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STEWART GARDNER
MUSEUM

EXHIBITIONS AT ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM EXPLORE HOW BIBLICAL
STORY OF ESTHER HAS PROVIDED ARTISTIC INSPIRATION THROUGH THE AGES

***The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt* Features Masterworks by Rembrandt
and other 17th-Century Dutch Artists; Works by Michal Rovner Reveal
Contemporary Fascination with Jewish Heroine**

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Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669), *A Jewish Heroine [possibly Esther] from the Hebrew Bible*, about 1632–1633. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1953

BOSTON, MA (August 2026) — This fall, the [Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum](#) will present exhibitions relating to the biblical story of the Jewish heroine Esther, a popular source of cross-cultural inspiration over the centuries, including the 1600s and today. On view from August 6, 2026 – January 18, 2027, [The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt](#) features 39 works of art that illustrate how the Hebrew Bible's Book of Esther was widely interpreted and retold by both Jewish and Christian communities in the nascent Dutch Republic. Displayed in the Museum's Hostetter Gallery, the exhibition showcases five works by Rembrandt van Rijn

(1606–1669)—three oil paintings and two etchings—including [A Jewish Heroine \[possibly Esther\] from the Hebrew Bible](#) (1632–1633) on loan from the [National Gallery of Canada](#) and the Gardner's seminal [Self Portrait, Age 23](#) (1629).

The exhibition includes paintings and prints by Rembrandt's contemporaries working in the Netherlands, including Jan Lievens, Aert de Gelder, and Jan Steen. It also incorporates textiles, decorative arts, and ceremonial objects related to Purim, the Jewish holiday during which the Book of Esther is read. Complementing this historic exhibition, [Michal Rovner: Esther Scrolls](#)—highlighting new works inspired by the story of Esther by multi-media contemporary artist Michal Rovner—will be presented in the Fenway Gallery. Additionally, a public work of art by Rovner, [Untitled/Night](#) (2016), will be displayed on the Museum's Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade.

“Across time and culture, Esther has emerged as a popular heroine, appearing in art and literature as a paragon of bravery,” shares Peggy Fogelman, *Norma Jean Calderwood Director*. “This season, the Gardner Museum is exploring the enduring influence and universal themes that have made Esther’s story so uniquely relatable through the ages—from Rembrandt and his Dutch contemporaries in the 1600s to artists working today.”

The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt

[*The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt*](#) was co-organized by the [Jewish Museum](#), New York, and [North Carolina Museum of Art](#), Raleigh. It was curated by Abigail Rapoport, Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Curator of Judaica at the Jewish Museum, and Michele L. Frederick, Curator of European Art and Provenance Research at the North Carolina Museum of Art. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is the third and final venue for the exhibition following its presentation at the Jewish Museum in 2025 and North Carolina Museum of Art in early 2026. Modified for its showing in Boston, [*The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt*](#) is the first major exhibition of 17th-century Dutch art at the Gardner, combining the Museum’s own rich holdings with generous loans from local, national, and international museums, private collections, and Jewish cultural organizations. The Gardner presentation was curated by Diana Seave Greenwald, *William and Lia Poorvu Curator of the Collection*.

Esther’s story, set 2,500 years ago, recounts the plight and eventual triumph of the Jewish people in exile under the Persian empire of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, who reigned 485–464 BCE). As the new wife of the Persian King, Esther hid her Jewish identity until her relative Mordecai beseeched her to speak up. Risking her life, Esther revealed her religion to stop a massacre of the Jews plotted by the king’s advisor, Haman. Through her bravery, Esther saved her people. Dutch Protestants saw parallels in Esther’s story to their own situation as their national identity was being forged in opposition to Spanish Catholic imperial rule, while the relative freedom of religious expression in the 17th-century Netherlands allowed the growing Jewish community in that country to express their culture and practice their religion. [*The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt*](#) invites visitors to explore the relevance of Esther’s story across faiths and cultures.

A pair of etchings by Rembrandt introduces the exhibition—[*The Great Jewish Bride*](#) (1635), and [*The Triumph of Mordecai*](#) (about 1641)—both on loan from the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#). Rembrandt was likely drawn to Esther’s story because of its resonance with the newly independent Netherlands, the story’s visual richness, and, possibly, because he lived among

and collaborated with members of the Jewish community. Also on view in the exhibition's first gallery are two Esther scrolls—called *megillah* in Hebrew—on loan from the Jewish Museum. These treasured documents would be brought to the synagogue every year on Purim and read (from right to left) as the story was recited. The parchment is decorated with [illustrations of scenes and architectural borders](#) by Jewish engraver Salom Italia, the most influential maker of scrolls in Rembrandt's time.

The main gallery of the exhibition showcases how Amsterdam became a cosmopolitan crossroads in the 17th century. Jacob van der Ulft's [Dam Square with the New Town Hall under Construction](#) (1652–1689), on loan from the [Rijksmuseum](#) in Amsterdam, depicts groups of Dutch citizens and merchants mingling in the vibrant city center. Figures wearing turbans and sashes indicate the flow of trade between the Middle East and the burgeoning Dutch Empire. The variety of imported goods for sale in Amsterdam and the city's engagement with people from around the world shaped Dutch artists' global understanding.

Some artists represented Esther as a Dutch woman. For others, the ancient Persian setting of Esther's story inspired images of sumptuous locales and fantastical interpretations of the biblical Middle East. Although the model in Rembrandt's [Man in a Turban](#) (1632), on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is Dutch, the painter cast him as someone of a different identity, wearing a wrapped turban, embroidered sash, and robe glowing with metallic threads. Rembrandt may have made this painting to satisfy a growing demand in the Netherlands for paintings of imaginary Persian or Ottoman princes. A painting by Jan Lievens, who briefly shared a studio with Rembrandt, is on loan from the [North Carolina Museum of Art](#). [The Feast of Esther](#) (about 1625) depicts King Ahasuerus (right) wearing layers of luxurious textiles. Lievens would have encountered people, objects, and textiles from across the world in the markets of Amsterdam.

In the exhibition's main gallery, textiles, furniture, and decorative arts share the stage with paintings. Textiles from the Safavid Empire—similar to those that appear in Dutch representations of scenes from the story of Esther—are positioned next to those paintings. Also, the tapestry [Esther Fainting before Ahasuerus](#) (1510–1525), from Isabella Stewart Gardner's collection, is a virtuoso display of design and weaving. Depicting the pivotal moment of Esther interceding with her husband Ahasuerus to save her people, its crowded composition and dense narrative exemplify how biblical stories were often pictured in the century before Rembrandt's time. Highlighting several scenes from the story of Esther, the

boldly painted [Cabinet with Painted Panels from the Book of Esther](#), attributed to Frans Francken II (Flemish, 1581–1642), is on loan from the [Jewish Museum](#). This cabinet once belonged to a *kunstkamer* (a room filled with art and rare objects) in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of present-day Belgium); the collector who commissioned the piece would have used it to store small, precious items. In addition to sacred scrolls, other Judaica related to the joyous holiday of Purim are included in the exhibition. A Purim cup (about 1690), engraved with the inscription “Blessed is Mordecai” and “Cursed is Haman,” highlights the reversal of fortunes—Mordecai and his fellow Jews triumphing over Haman—central to the story of Esther.

A [catalogue](#) about [The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt](#) was published by Yale University Press in association with the Jewish Museum and North Carolina Museum of Art. It was edited by Abigail Rapoport with Michele L. Frederick, and includes contributions by Larry Silver, Antwaun Sargent, and a postscript interview with contemporary artist Fred Wilson. The Gardner’s work by Rembrandt, [Self-Portrait, Age 23](#), is also the subject of a new publication, [Rembrandt’s Self-Portrait](#) (Paul Hoberton Publishing, June 2026), written by the Museum’s Associate Director and Chief Curator, Nathaniel Silver, along with Associate Paintings Conservator, Lucia Bay.

Michal Rovner

As a contemporary complement to [The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt](#), the Museum has invited Michal Rovner, a multimedia artist engaged with the story of Esther, to conceive a response to the historic exhibition for its Fenway Gallery. The resulting exhibition, [Michal Rovner: Esther Scrolls](#), includes three recently created works by the Israeli American artist. Additionally, [Untitled/Night, 2016](#), part of Rovner’s ongoing reflections on the animal world, will be displayed on the Museum’s Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade. Both exhibitions are curated by Pieranna Cavalchini, *Tom and Lisa Blumenthal Curator of Contemporary Art*.

After intensively researching and studying historic *megillahs*, or scrolls, handwritten in ink on parchment, Rovner has produced three new pieces connected to the 2,500-year-old story of Esther. Two of the works—a video projection and a large print—are in a vertical scroll format; the third is arranged like a horizontal scroll. *Michal Rovner: Esther Scrolls* will be on view from August 6, 2026 – January 18, 2027, concurrent with [The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt](#).

The video projection, *Esther Scroll: The Kingdom* (2026), portrays a mystical landscape resembling a textile or fresco with moving figures. Rovner imagines Queen Esther as two personas, one dark and one light, as they walk within the Persian palace, a site of beauty and ceremony. Esther is surrounded by other female figures continuously appearing and reappearing, moving like text on a page. Rovner transforms the Book of Esther, traditionally in the form of a scroll, unrolled as it is read, into cycles of mysterious, meditative motion.

Esther Scroll: New Reflections (2026), a vertical print measuring over eight feet tall, is Rovner's personal response to the *megillahs* she researched and includes a few emphasized words and phrases from the original manuscripts. The word at the top translates to "Esther" in Hebrew, and a fragment of a sentence, "fear fell upon them," appears directly below. Rovner explains, "The dark side of the story unfolds fear, desperation and the wonder of Queen Esther managing to turn the story around. These words floated in front of my eyes, carrying layers of meaning and time."

The third work in the exhibition, *Esther Scroll: New Realizations* (2026)—a series of 10 small prints laid out like a horizontal scroll—also combines words and figures. Rovner made these prints on very old handmade Chinese paper, so that the images appear almost like rubbings of stones from the biblical period.

In addition to her recent Esther-inspired works, a still from a video taken by Rovner over a decade ago will be displayed as a public work of art on the Museum's Anne H. Fitzpatrick Façade. *Untitled/Night*, 2016, a black and white image of a jackal, will appear like a sentinel on the Museum's edifice from July 28, 2026 – February 8, 2027. Rovner used night vision cameras to capture the shadowy silhouette of one of the jackals she could hear at night near her farm in Kfar Shmuel, Israel.

Filmed from a distance, the animal felt at once strange and familiar to Rovner. It made the artist think of Anubis, the jackal-headed god of Egyptian mythology, protector of souls traveling to the afterlife. This guardian-like animal watches over an unidentified landscape, filled with human figures across it, which the artist has sometimes likened to text moving on a page.

Michal Rovner's meditative works often blur the line between past and present, exploring universal questions of identity and collective memory. Her multimedia practice employs drawing, printmaking, video projection, sculpture, and installation. By recording and erasing

visual information, where specifics of time and place are obscured, her works become gestural, layered, and abstract reflections on the fragility of life and continuum of human experience. Rovner's work is held in major public collections worldwide and has been the subject of more than 70 solo exhibitions. This is the first solo showing of her work in Boston.

Support

The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt is co-organized by the Jewish Museum, New York, and the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.

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Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum invites you to escape the ordinary in a magical setting where art and community come together to inspire new ways of envisioning our world. Embodying the fearless legacy of its founder, the Museum offers a singular invitation to explore the past through a contemporary lens, creating meaningful encounters with art and joyful connections for all. Modeled after a Venetian palazzo, unforgettable galleries surround a luminous Courtyard and are home to masters such as Rembrandt, Raphael, Titian, Michelangelo, Whistler, and Sargent. The Renzo Piano wing provides a platform for contemporary artists, musicians, and scholars and serves as an innovative venue where creativity is celebrated in all of its forms.

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