

# Reality and Imagination: Rembrandt and the Jews in the Dutch Republic

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*Reality and Imagination: Rembrandt and the Jews in the Dutch Republic*, co-organized by Boston University students and the MFA's Center for Netherlandish Art (CNA), is now on view at the MFA Boston through December 1, 2026. The exhibition's aim is twofold: to provide a window onto Jewish lives in the Dutch Republic during Rembrandt's time, and to map these lived realities onto paintings and prints by Rembrandt, his contemporaries, and later artists. Examining Jewish material culture alongside seveneenth-century Dutch depictions of Old Testament narratives reveals that these images are simultaneously fanciful yet reflective of the unique religious makeup of Rembrandt's environs. Comprised almost entirely of objects from the MFA's own collection, this exhibition both furthers the CNA's mission of contributing new perspectives to traditional narratives about Dutch and Flemish art and renews the museum's commitment to fostering a welcoming space where all belong.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). *Christ Disputing with the Doctors: A Sketch*, 1652. Etching and drypoint. 4 15/16 x 8 7/16 in. (12.5 x 21.4 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Harvey D. Parker Collection–Harvey Drury Parker Fund. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

A map of Rembrandt's neighborhood, indicating the proximity of the artist's house and studio to various Jewish residences and synagogues, opens the exhibition and highlights the distinctive diversity of seventeenth-century Amsterdam. The map additionally designates the residence of Bastian Fernando, one of many African men living in Amsterdam in this period. As if to visually corroborate this mingling of diverse peoples, Rembrandt's print *Christ Disputing with the Doctors* shows figures resembling Ashkenazi Jews in the foreground and an African figure in the top right corner, suggesting that Rembrandt drew inspiration directly from his diverse neighbors (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> From

1 Murray White, "MFA wing looks at – and behind – art of Netherlands," *Boston Globe*, November 21, 2021.

2 *Reality and Imagination: Rembrandt and the Jews in the Dutch Republic*, Wall label for *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

the start, *Reality and Imagination* complicates the common perception that seventeenth-century Amsterdam was only home to European Protestants.

Further perusal of the exhibition complicates the seemingly straightforward portrait of both Rembrandt's adherence to reality and Amsterdam's seamless integration of diverse peoples. While both the map and print suggest peaceful cohabitation, the exhibition reminds visitors that prejudice still characterized some interactions between Dutch Protestants and their Jewish neighbors. This tension between religious acceptance and intolerance is embodied by a pair of seventeenth-century Torah finials: though crafted to adorn a sacred Jewish text, they were likely made by Christian goldsmiths since Jews were prohibited from holding this occupation (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> Jews could practice their religion, but not certain occupations, in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. Nonetheless, Jenna Wendler, one of the exhibition's junior curators and a PhD student at Boston University, emphasized that, in addition to representing religious intolerance, this Torah finial speaks to a cooperative spirit between Jewish patrons and Christian makers who collaborated to create precious artworks for Jewish worship.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 3. Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680). *Judah and Tamar*, 1644. Oil on canvas. 48 1/2 x 67 7/8 in. (123.2 x 172.4 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Robert Dawson Evans Collection. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 2. Pair of Torah finials, 1649. Dutch (Rotterdam). Silver, parcel gilt. 16 3/4 in. (42.5 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Museum purchase with funds donated by Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

In spite of this prejudicial treatment, other objects on display, such as a *ketubbah* (a Jewish marriage contract) and a Hannukah lamp, attest to the vibrant presence of Jews in Rembrandt's world, evidencing how they wed, worshipped, and lived. In fact, Wendler revealed that spotlighting the everyday experiences of early modern Jewish people was a major goal of the exhibition, using artworks as conduits to showcase their lived histories. Moreover, Rembrandt's sensitive portrait of Jewish physician Ephraim Bueno, exhibited next to the first known Hebrew map of the Holy Land commissioned by Jewish merchant Jacob ben Abraham Zaddick, emphasizes the importance of contributions made by specific Jewish profes-

3 *Reality and Imagination: Rembrandt and the Jews in the Dutch Republic*, "Reality" wall text, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

4 Jenna Wendler, interview by Isabella Dobson, March 12, 2026, audio, 51:47.

sionals to Dutch society.

These glimpses into the lives of seventeenth-century Dutch Jews often stand in contrast to contemporaneous depictions of Jewish stories and people. For instance, in his painting *Judah and Tamar*, Rembrandt's student Ferdinand Bol illustrates the story of a Jewish couple from the Hebrew Bible, but, in an attempt to appeal to collectors, exoticizes Judah with a turban reminiscent of the ancient Near East and eroticizes Tamar with a low neckline, driving home the exhibition's assertion that Rembrandt and his circle blurred the line between reality and imagination when depicting Jewish people (fig. 3).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, *Reality and Imagination* does more than foreground the experiences of Jews living in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic; it offers a blueprint for future generations on how to study and evaluate artistic representations of minority experiences.

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5 *Reality and Imagination: Rembrandt and the Jews in the Dutch Republic*, Wall label for *Judah and Tamar*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.