or, as here, a series of paintings from the story of Esther. The small scale of the paintings demonstrates the skill of the artist and their subject shows the moral standing of the collector who so valued these biblical lessons—in this case, choosing to live with Queen Esther's story.

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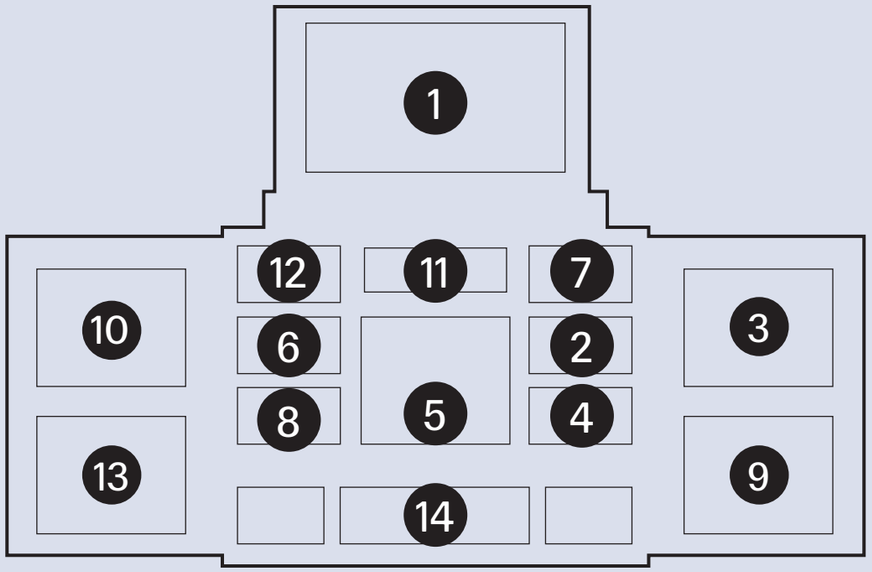

1. Ahasuerus's first wife is banished.
2. Haman is enraged that Mordecai will not bow to him.
3. Ahasuerus orders the Jews killed.
4. Casting lots for date of annihilation.
5. Mordecai learns of Haman's plot.
6. Mordecai asks Esther to intervene.
7. Esther receives Mordecai's message.
8. Esther prays for courage.
9. Esther goes before the king uninvited.
10. Esther's feast.
11. Haman asks for Esther's forgiveness.
12. Haman hangs on the gallows.
13. Mordecai is promoted.
14. Water, air, fire, and earth.

Salomon Savery, *Stage of the Amsterdam Schouwburg Theater*, 1658, reproduction, original: engraving, 20¼ x 2⅞ in. (51.5 x 73.3 cm). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam