



'He portrayed Jews as fellow human beings' Questions for... Andre Salz

by [Susan Bloom](#)
NJJN Contributing Writer

January 14, 2013

Intriguing connections between Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69) and the Jewish community of 17th-century Amsterdam will be explored when painter and former teacher Andre Salz offers an illustrated talk at Kehilat HaNahar in New Hope, Pa., on Friday, Jan. 18.

A Quakertown, Pa., resident and long-time member of Kehilat HaNahar, Salz has exhibited his landscape and still-life paintings in Philadelphia, New York, and other locations. *NJJN* caught up with the 62-year-old Salz for a preview of his lecture and his perspective on how this “odd coupling” affected the future of fine art worldwide.

NJJN: As background, talk about Rembrandt and the key characteristics of his works.

Andre Salz: Among the many prominent features of Rembrandt’s work was the thickness of his paint and the dramatic nature of his use of light. He drew with paint and took a more active, organic approach than other painters of his time. Second, Rembrandt’s work elicited a great sense of emotional intimacy — his subjects were not idealized, but rather were depicted as real people and were sensitively portrayed in terms of their detail. He had a direct connection to his subject matter and typically involved few other participants in his paintings beyond the main subject. In addition, while Rembrandt was a Christian, he was a strong believer in the importance of the Torah stories and the need to have them depicted.

NJJN: Please discuss the Jewish community in Rembrandt’s Amsterdam of the 1600s.

Salz: In 1619, the Dutch welcomed “The Jewish Nation” — comprised initially of Sephardi Jews who had been expelled from Portugal and Spain and then Jews of Ashkenazi origin as well — while at the same time placing numerous restrictions on their lifestyle and livelihood. Despite this, the Jewish community — which at its height is estimated to have accounted for 3 percent of Amsterdam’s population at the time — became successful merchants of numerous goods, including tobacco and arms.

NJJN: How did Rembrandt come to be connected with the Jewish community?

Salz: Jewish immigrants entering Amsterdam located themselves near the city's artists' district, so Rembrandt interacted with Jews because they lived all around him. Though the majority of Dutch residents were Calvinist Christians, many had an exotic fascination with the Old Testament and would frequent synagogues in the Jewish community to see how Jews worshiped. Rembrandt's portrayal of Jews and Jewish subject matter in as many as 30-50 of his paintings and etchings—including *Moses and the Tablets of the Law*, *The Jewish Bride*, *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*, *Belshazzar's Feast*, and *The Triumph of Mordecai*—were inspired by his own spirituality and interaction with prominent Jewish figure Rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel (Spinoza's teacher) and others.

NJJN: Why do experts believe Rembrandt had meaningful interactions with his Jewish neighbors?

Salz: In addition to a known connection with Rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel based on his role as illustrator of the rabbi's book, Rembrandt had to have interacted with the rabbi or other prominent members of the Jewish community in order to capture some of the details he did, such as the nuances of Sephardi characteristics or the accurate Hebrew words and images featured in his work. He portrayed Jews as fellow human beings, a stance which ran counter to the anti-Semitic depiction by many other European painters of the day.

NJJN: What legacy did Rembrandt leave behind for Jews of subsequent generations?

Salz: Rembrandt was very much of the world and involved in its human dimension, and in that his depiction of Jews in his paintings and etchings was not negative or anti-Semitic, he likely helped normalize the way people perceived the Jewish community in Holland. In addition to influencing later painters such as Chagall and van Gogh, he also helped to inspire the growth of a prominent community of Jewish painters by the 1800s-1900s. Though in many ways Rembrandt's relationship with the Jewish community represented an odd coupling and an ironic coming together, his presence helped Holland become an area known for its openness to interaction, ideas, and diversity.