

Opening speech by Gary Schwartz for *The 'Jewish' Rembrandt*, Jewish Historical Museum  
(09-11-2006)

Last month I gave a lecture on Rembrandt to a well-educated American audience in the chic winter sports paradise of Ketchum, Idaho. During the question and answer session a woman in the audience asked: "Is it true that Rembrandt was Jewish?" "No, that is not true," I answered, "he and his parents were Dutch Protestants and his ancestors were Dutch Catholics." "Yes," she persisted, "but couldn't he - like Madeleine Albright - have been Jewish without knowing it?"

I did not flinch, but nonetheless her question made me a little nervous. Not long ago I was surprised to read the following sentence about Picasso's grandfather in John Richardson's monumental biography of the artist: "Next to nothing is known about this bizarre gentleman... beyond the fact that he married a plump young woman from the province of Málaga, Inés López Robles, rumoured to be a Maranna (of Jewish descent)" (p. 22). This was thus Picasso's mother's mother. If the rumour about Inés López Robles were true then even the great goy Pablo Picasso was in fact Jewish according to Jewish law. And if Picasso might be Jewish, then why not Rembrandt?

There is one good reason why not: at the time that Rembrandt's grandfather was married, there would have been no Jews in Leiden. But is that really the case? My colleague Jeremy Bangs recently informed me that he had found evidence to suggest a Jewish presence in Leiden in the mid-sixteenth century.

Upon my return I checked in the most extensive Rembrandt genealogy I know, compiled by the Leiden archivist Piet de Baar. If Rembrandt turned out to be Jewish after all, I would need to telephone the Jewish Historical Museum immediately to tell them to remove the quotation marks from the word 'Jewish' in the exhibition's title: *The 'Jewish' Rembrandt*. But there was no need. Rembrandt's mother's name was Neeltje Willemsdr., and her mother's name was Lijsbeth Cornelisdr. Vinck. As my grandfather would have said: "Keine yiddishe numen."

But if we extrapolate the famous advertising slogan "You Don't Have To Be Jewish To Love Levy's Jewish Rye" you could say: You Don't Have To Be Jewish To Be Jewish. Many Jews have a feeling that Rembrandt, more than other artists, is one of them. They do not get this feeling from Michelangelo, despite his creating an immortal Moses, let alone from Picasso.

We are dealing with a complex phenomenon, as the exhibition *The 'Jewish' Rembrandt* makes clear. It connects not only Rembrandt's ancestry to Jews and Judaism but also his place in

society, his intellectual interests and his personality. People identify the models for his character studies and the sitters for his portraits as Jews with only the slightest of evidence.

In this connection I have a riddle for you. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries people identified numerous portraits and studies as Rembrandt rabbis, Jewish philosophers, Jewish traders, young Jews and old Jews. But they are almost always men. There are a few drawings, etchings and paintings of Jewish brides – one of which turned out to be a depiction of Saint Catherine – but for the rest, all of Rembrandt's Jews are men. In his Rembrandt catalogue of the 1930s, Abraham Bredius describes thirty-six portraits and studies of unknown models as Jewish men. We now know that the majority of these were not Jews and indeed that they were not painted by Rembrandt. Yet not a single one of them was a woman. Can you explain this marriage of two forms of discrimination in the Rembrandt literature?

The documentary evidence to support Rembrandt's close connection with Judaism can be summed up in a single word: nonexistent. Even the early writers who criticised Rembrandt's association with the wrong sort of people made no mention of his friendship with Jews. These were people who would have jumped at the chance of damning him for consorting with Jews if there had been any reason for them to suppose this was the case. Even the great snob Joachim von Sandrart said of Rembrandt only that he did not respect his social standing and sought the company of 'lowly people.'

Nonetheless, there exists to this day a passionate belief in the special relationship between Rembrandt and the Jewish people, not only amongst the public but also within the art-historical community, whether Jewish or gentile. I am realistic enough to accept that an art historian is in no position to divest the world of such a widely held misapprehension. In fact I'm willing to wager that within a year the majority of visitors to this exhibition – an exhibition that is as sceptical as I am about the 'Jewish' Rembrandt – will think that it was a confirmation rather than a disavowal of the idea that Rembrandt was a friend of the Jews. But thankfully Rembrandt is not the exclusive property of the art historians and the museums. He reaches his own public beyond us. And if the public thinks that all the neshama they discover in Rembrandt, all the humanity, is unthinkable without a dash of yiddishkeit, then that belief will persist.

Rembrandt was a hero for one important Jew, and for a remarkable and singular reason. That was none other than Rabbi Abraham Kook (1865-1935), one of the founders of modern ultra-orthodoxy. I have included the following quote by Rabbi Kook in my new book about Rembrandt, but I would also like to share it with you now: "When I lived in London I used to visit the National Gallery, and my favourite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a

*Tzadik*. Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt's works, they reminded me of the legend about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light, it was so strong and pellucid, that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous when the Messiah should come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that was originally created by God Almighty." (Quoted from *The Jewish Chronicle*, London, 13 September 1935, p. 21.)

A tzadik. Even his Christian admirers would not dare to say that about the somewhat socially inept Rembrandt. I cannot think of more beautiful words with which to open the exhibition *The 'Jewish' Rembrandt*. Mirjam Alexander, Edward van Voolen, Joël Cahen and the staff of the Jewish Historical Museum: congratulations on this impressive achievement. Visitors, look, learn and enjoy!