

considering in the multidisciplinary environment of biographical studies. The book undoubtedly repays effort however, and as the publishers assert, it 'provides a valuable comparative perspective' which is 'a stimulating read'.

*Jane Mason  
Bridgebuilders Training*

### REMBRANDT AND HIS JEWISH NEIGHBOURS

*Rembrandt's Jews*. Steven Nadler. 2003. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0226567362, pbk, 250 pp., £12.25.

This interesting account of Jewish history in Amsterdam starts with a fascinating description of building works taking place next door to Rembrandt's house on Sint-Anthonisbreestraat. We are immersed in a convincing account of the noise, dust and upheaval and are told that the canny builder, knowing of Rembrandt's reputation for non-payment of debts, did not even bother to charge him for his share of the building works. Nadler, a distinguished Jewish philosopher and historian, places Rembrandt firmly in the Jewish quarter where he lived for most of his time in the city. He alternates lively descriptions of his visits and experiences in present-day Amsterdam with learned research on the influx of both Portuguese and later Ashkenazim Jews from Germany, Poland and Lithuania. The tensions between the two disparate Jewish camps is explored. The religious toleration of the people of the Netherlands, astonishing for its time, is explained by the practical, economic advantages of allowing prosperous merchants to settle and carry on their trade within Dutch cities. This religious tolerance at first took the form of a compromise: Jews were allowed to worship God in their own way, but could not flaunt their faith or festivals. Jews were allowed to settle but precautions were taken against their ability to proselytize their faith; they could not employ Christian servants or send their children to schools in Amsterdam. The situation, on the whole benefited both sides and Nadler quotes Rabbi Uziel who proclaimed life for Jews in Amsterdam was 'tranquil and secure'.

Nadler guards against the temptation to romanticize Rembrandt's interaction and fascination with the Jews. He says that his 'heartfelt respect for their traditions arose from his personal encounters along Breestraat'. In this, Nadler disagrees with Gary Schwartz, who in his *Rembrandt: his life, his paintings* believes that 'Rembrandt did not penetrate deeply into the Jewish community'. Nadler points out the difficulty of determining which of Rembrandt's works are purportedly Jewish subjects. There is no solid

evidence that the couple portrayed in the ‘Jewish Bride’ are of the Jewish faith or that an Old Testament scene is its subject. Rembrandt undoubtedly had a close connection with Rabbi Menassah ben Israel. Nadler gives a detailed account of Menassah’s life including his trip to England to engage in debate with Cromwell over the readmission of Jews to England. He found that Rembrandt and Menassah had several close acquaintances in common. The Hebrew characters are written in light on the wall in ‘Belchazzar’s Feast’ with great confidence, there are eight other important works giving Hebrew script in Rembrandt’s work and Nadler cites Menassah as his adviser on the texts. They worked together in 1655 on illustrations for Menassah’s book *Piedra Gloriosa* and Rembrandt produced four striking images; however, mysteriously, these were only used in the first edition of the book. Some have speculated that Menassah was unhappy with Rembrandt’s etchings; however, Nadler thinks the explanation is more mundane – that the second edition was produced after Menassah had left Amsterdam for good.

From chapter four the book takes a different slant away from Rembrandt and towards a much more general view of Jews in Amsterdam. There is a long account of the building of the Esnoga synagogue, which, when it was completed in 1675, six years after Rembrandt’s death, was one of the most impressive buildings in Amsterdam. Nadler recounts how the Jews in Amsterdam were a great tourist attraction, with travellers from England, France and Italy making a visit to watch the Jews at prayer a highpoint of their trip to Amsterdam. In an attempt to keep order, fines were introduced for Jews who engaged in interaction with the spectators. Nadler then investigates the building of the Jewish cemetery twenty miles outside Amsterdam in Ouderkerk. He looks at the works by van Ruisdael and de Hooghe as examples of Christian artists engaged in fascination for this place of alien burial.

I found this book to be very enlightening on the growth of the Jewish community in Amsterdam and the detailed research on the area in which Rembrandt lived is absorbing. However, the book, particularly its latter half, veers away from its central theme, and the focus on Rembrandt is largely lost. The author switches tack frequently and his changes of direction are sometimes quite disconcerting: an analysis of van Ruisdael’s landscape paintings is followed by a description of the author’s jogging trip to the cemetery and the book ends with a description of Messanah’s funeral. However, by his examination of the position of the Jewish community in Amsterdam Nadler has certainly contributed towards the debate on the extent of Rembrandt’s engagement with his Jewish neighbours.

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