THE STORY OF ESTHER

The Book of Esther is among the final stories of the Hebrew Bible, known as the "Old Testament" in Christian tradition. The story takes place after the Jewish people were exiled from ancient Israel by the Babylonian conquest in 587 BCE. It is set in the city of Susa (Shushan), the capital of Persia (present-day Shush, Iran) and the seat of King Ahasuerus, the ruler of a sprawling empire that encompassed 127 provinces from India to Nubia.

After several drunken feasts, Ahasuerus dismisses his first wife, Vashti, and stages a beauty pageant in search of a new queen, ultimately choosing Esther. Unbeknownst to Ahasuerus, Esther is Jewish. In the dramatic tale that unfolds, Esther's cousin Mordecai comes before the king's adviser, Haman, but refuses to bow to him, an action that would have violated Jewish law. Angered by Mordecai's actions, Haman devises a scheme to kill the Jewish people, convincing Ahasuerus to quickly issue the decree.

In this moment of uncertainty, Queen Esther requests that Mordecai gather the Jewish community to fast as a rallying cry. Urged to intervene by Mordecai, she risks her life by going before her husband, King Ahasuerus, uninvited. Esther requests that he attend a banquet, at which she reveals her Jewish identity to overturn Haman's plot. Ahasuerus, outraged with his adviser for threatening his wife and her people, orders Haman hanged on the gallows that were meant for Mordecai. To commemorate their safe deliverance, Esther and Mordecai proclaim an annual celebration—the holiday of Purim.

The unpredictable actions of the story's beginning are mirrored in its ending. Although Ahasuerus regrets calling for the annihilation of the Jews, he cannot retract his own law. He instead authorizes the Jews to battle against Haman's Persian army. The reversals of fortune in the story emphasize the fickleness of Ahasuerus and the precarious position of the Jewish people in his empire.

REMBRANDT'S AMSTERDAM

Amsterdam in the early 1600s was one of the wonders of the world: an expanding urban center, an economic powerhouse, and a wellspring of artistic production. By 1660 there were more than three hundred painters active in Amsterdam alone. Drawn to these opportunities like so many others, Rembrandt moved to the city from his native Leiden in 1631.

From 1639 to 1655 Rembrandt lived in the exceptionally diverse eastern part of Amsterdam together with many of the city's Jewish immigrants, Christians, and a small free Black community. As new residents flocked to Amsterdam from across the country and world, the city's population exploded, swelling to seven times its original size in just eighty years. Print culture thrived in Amsterdam, renowned for its newspaper, book, map, and pamphlet publications. The Hebrew and Christian Bibles were published in several languages, making them more broadly accessible than in previous centuries. Amsterdam also became the center of Esther scroll production, with Jewish engravers like Salom Italia creating elaborate imagery utilizing the newest printing technologies. In this innovative environment, Rembrandt became one of history's most influential printmakers. His prints range from portraits of his friends and neighbors to biblical subjects including Esther.

As Europe's busiest port, Amsterdam was also a gateway for trade and the mixing of cultures. Merchants from outside the city and across the globe circulated in the city, wearing turbans and other types of attire from distant locales. Shops opened in great numbers, offering imported textiles, porcelain, weapons, and precious gems and metals. These goods and people then appeared in everything from Dutch paintings to illustrated Esther scrolls, changing the way artists in the Netherlands interpreted and presented the Book of Esther's ancient Persian setting.

REMBRANDT'S ESTHER

Rembrandt van Rijn

Dutch, 1606–1669

A Jewish Heroine [probably Esther] from the Hebrew Bible, 1632–33

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1953

This work is one of Rembrandt's most enthralling paintings of a biblical woman, highlighting his mastery in capturing texture, light, and emotion. The figure here has been interpreted as depicting a few different women from the Hebrew Bible, including Esther. If this is indeed Esther—shown here getting ready in a scene called a *toilette*—the artist portrays her in a moment of contemplation rather than dramatic action. Rembrandt's innovative approach to the subject humanized Esther, encouraging viewers to identify with her. Here we see her preparing to go before King Ahasuerus unsummoned, for which she could be put to death.

With tense preoccupation, Esther stares past the viewer and raises her hand to her heart in a gesture of faith. Her faraway expression signals her knowledge of the risks of her next action and the weight of responsibility for her people. Though she is dressed fancifully, the model that Rembrandt used was a contemporary Dutch woman, drawing a further connection with his audience. For artists such as Rembrandt, Esther offered a heroine of strong character whose actions as a responsible citizen benefit all.

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REMBRANDT AND HIS CIRCLE IMAGINE QUEEN ESTHER

In this gallery, Esther takes center stage. Rembrandt and his circle often imagined and depicted Queen Esther's brave actions. Rembrandt's captivating artistic style—his rich colors, expressive brushwork, and dramatic interplay of light and dark—inspired a generation of artists to shape her into a dynamic woman of their contemporary world. This new approach also helped viewers forge a personal connection with her and better relate to her story.

Esther was a popular subject for both domestic and Jewish ceremonial objects, appearing on everything from decorative firebacks (the back lining of a fireplace or furnace), Delftware tiles, and snuffboxes to Purim plates and Esther scrolls. Many works focus on Esther's process of getting ready (*toilette*) as a prospective bride for Ahasuerus. The second version of this scene comes later in the story, when—urged by Mordecai—Esther prepares to go before the king uninvited on behalf of her people, a bold action for which she could be put to death.

Imagery of Esther getting ready and pleading with Ahasuerus to spare the Jews in his empire draw parallels with the courage the Dutch needed to face their Spanish enemy. Esther was a model of female virtue: a woman who puts her people's interests above her own and symbolizes a young nation.

For the Sephardic communities, Esther was not unlike their own ancestors and families, forced to hide their Jewish identity for fear of being persecuted. For Rembrandt's Dutch audience, Esther's civic-minded bravery embodied the ideals of their new republic. This emphasized that the country, too, could triumph over Spain—the most powerful monarchy in the world at the time.

ESTHER'S FEAST IN THE DUTCH REPUBLIC

The dramatic episode of Esther's climactic feast was one of the most compelling subjects for artists and audiences of the Netherlands. It is the moment that both Esther's Jewish identity is revealed and Haman's plot against her people is thwarted. Reflecting the importance of celebrating this part of the story, the joyous ceremonial feast is a key aspect of Purim and one of the few ritual commandments for observing the holiday.

In illustrating Esther's feast, Dutch artists combined several of their favorite subjects: boisterous merrymaking, decadent still lifes, and self-fashioning portraiture. The Dutch imagination of Esther's Persia is filtered through objects that are sometimes distinctly Persian but are often not. The works are fantastical interpretations of the biblical Middle East, not documentary images; the images combine exoticized items from different parts of the world without necessarily maintaining ties to their cultures of origin.

Images of Esther's feast are suffused with what would have been considered exotic luxuries: turbans, silks, porcelain, and carpets that were brought to Amsterdam by diplomats and merchants from across the globe, including what was then the Safavid Persian Empire (1501–1722). As the international and colonial reach of the Netherlands expanded, the country's knowledge of the Middle East expanded as well—alluring foreign goods and unfamiliar types of people became increasingly visible. Dutch painters presented Esther's feast through goods and textiles from their own time, conjuring the distant past by way of the distant East.

In this gallery, images of Esther's feast and earlier scenes in the story draw from both the familiar and the foreign. Objects from contemporary Dutch life—clothing, furniture, table settings, and jewelry—appear with imported goods and textiles from around the globe. These images of Esther's story anchored Dutch viewers in their world while prompting them to imagine Esther's Persia.

PERFORMING THE BOOK OF ESTHER IN REMBRANDT'S TIME

In this gallery, theatrical plays, comedias (productions from Spain that mixed comedy and tragedy), and Purim parodies highlight Esther's role onstage—whether at formal theaters or informal gatherings. The first public theater in Amsterdam, called the Schouwburg, opened its doors in 1638. Some of the earliest performances at the Schouwburg were based on Spanish Esther dramas, a genre that was also adapted into Purim plays. Dutch playwrights translated and reinvented Spanish productions for the Amsterdam stage, fueling the Schouwburg's growing international prestige.

Many of the Dutch plays being staged compared the Dutch to the ancient Israelites and the freedom of contemporary Amsterdam to the biblical promise of Jerusalem. Artists including Rembrandt and his contemporary Jan Steen were inspired by these theatrical productions, incorporating their storytelling and even stage sets into paintings of Esther's story.

Members of the Spanish and Portuguese (Sephardic) Jewish community were vital to the success of these Spanish dramas, having brought their knowledge and love of Iberian theater with them to Amsterdam. The Sephardic community developed its own vibrant theater scene in the neighborhood of Vlooienburg, the center of Jewish life in Amsterdam. They forged their space for theatrical productions, creating and producing plays, including those for Purim, in the attics of warehouses or in the living rooms of affluent community members.

Within the Ashkenazic community, theatrical and carnivalesque activities on Purim continued well into the eighteenth century, when festivities could last for weeks after the holiday. These topsy-turvy modes of celebrating Purim are common today as well, echoing the reversals of fortune in Esther's story. Whether through formal productions or informal Purim *shpiels* (plays), performances of Esther's story were brought to life with costumes, masquerading, and acting.

DOWRIES, LOTTERIES, AND PURIM IN THE NETHERLANDS

Starting in 1616, a public lottery was held on Purim at the Portuguese synagogue by a charitable society known as the Dotar (Santa Companhia de Dotar Orphas e Donzellas). This lottery awarded dowries—usually goods or money provided by parents—to orphaned brides-to-be. Like Queen Esther, many of these women had been forced to hide their Jewish identity and had immigrated to Amsterdam from regions such as southern France and elsewhere in Europe. Like Queen Esther, these young women took initiative in their own lives, applying to the lottery in search of a brighter future.

The Dotar society was established by Sephardic Jews who had escaped the Portuguese Inquisition. Purim was an especially appropriate date for this lottery: the root of the word "Purim" alludes to the lots cast by the king's adviser, Haman, in determining the annihilation date of the Jewish people.

The society is active today. The Dotar lottery was, and still is, a grand event enlivened with processions and ceremonial art. In stark contrast to the Sephardim's forced hiding in the past, the Dotar's public lottery ceremony was a potent symbol of hope, both for the future its dowries enabled and for the real potential for the Jewish community to solidify its own future in Amsterdam and at large.