

REMBRANDT AND THE BIBLE

DIVINE ENGRAVING
30.11.23-17.03.24



REMBRANDT IN GENEVA!

70 religious etchings by the great Dutch artist create a biblical story in 45 episodes at the International Museum of the Reformation!

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1.

10 KEY POINTS

- 1 An exceptional collaboration between the Musée d'art et d'histoire (MAH) and the Musée International de la Réforme (MIR) in Geneva.
- 2 72 etchings by and after Rembrandt presented. The exhibition brings together more than two-thirds of his printed work on religious and biblical themes.
- 3 54 etchings depict well-known biblical scenes, such as Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, The Sacrifice of Abraham, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds, Christ Disputing with the Doctors, The Raising of Lazarus, The Good Samaritan and The Crucifixion.
- 4 13 etchings depict episodes from the 4 books of the Old Testament, especially Genesis, while 41 illustrate episodes from the New Testament. Several of these are represented more than once (*The Flight into Egypt*, *Christ Disputing with the Doctors*, *The Crucifixion*, *The Pilgrims of Emmaus*).
- 5 9 etchings illustrate broader religious themes, such as the Holy Family, St. Jerome and the Virgin Mary. Two of Rembrandt's most famous works can be seen at the MIR: *Jesus Preaching and Healing the Sick*, known as *The Hundred Guilder Print*, which brings together several scenes from Christ's public life in a single composition, and the famous *Crucifixion*, also known as *The Three Crosses*.
- 6 The scenography uses chiaroscuro effects and large-scale reproductions of selected works to create an immersive experience.
- 7 A biographical, historical and artistic timeline, a self-portrait of the artist, portraits of his Amsterdam contemporaries from different religious backgrounds, and a film on Rembrandt's etching technique contextualize the prints.
- 8 Visitors can print their own reproduction of one of Rembrandt's etchings using a hand-operated press inspired by Gutenberg's.
- 9 An audio guide provides access to didactic panels, labels, and additional informative content in ten languages (French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Japanese, Korean, Chinese).
- 10 A programme of guided tours and lectures, as well as a 240-page catalog featuring reproductions of all the works exhibited along with commentaries and historical essays, complement the four month long exhibition.

2.

A WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

Was Rembrandt Protestant?

Rembrandt is considered a Protestant painter. As such, his portrait adorns the walls of the MIR's new permanent exhibition. "Rembrandt and the Bible" puts this claim to the test: what exactly is "Protestant" about the 72 etchings by and after Rembrandt on display at the MIR from 30 November? The Dutch master had an extensive knowledge of the Bible. These etchings tell a holy story, from Adam and Eve to the Acts of the Apostles. Yet the exhibition also contains images of the Virgin and Child and St. Jerome which, on the face of it, have nothing to do with Protestantism.

Little is known about the great artist's faith, except that he seems to have followed the rites of the Calvinist Church, but may also have been close to certain Protestant currents such as the Mennonites. We know that he clashed with the Reformed church due to his marital situation, and that collecting art, was far more important to him than conforming to Calvinist austerity. One learns all this and more, thanks to the exhibition's ambitious scenography and curation. More importantly, however, it is impossible not to fall in love with the succession of vivid scenes unfolding before one's eyes. Rembrandt's friends, family, and the people of Amsterdam are vibrantly brought to life in the guise of the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, or the desperately ill in the *Hundred Guilder Print*.

These extraordinary etchings illuminate the well-known stories they depict. They bring them closer to us, within reach; in this respect, they share the vision of the Protestant Reformation. They call to mind Martin Luther's famous quote regarding those who should inspire the interpreters of Scripture, which Rembrandt, naturally, made his own: "The woman in her house, the children in the streets, the common man in the market...".

Gabriel de Montmollin

Director of the MIR

3.

AN EXCEPTIONAL EXHIBITION

“Rembrandt and the Bible. Divine etching” is a joint exhibition of the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire de Genève (MAH) and the MIR. The MAH has provided a unique group of etchings from its collection, with additional worked loaned by the Musée Jenisch in Vevey and the Jan Krugier Foundation. The 61 religious scenes on loan from the MAH are complemented by 10 prints belonging to the Musée Jenisch and one loaned by the Krugier Foundation. In all, the exhibition brings together, for the first time ever, 72 of the 89 etchings on religious themes created by the Dutch master. These also include several versions of the same theme made by Rembrandt.

The striking scenography is the brainchild of Simon de Tovar and Alain Batifoulier, who also designed the MIR’s new permanent exhibition. The exhibition underlines the biblical inspiration of Rembrandt’s etchings by presenting the scenes in their order of appearance in the Bible, accompanied by related passages from the Old and New Testaments. This allows visitors to understand which episodes Rembrandt chose, and how he visually interpreted them. The combination of the 54 original etchings and texts from Scripture creates a biblical timeline, from Adam and Eve to the Acts of the Apostles.

While Rembrandt’s art cannot be described as Protestant, his choice of episodes from the Bible, if not his artistic style, clearly mark him out as a product of the 17th-century Dutch Reformation. The episodes he illustrated are varied, and the realism of the figures seems to channel the Protestant goal of identification with the events recounted in the Bible. As his models, Rembrandt used his own family, his neighbors, and the people of the colorful, mixed-race city that was 17th-century Amsterdam.

Given the small size of the etchings, the exhibition includes many enlarged reproductions of entire scenes or selected details. Strong contrasts create a space where visitors enjoy both an immersive and crow-eye view of the etchings. The wall-sized reproductions offer a first level of reading before viewing the etchings up close. Electroluminescent sheets provide lighting to read labels and panel, as well as a low level of light to protect the sensitive works. Alternating midnight blue and coppery brown walls, reminiscent of the etcher’s copper plate, punctuate the route.

The exhibition unfolds across five rooms. The first addresses Rembrandt and Amsterdam’s religious context, followed by a room presenting biographical, historical and artistic timelines. A typographic hand-operated press, based on a 15th-century model, allows visitors to print their own reproduction of a detail of one of the etchings in the exhibition, while a film explains Rembrandt’s etching technique.

4.

THE REMBRANDT PRINT COLLECTION AT THE MAH

Rembrandt created 89 etchings on religious themes during his lifetime. Etching enabled him to sell a scene several times, thus increasing his income. The Dutch master was also an avid art collector and, therefore, in perpetual need of funds, reportedly purchasing his own engravings on occasion in order to create a rarity effect that would drive up their value.

The MAH owns 220 engravings by Rembrandt, including the 59 on religious themes currently exhibited at the MIR. In addition to biblical scenes, these include depictions of St. Jerome, the Virgin and Child, the Holy Family, the Death of the Virgin and one portrait of a young woman reading the Bible. Completing this collection are 10 engravings on loan from the Musée Jenisch in Vevey, including the famous *Hundred Guilder Print*, and the equally famous *Three Crosses* loaned by the Jan Krugier Foundation.

The provenance of 116 of the 220 Rembrandt prints in the MAH collection has been traced. In particular, they come from several large donations received from private individuals since 1748. All the Rembrandt prints in the MAH can be viewed at: <https://www.mahmah.ch/collection/recherche>

Adam and Eve,
also known as *The Fall*
1638
© Musée Jenisch Vevey
- Cabinet cantonal
des estampes, Fondation
William Cuendet & Atelier
de Saint-Prex



5.

HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Rembrandt lived and built his career in the 17th century Amsterdam, which offered its inhabitants considerable freedom of conscience and practice. Reformed Protestantism was the dominant religion, as in all the Dutch provinces, but other faiths were tolerated. Rembrandt bought a house in Amsterdam's Jewish quarter in 1639 and lived there for many years.

From the 1610s onwards, thanks to an economic boom driven by the Dutch colonies, Amsterdam rapidly became an important political, economic, and artistic hub. Rembrandt moved to the Dutch capital to be close to wealthy patrons, and he profited greatly from this proximity. He also cannily exploited the logic of the local and European markets, where his prints could command very high prices.

Ironically, Rembrandt, despite his skill as a negotiator and manipulator of the market value of his work, spent money lavishly. He was a compulsive art collector, a passion that led him to resounding bankruptcy.

Adoration of the Shepherds with the Lamp, also known as *The Nativity*
Circa 1654
© Musee d'art et d'histoire, Ville de Geneve



6.

REMBRANDT AND ETCHING

It is unclear where or how Rembrandt learned etching, but the technique he used is well known. First, a thin layer of varnish is applied to a copper plate. The artist then incises the varnish with a special tool. The plate with the finished drawing is immersed in an acid solution that etches away the copper wherever the varnish has been removed. To obtain different shades of black, Rembrandt would reapply a coat of varnish to areas where the grooves were deep enough and return the plate to the acid to further etch others. He often reworked his plates after a series of impressions. Sometimes, he simply polished down the copper to draw a new version.

“Rembrandt quickly mastered the technique of etching,” says exhibition curator Bénédicte De Donker, curator in the Prints and Drawings Department at the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire (MAH). “He knew exactly how to control the bite of the acid to obtain lighter or darker tones”. The shading of the print is determined by how long the copper plate is left in the bath. “A short immersion produces pale gray lines, a longer one produces a deep black”. Rembrandt masterfully combined this understanding of shading with variations in mark-making (hatching, cross-hatching) and inking techniques to achieve unequalled contrasts, which soon won him the admiration of his contemporaries. The artist contributed to the emergence of a market with a growing appetite for religious prints, in a young country that offered significant freedom of belief and practice. Rembrandt came to the Dutch capital to seek out wealthy patrons and profited greatly from this proximity. He also had a shrewd understanding of the logic of the local and European art markets, where his prints could sell for very high prices. One of the masterpieces in the “Rembrandt and the Bible” exhibition, the *Hundred Guilder Print*, takes its name from the price, exorbitant for print at the time, paid by Flemish merchant to acquire it back in the 17th century.

Jesus preaching and healing the sick, the 100 Guilder Print
Circa 1648
© Musée Jenisch Vevey
- Cabinet cantonal
des estampes, collection
du Musée Alexis Forel



7.

REMBRANDT AND THE BIBLE

Rembrandt's intimate knowledge of the biblical scenes depicted in his etchings can be explained by his assiduous reading of Scripture. The sheer number of his religious drawings - around 150 are known - attests to the strength of his interest. At the time of his death, the only book in his home was... a Bible.

The abundance of visual references, which Rembrandt alternately played with or departed from to forge a new iconography, is one of the appeals of his biblical prints, as is the deeper theological message they contain. For example, Rembrandt's 1638 etching of *Adam and Eve* is a response to famous engravings by artists such as Dürer, among others. But Rembrandt's version is unlike anything created before it, disturbing many of his contemporaries. The couple's bodies are not idealized, they do not resemble Apollo and Venus. This gives the scene an immediacy that encourages viewers to identify with the characters that inspired the viewer's thinking.

One of the characteristics of Rembrandt's art, which explains the evergreen popularity of his work, especially his biblical etchings, is his ability to create a connection between ancient biblical events and the viewer's lived experience.

The Baptism of the Eunuch
1641
© Musée d'art et d'histoire,
Ville de Genève



8.

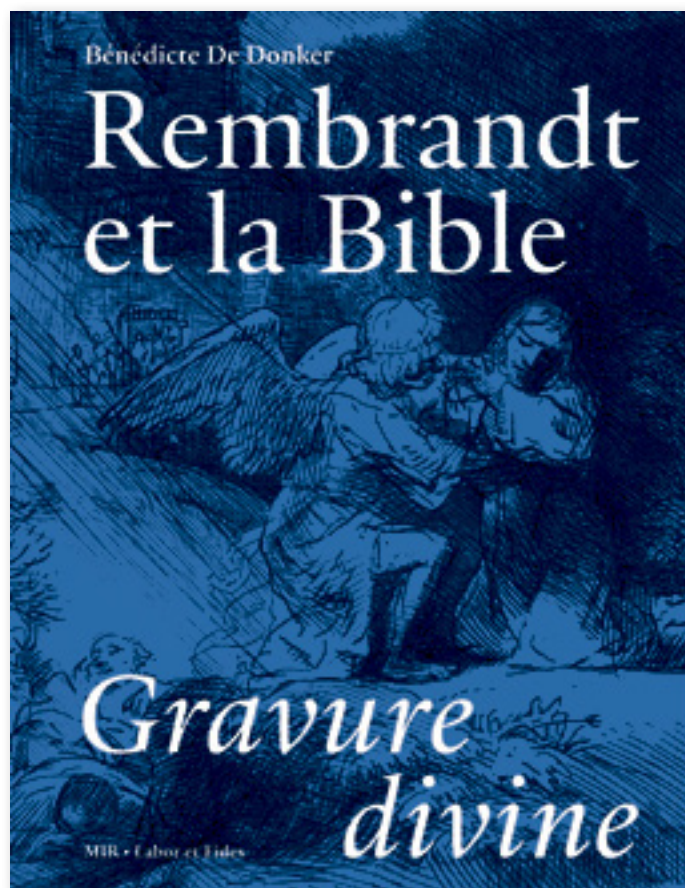
THE EXHIBITION CATALOG

Bénédicte De Donker
Rembrandt and the Bible
Divine etching

MIR-Labor et Fides, 2023
240 pages • 27 CHF

Has any other artist delved as deeply into the Protestant Bible as Rembrandt? The great artist produced thousands of works inspired by the Old and New Testaments, including 89 etchings. He was an assiduous reader of the Bible; in the words of Pastor W. A. Visser 'T Hooft, "it is not simply *subjects* that the painter draws from the Bible; it is texts of Scripture that he comments on".

This catalog was published on the occasion of the exhibition "Rembrandt and the Bible" presented at the MIR in collaboration with the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Genève, from 30 November 2023 to 17 March 2024. It contains, among others, 54 of Rembrandt's etchings on biblical themes, presented according to a biblical timeline, from Adam and Eve to the Acts of the Apostles.



9.

ACTIVITIES, EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

A four-month program of guided tours, family activities, and lectures complement the exhibition.

[Print your own Rembrandt etching](#)

Two-thirds of the way through the exhibition, the famous MIR press allows visitors to understand printing processes in the 17th century.

Tuesday to Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m. or by registration

[Free guided tours upon registration \(regular admission\)](#)

Sunday, 28 January 2024

Sunday, 25 February 2024

Sunday, 17 March 2024

French tour 11 a.m., English tour 2 p.m.

[Audio guide in 10 languages](#)

French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Japanese, Korean, Chinese.

[Free guided tours for families \(regular admission\)](#)

1h interactive tour (ages 7 and up) Wednesday, 17 January 2024, 3 p.m.

Wednesday, 14 February 2024, 3 p.m.

Wednesday, 13 March 2024, 3 p.m.

[Lectures at MIR](#)

5 December 2023, 6:30 p.m.

The Bible in Rembrandt's etchings, with Bénédicte De Donker

13 February 2024, 6:30 p.m.

Religious painting in Rembrandt's time, with Jan Blanc

[Registration on \[mir.ch\]\(https://www.mir.ch\)](#)

10.

THE MIR TODAY

Founded in 2005, the International Museum of the Reformation (MIR) closed for renovation in 2021 and reopened 21 months later, in April 2023. The main entrance has been relocated, the circulation reorganized, and new spaces created for temporary exhibitions. “Rembrandt and the Bible” is the second exhibition organized by the MIR this year, following Explosions: 140 Children’s Drawings of War Across a Century, from 27 April to 28 August 2023.

The MIR’s scenography has also been transformed. While the permanent exhibition still features the major works that made the museum’s reputation, these are presented in a somewhat less crowded environment, with the aim of telling an international story of the Reformation from the 16th century to the present. Combining the secular and the historical, the MIR’s permanent exhibition unfolds across nine rooms on the first floor and basement of an 18th-century mansion in the heart of Geneva’s old town. With the help of contemporary museological techniques (variations in color, audio-visual content, audio guides in ten languages and augmented reality animations), the MIR presents a new perspective on the Protestant Reformation that aims to appeal to visitors with varying levels of familiarity with the topic.

Six months since reopening, the new exhibition has proved a resounding success, as shown by the 20% increase in visitor numbers compared to the average prior to renovation.

→ [Download images, poster and press release at
https://www.musee-reforme.ch/espace-presse](https://www.musee-reforme.ch/espace-presse)

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