



“Legacy of Decency. Rembrandt, the Jews and the Danes” Elverhøj Museum of History and Art, Solvang, CA

by Neil Goodman

In 2012, my wife JoEllyn and I bought a house in the small town of Los Alamos in the central coast of California. The nickname for Los Alamos is “Almost Lost,” and, with two of our kids, the population rose by four percent. Overlooking a vineyard with a hypnotic view of the Los Padres National Forest and the San Rafael Mountains, I felt more like Turner than Giacometti as my urban roots were quickly replaced by small town life.

Solvang is a small Danish town nestled in the Santa Ynez valley (twenty minutes south of Los Alamos and 154 miles north of LA) founded by a group of Danes (1911) escaping the harsh midwestern climate. To this day, the community is firmly entrenched in its Danish roots as well as surrounded by excellent wineries and a bucolic landscape. Occasionally a subject of Garrison Keillor humor, it is noted for both its traditional Danish architecture and as the location of the cult classic film *Sideways*, starring Paul Giamatti. In fact, you will drive by the ostrich farm featured in the film on the way to Solvang.

Solvang’s Elverhøj Museum of History and Art occupies a historic hand-built structure in the former home studio of two artists, Viggo Brandt-Erichsen and his wife Martha Mott. Opened in 1988, the museum serves the community as both a cultural and historical institution and has permanent and temporary exhibits. As it is on the road, so to speak, from LA to San Francisco, the museum is well attended and has strong local support. Ironically, the town’s quaintness and traditional Danish architecture provides a steady source of revenue for the community and, as such, tourist income parallels and supports its identity. The next time you are visiting LA and decide to take the northerly route on Highway 101 on your drive up the coast, stop by the Elverhøj in Solvang. You will find a museum committed to many local exhibitions that celebrate the joys of regionalism as well as showcasing Danish history and culture.



Elverhoj exterior—image of the exterior of the museum, handbuilt by the artists who made it their home. Image courtesy of Elverhøj Museum of History and Art.

The Elverhøj exhibition “Legacy of Decency: Rembrandt, Jews & Danes” is actually a pairing of two distinct exhibitions. While initially discordant, the work is oddly well suited to the times, as the central theme of the show is about empathy, both individually and collectively. Their juxtaposition proves to be an insightful historical and educational dialogue, and as such, the show’s strength is both conversational and aesthetic. This material is also a bit of a departure for the museum, as

A CHICAGO TRADITION

ANN SATHER

RESTAURANTS & CATERING

909 W. Belmont Ave. 773-348-2378
1147 W. Granville Ave. 773-274-0557
3415 N. Broadway Ave. 773-305-0024

SUPPORTING THE VISUAL ARTS

Deborah Hellerstein, PhD
Psychotherapist/
Psychoanalyst

30 N. Michigan Ave.
312-781-9566
therapyinchicago.com

25 years in private practice working with adults ranging from artists, academics, office workers, and political organizers to homemakers. I take BCBS and I have a sliding scale fee.

most of the art exhibitions are contemporary and regional.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self Portrait with Plumed Hat and Lowered Sabre*, 1634. Etching on laid paper, 5 1/8 x 4 3/16. Image courtesy of Elverhøj Museum of History and Art.

The twenty-one prints by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) are borrowed from the permanent collection of the Westmont Ridley-Tree Museum of Art in Santa Barbara or Montecito, California. The prints were a gift in 2014 from the collection of Fran and Howard Berger with the intent that the work would be available for public exhibition. As stated in the catalog essay, "Their goal in collecting Rembrandt's prints was to demonstrate Rembrandt's special relationship with Amsterdam's citizens of the Jewish faith." Within this rubric, the prints specifically address stories of the Old Testament. Titles for the prints include *Abraham and Isaac*, *David in Prayer*, *Joseph Telling His Dream*, *Abraham's Sacrifice*, and *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.



LEFT: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Joseph Telling His Dreams*, 1638. Etching on laid paper 4 1/4 x 3 1/4. **RIGHT:** Rembrandt van Rijn, *Abraham's Sacrifice*, 1655. Etching on laid paper with pen and ink and ruled lines 6 1/8 x 5 1/4. Images courtesy of Elverhøj Museum of History and Art.

One of the most poignant images in the exhibition is *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Rembrandt's print embodies both revelation and action, the quintessential moment between life and death. The horror of sacrifice unfolds, as the epiphany of faith and individualism are at the razor's edge. These questions are profound and eternal and seem to be at the core of the human experience. The image is haunting and unrelenting, yet somehow cathartic, as we watch the drama unfold while knowing the ending. Today we are more like Abraham, where every day we negotiate faith and fact, belief and hope. Perhaps we could wish for the same redemption and divine intervention. Yet unlike the Sacrifice of Isaac, our ending is uncertain and still before us.

As I mentioned, the exhibition and motivations for collecting the prints are both historical and political and canonize Rembrandt as both a celebrated artist and a friend to the Jews. Whether this is entirely true, based on the catalog, seems to be open to a bit of a debate among historians, as there are differing interpretations. What we do know is that Rembrandt lived close to the Sephardic Jewish quarter (ghetto). The Spanish inquisition of 1492 and the Portuguese expulsion in 1496 brought a great migration of Jews to Amsterdam, and many lived within close proximity to

Rembrandt with a relative ease of social and religious restrictions. The occasional use of Jewish models also points to a loosening of biblical prohibitions in the Jewish community regarding figurative representation.



LEFT: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1636. Etching on laid paper, 6 ¼ x 5 ½.
RIGHT: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Ephraim Bonus, Jewish Physician*, 1647. Etching, engraving, and drypoint on laid paper, 8 1/8 x 7. Images courtesy of Elverhøj Museum of History and Art.

The prints, illustrating themes from the Old Testament, were possibly an important source of revenue for Rembrandt, as Dutch Reformed churches publicly banned pictorial images in their houses of worship (similar to synagogues). The prints then had multiple functions, including religious education and family worship, and certainly embraced a longer and visually engaging view of biblical Jewish history based on stories from the Old Testament.

The irony in Rembrandt, through our modern lens, is that this appropriation of “otherness” is precisely what we admire, as he crosses boundaries and empathetically brings one culture to the next. Whether or not this was his original intention can be debated, yet in Rembrandt’s case, this “borrowing” countered the grotesquely exaggerated caricatures typically used to portray Jews in the Middle Ages. This “humanism” is at the core of Rembrandt’s portrayal of Jews, as he organically recalibrates physical stereotypes by linking representation with content. The sad fact of European anti-Semitism was that his voice ultimately was more singular than collective, yet it continues to remain powerful and moving and resonates in today’s world.



Denmark was occupied by German troops 1940–1945. King Christian won popular support when he carried on with his daily horse ride in Copenhagen's streets. The king came to symbolize the nation's resistance to the German occupation during World War II. Image courtesy of Elverhøj Museum of History and Art.

This brings us to the Danes. If Rembrandt’s voice was singular, the Danes was collective. The second part of the exhibition focuses on this aspect of Danish culture which made their role in the rescue of the Jewish population unique in the Holocaust. In the history of WWII, their courage and shared action were a beacon of light in a world adrift with horror. The Danish story is told through large placards placed in the gallery and highlights key moments in that particular period of Danish history. The Jews in Denmark were relatively safe until 1943, when the Gestapo reversed its policy and moved towards mass arrest and deportation. After the new policy was leaked to a prominent Dane, the Danish community both hid and transported Jews to neutral Sweden within a three-week period, thereby rescuing over ninety-five percent of the Jewish population. It is a remarkable story that resonates in so many ways in the times we live in, and as events fade it is important to

pass these stories from one generation to the next, for they are worth remembering and they are at the very core of the best of humanity.



The rescue of the danish Jews occurred during Nazi Germany's occupation of Denmark during World War II. In 1943, the Danish resistance movement, with the assistance of many Danish citizens, managed to evacuate 7,220 of Denmark's 7,800 Jews, plus 686 non-Jewish spouses, by sea to nearby neutral Sweden. Image courtesy of Elverhøj Museum of History and Art.

As we confront the challenges of our daily life, I am deeply grateful for how others maintained and fostered their empathy and morality in other difficult times, and how we as artists have given voice to the depths of the human experience. We are our story, and how history remembers us will perhaps become another generation's archetype in how they collectively confront adversity while maintaining their humanity. Through their art and action, both Rembrandt and the Danish resistance created a lasting "legacy of decency."

The exhibition opened in mid-March and closed shortly thereafter in response to the pandemic. It will hopefully reopen at a later date.

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formally based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the Los Angeles correspondent for the *New Art Examiner*.



Resistance Wall of People poster: one of the placards from the Museum of Danish Resistance, Copenhagen. Image courtesy of Elverhøj Museum of History and Art.

Make a MONTHLY DONATION or a ONE-TIME DONATION via *PayPal*

Donate

U.S. : \$55.00 USD - yearly

SUBSCRIBE to the print version of the *New Art Examiner* via *PayPal*

Subscribe

