

The representation of the Jewish culture in Amsterdam in the *oeuvre* of Rembrandt

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Abstract. Amid the furor caused by the effects of the Protestant Reform and the Counter-Reform, Amsterdam in the Modern Period, driven by economic progress and its conditions of freedom for the population made possible by the accumulation of wealth, will enable the arrival of several Portuguese Jews who were persecuted by the Inquisition. These Jews were mostly merchants and had a lot of relevance in overseas negotiations, that is, they collaborated for the progress of the nation they lived in, but even so, they suffered from anti-Semitic persecution, at a time of centralization of powers in the Iberian Peninsula, the that will provoke a huge diaspora of these Sephardic Jews all over the world. In Amsterdam, they will find conditions to live under a certain religious tolerance, due to their Calvinist thinking, thus benefiting not only religiously, but also economically, as they could carry out their activities without restrictions. The important Dutch painter Rembrandt lived in the same neighborhood as the Jews in that city, Breedrestraat, which allowed him to have a unique view of them, being so close to their daily lives, many of them being his customers. He portrayed them without the prejudice characteristic of the time, faithfully portraying Jewish symbology.

Keywords. Rembrandt, Amsterdam, Inquisition, Portuguese Jews, Religious Tolerance

1. Introduction

When we talk about the Modern Period, we immediately think of great transformations in the world, both economic and cultural. But also, many conflicts, mainly based on the discourse of faith: with the Protestant Reform and the emergence of new religions, and the Catholic response to the Courts of the Inquisition, spread throughout Europe, being present even in the colonies. The religious issue at this moment is very relevant: being Catholicism the predominant religion, some religious groups were highly persecuted, considered heretical. This is what happened to Sephardic Jews in the Iberian Peninsula. Expelled from Spain and later from Portugal, they were forced to find various destinations for their diaspora: the Northern Provinces, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and even Brazil. Spread throughout the world, they formed important Sephardic trade networks, where they established trade relations with each other. The destination highlighted here will be the Netherlands, in particular Amsterdam, also home to the painter Rembrandt. It is in this specific place that we will find very interesting relationships between these Portuguese Jews and Dutch paintings.

A country moved by commerce, and by the Calvinist logic, allowed certain religious freedom for those who lived there. It was the ideal place for Sephardic Jews to live in peace, carry out their trade, and

develop their fortune. They had a neighborhood of their own, the Jewry of Breedrestraat, which was where Rembrandt lived most of his life as well. It is through his work that we can see how important his coexistence with this Jewish community was, both financially, as he had many Jewish clients, many of them very wealthy, from the Portuguese Nation, who commissioned his portraits, but also aesthetically, because, in this context of so much intolerance and prejudice towards Jews in Europe, Rembrandt is one of the painters who will begin to represent them without Catholic stereotypes, painting them the way they were, and also paying close attention to staying true to Jewish symbology. . His portraits were almost photographic, they brought both meticulous physical details of the person he was painting, but he also brings sensitivity in his brushstroke, in a simple and unpretentious way, but with perfect technique and expressiveness.

2. Painting in Protestant Holland in the 17th-century

In the context of the Reform and Counter-Reform, this quarrel between Catholics and Protestants was directly reflected in art. On the part of the Catholics, we had the construction of large churches and commissions for canvases to demonstrate their

power and glory. In the case of the Protestants of Holland, they were not very fond of the Baroque, with all the gold, ornaments, and exaggeration. Art for them then was more sober and balanced.

There is now a new situation, Dutch painters who did not incline portrait painting had to paint their pictures first and find their buyers later. As natural as it is today to observe an artist working in this way, at that time it was a novelty. This gave the artist more freedom, who would no longer depend on the patron and their interference, but now also forced him to deal with the buying public. Gombrich [4] points out that there were two ways for the painter to sell his canvas: attending fairs or having an art dealer, who would act as an intermediary between the painter and the buyer. Faced with competitiveness, many specialized in a specific genre of painting to stand out, for example, landscapes, still life, war scenes, or portraits... they insisted on it.

The stylistic novelty will be simple and unpretentious. The works were interesting and impactful for representing the world as it is, without the need to use dramatic resources. They are the first to explore human splendor for what it was, showing that true transcendence was in the human itself, not outside of it. Real scenes, simple scenes evoked more emotion in those who saw the work precisely because they were simple, the enchantment for the banal, the trivial, attracted attention, for example, by the affective memory of those who observed.

3. Rembrandt

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669) was the greatest Dutch painter, forming part of the so-called "Golden Age of the Netherlands. He was born in Leiden, the eighth of nine children. His parents raised all his brothers to be craftsmen except him, who was sent to school alone to learn Latin. Rembrandt goes to study the classics at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Leiden, but soon abandons his studies to be an apprentice to some painters, as he had his inclinations toward painting and decides to dedicate himself to it. At the age of 25, he moved to Amsterdam, where he made his successful career as a portraitist. He married a wealthy young woman, Saskia van Uylenburgh, daughter of the mayor of Amsterdam, and they bought a huge house in the Jewish quarter. He had many orders and worked hard, but when his first wife dies, he falls into decay, going into debt. His popularity with the public also declined, and so he went bankrupt, his house being sold by creditors, along with his collection of antiques. He was saved from ruin by his second wife Hendrickje Stoffels and their son Titus, who started a venture selling artwork and hire Rembrandt as their employee. These two lifelong companions of his died even before he did. Rembrandt died a year after his son and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Church of Westerkerk. In this summary of his life, we can see that he went through many experiences, through ups and downs,

and certainly, all this experience contributes to his expressive and penetrating brushstroke. He was successful at a young age and was also a teacher for many other painters.

His way of painting portraits allows us to visualize the person as he was, in flesh and blood, and this is what marks the painter's style, the sensitivity in showing the real, however complex or cruel it was, or even too much. simple, but being true to reality as it were. He painted a series of self-portraits throughout his life, from his youth, which allows us to have the feeling of knowing him intimately, in the moments of his peak and wealth, and those of tragedy and melancholy, being as if they were psychological readings of oneself. A curiosity is that in many paintings, he represented himself in the crowd.

We have seen other portraits, made by great artists, which are memorable for how they synthesize the person's character and the role he or she performs. Even the best of them, however, may remind us of fictional characters or actors playing a role. As convincing and impressive as they are, we feel that they present just one aspect of a complex human being. Not even the Mona Lisa was supposed to smile all the time. Already in Rembrandt's portraits, we have the feeling of being face to face with real people; we feel their warmth, their need for sympathy, their loneliness, their suffering. His sharp, unflinching eyes, which we know so well from his self-portraits, seemed capable of penetrating the human heart. [4]

In his work in general, of paintings and engravings, he produces, in addition to portraits and self-portraits, as explained above, he also made some group portraits, with the famous example of the "De Nachtwacht" ("The Night Watch"), 1642. But he also produced many biblical-themed paintings and landscapes.

4. "Amstelredam galut"

Rembrandt in 1639 buys a mansion on the Bredestraat ("Broad Street"), which would be the main street of the Jewish quarter in Amsterdam. As we can see from the presence of Rembrandt, the neighborhood was not exclusive to the Jewish community. Even living in Amsterdam, Portuguese Jews did not fully integrate into Dutch culture. Their fixation around the Bredestraat, according to Ronaldo Vainfas, was to create a kind of Jewish quarter, a neighborhood where Sephardic Jews would be concentrated. There they spoke Portuguese among themselves, the older residents barely knowing Dutch. Dutch was important to them because it was the language of business, that's how the Sephardim carried out their trade with individuals in Holland, it was the intermediary language of commercial transactions, of negotiations.

The Sephardic Jews, or Sephardim, were different from the Ashkenazim of eastern and central Europe,

they were the Jews who lived in the Iberian Peninsula. Their original language was Sephardic and Ladino (for the liturgy), and they have their rituals and customs. With the advent of the Spanish Inquisition, from 1478 onwards, a series of measures were taken against this population. In March 1492, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain was decreed, so that they would leave by August. And this is where the Sephardic diaspora begins. Many heads to the nearest destination, Portugal, but in 1492 the expulsion of Jews and Moors were signed in a marriage clause by D. Manuel I, which begins to happen in 1496. Those who wished were allowed to be baptized and adopt the Catholic faith, and it is from there that the so-called "New Christians" are born. But in 1497 a series of attitudes in the persecution of these people is initiated. In April, children under the age of 14 are taken from their families. In May, they decreed a 20-year guarantee so that converts would not be questioned. And in October, the forced baptism of all Jews takes place.

It is important to observe the behavior of the Holy Inquisition regarding the Sephardic Jews. When we talk about the Inquisition, we immediately think of witches and Protestants. But there is a particularity in the Iberian Peninsula, where the focus was on Jews and Muslims. There were a few cases of accusations of witchcraft and sorcery, but that was the minority. The focus was the persecution of heretics. This must stand out because heretics, that is, those who deviate from the orthodox faith, were prosecuted, and judged by the Inquisition, not Jews, nor Muslims. These were expelled. Who the Inquisition judged were the New Christians, the Catholics. There was this division in society between New Christians and Old Christians. Old Christians were those who were traditionally Catholic, and New Christians were converts, either voluntarily or by force. The main accusation often made against them was the practice of crypto-Judaism, that is, to behave Catholic in public, to attend church and religious festivals, but to Judaize in secret. Did it happen? Yes. There were the B'nei Anusim, or "sons of the forced", who we also know as Marranos, who were the descendants of the Sephardic forcibly converted. These kept Jewish traditions and customs secret, inside their homes. But many ended up abandoning the Jewish faith and following Catholicism, but they were also accused. The New Christians were not only persecuted religiously but also in the civil sphere, highlighting the creation of the Clean Blood Statutes, extremely discriminatory laws, where, for example, to apply for certain positions or offices, it was necessary to prove the cleansing of the blood, which made life very difficult for many New Christians and their descendants.

But this was true of those who remained in Portugal, Spain, and their colonies. At the time of the expulsions, many moved to other countries, which is the case of the Portuguese Jews in question, the "Gente da Nação", neighbors of Rembrandt, who even sold many paintings on the Old Testament.

"Amstelredam galut" means Exile in Amsterdam. In Bredestraat, Rembrandt had relationships with several very wealthy Jews, who became his customers, such as merchants, doctors, printers, and rabbis. Rembrandt even rented his basement to merchants Jacob and Samuel Pereira, who used it as a warehouse and office. He was a neighbor of Isaac Montalto, a famous doctor who served at the court of Maria de Medici and had as his secretary the future rabbi Saul Mortera. In the block next to his house, lived Miguel Spinoza, father of philosopher Baruch Spinoza. His close relationship with these people allowed him to paint several scenes of the daily lives of these Jews. He painted them just as they were, without the classic negative elements of Western painting, associating them with evil, greed, and the Devil. He always tried to be faithful to the Jewish symbology in the biblical-themed paintings.

He made for the famous rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel, the first Portuguese rabbi to be trained in Amsterdam, and founder of the first printer in the city, who lived a few blocks from his house and was his friend, four illustrations for his treatise *Piedra Gloriosa*, in addition to also his most famous portrait.

5. Jewish Representations in Rembrandt's Work

The illustration "Jews in the Synagogue", 1648, can be considered a visual document of what the Jews were like at the time, and how they lived and carried out their religious customs. It can also be considered a triumph for the Jewish Nation because on the same date it was made, many of their equals were being persecuted and judged, just for being Jews or descendants of Jews, for being or not practicing crypto-Judaism, while they were there, freely professing their faith in North Jerusalem: Amsterdam, being blessed by the religious tolerance promoted by the Calvinist Protestant thought of this new place that welcomed them. From the observation of this Jewish daily life, Rembrandt also used these people as inspiration to paint his pictures about the Old Testament, when he portrayed biblical characters. Still in the illustration, Rembrandt manages to emphasize the feeling of isolation, through the solitary figure in the center of the image, seated with his back to the viewer, along with the other characters, who give the sensation of movement, as if they were walking through the synagogue while talking to each other in pairs. It may perhaps refer to the feeling of isolation felt by Polish Ashkenazi Jews, newcomers to this pre-established Jewish community.

In the painting "Moses and the Tablets of the Law", from 1659, we have an example of Rembrandt's approach to biblical themes. It represents Moses threatening to break the two original stones with the

inscription of the 10 commandments, as he descends the sacred mountain, a symbol of the sacred covenant between God and the Jewish people. Rembrandt symbolizes his heavenly origin in Hebrew writing with white letters under a black stone. Moses is not portrayed as a stereotypical hero and overly dramatic, but with the simplicity and reality of Rembrandt's style, evoking how he was also a man and a sinner. But his illuminated face is featured prominently in the painting, symbolizing the enlightenment of Moses by his inner reflection, and understanding, and who was then to confront his people. Rembrandt expresses the pain and sadness that Moses might have felt when he realized that his people could draw closer to God, but the process could only be learned slowly and painfully, over the years to come across the desert, symbolizing that following the 10 Commandments would not be an easy task.

Rembrandt was a devout Protestant and had read the Bible many times. With that, he brings the concern of expressing with vivacity not only the stories narrated but also the messages they brought. He tries to express the story as he envisioned it happening. "He got into the spirit of each character and tried to visualize exactly how each situation would have gone; what the gestures and attitudes of people would be like at that moment". [4]

6. Conclusion

This way in which Rembrandt portrayed the Jewish community does not only reflect the fruit of his coexistence with them, which, due to his proximity, portrayed them in a real, sensitive, and gentle way. They also serve as a historical document, for us to understand what the reality of this community in the Netherlands was like at that time, as can be very well exemplified by the portrait of Dr. Ephraim Bueno, Jew, doctor, poet, and Portuguese translator, where we can observe a typical aristocrat of Amsterdam, with his black costume, a wide-brimmed hat, short beard, and lordly posture. It was a preparatory study for a painting, this explains the rough brushstrokes on his clothes and hands.

The relations with the Jewish community expressed in his work also serve as a good example of the coexistence between the Dutch community and the People of the Nation during this period.

7. References

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