



Rembrandt, *Death of the Virgin*, etching of 1639. Collection of Drs. Morton and Toby Mower. Photograph: M.M. Mower

THE SERPENT OF MOSES

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In addition to pioneering new and novel etching techniques producing vast arrays of tonal variations, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) was prolific in his choices of subjects, which included many Christian and Jewish themes.

In the 17th century, the Dutch were fairly tolerant of religion, in comparison to many surrounding countries. Jews fleeing from the Spanish Inquisition found a haven in the Netherlands. While there was tension between Catholics and Protestants with the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, it was also the time of the Age of Enlightenment with major advances in science and philosophy.

Rembrandt was Protestant, members on both sides of his family were Catholic, as were his teachers, and his clientele was religiously diverse.¹ In addition he lived on Jewish Broad Street only two doors away from the most famous Rabbi of the period, Rabbi Samuel Manasseh ben Israel.²

Rembrandt's treatment of his *Death of the Virgin* etching of 1639 depicting Mary's Assumption is especially interesting and important, with implications which have not been well-documented in art literature. At first glance, this work appears deeply Catholic in subject—the gaunt, lifeless Virgin Mary lies in bed as she takes her final breath. The apostles at Mary's bedside mourn her death—some cry, some tend to her comfort, and some turn to the heavens, where hovering angels wait to receive her. The entire townspeople are included as onlookers, and the tonalities vary from the realistic to the ethereal. Traditional symbols associated with the dying, such as a lighted taper, are absent. Alongside the priestly figure at Mary's right, often presumed to be St. Peter, there is a large serpentine-like figure on a rod looming over the bedside.

It is of great significance that this scene differs markedly from previous artists' depiction of the same subject. Albrecht Dürer's woodcut 100 years earlier shows a much simpler setting with only the apostles surrounding the bed,

Rembrandt's iconography of the healing arts

with the major feature being a crucifix atop the staff. In Rembrandt's work however, it is not a crucifix but appears to be a serpent mounted on the staff.

Serpents in medicine and health

Serpents are frequent figures in mythology and in the Old and New Testaments. The Rod of Hermes from Greek mythology has persisted as a symbol of Medicine (the Caduceus), but it typically involved two serpents coiled around a winged staff.³ However, the Greek physician-god Asclepius, was also associated with snakes,⁴ but with a single serpent on a staff.

Despite the availability of free health care in the Grecian Empire, the ill and dying often chose to find respite in temple sanctuaries. The sick would sleep there and then claim to have been healed upon awakening. To recover from an ailment was likened to a return from death, i.e., a resurrection. There was considered a natural connection between Asclepius and the serpent because the serpent was thought to dwell in the underworld, the same realm in which Asclepius was associated: it was precisely in the realm of the dead that the mystery of life and of recovery lay hidden.

In the 16th century, Cesare Ripa provided a critical

textual and visual reference for artists and craftsmen in a common artistic language of allegory and symbolism in which serpents were often linked with issues of causing and ameliorating sickness. In Ripa's iconography, there are eight references to serpents, the terms "Medicina" (Phisick #204) and "Sanità" (Health #265) being among them.⁵

Parenthetically, Rembrandt was very well read and may have been familiar with the works of Josephus, written during Roman times, which also has references to serpents, but none there relate to medicine or health.⁶

While the primary graphic connection emphasized here had hitherto been casually observed ("...[the] snakelike form [is] reminiscent of the brazen serpent of Moses..."),¹ the word "reminiscent" appears to suggest that there might possibly be a relationship.

However, this choice was probably extremely deliberate, and a deep commentary by the artist on the meaning of death and the possibility of afterlife. This stems from an exhibition "A Fortnight of Rembrandt" held at the Florida



Albrecht Dürer (Germany, Nuremberg, 1471-1528), *Death of the Virgin*, 1510, Woodcut, Sheet: 12 × 8 3/4 in. (30.48 × 22.23 cm) Image: 11 1/2 × 8 1/8 in. (29.21 × 20.64 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. Allan C. Balch Collection (M.50.4). Photo © Museum Associates/ LACMA



Charles Sherman, *The Serpent of Moses*, a sculpture in bronze. Moses is depicted holding a staff upon which is intertwined the brazen serpent, allowing the Israelites who have been bitten to view it and be cured. Collection of Drs. Morton and Toby Mower. Photograph: M.M. Mower



Detail of serpent's head of *The Serpent of Moses* shown in profile. The open mouth is tilted in a slightly downward direction.

State University Museum of Fine Arts in Tallahassee, Florida in 2013. The print in question was acquired in June 2000, and the contemporary sculptor's statue depicting the biblical portion of *The Serpent of Moses* was acquired in 1998. The study of the possible association began at that time.

It is almost certain that Rembrandt learned of the story of the Serpent of Moses from his close relationship with Rabbi ben Israel.⁷

Rembrandt and the Rabbi

Within the relatively small Jewish area of Amsterdam to which Rembrandt moved in 1637, were many notables in science, the arts, and philosophy. It is likely that he knew Spinoza, Descartes, and Christian Huygens. He received commissions to paint portraits of a number of well-to-do Jews, including Ephraim Bueno, a friend, patron, and well known physician, whose portrait Rembrandt painted in 1646. Rembrandt also painted a portrait of Rabbi ben Israel in 1636, and was also commissioned by him to make four etchings for his book *Piedro gloriosa*, which was published in 1655.⁷

Rembrandt was undeniably influenced by Rabbi ben Israel as seen in the unusual Hebrew lettering in his *Belshazzar's Feast* painting of 1635.¹ The Rabbi highlights this in his book *De termino vitae*, published in 1639, as the reason that Belshazzar is unable to read the heavenly words. In his 1659 oil painting, *Moses and the Tablets of the Law*, Rembrandt's use of Hebrew lettering is present once again.¹

Among the other subjects the Rabbi undoubtedly conveyed to Rembrandt was the following passage from *Bamidbar* (the book of Numbers) Chapter XXI (Hukkath) herein quoted:

4. They journeyed from Mount Hor toward the Red Sea, in order to bypass the land of Edom, and the people became impatient along the way.
5. And the people spoke against God and against Moshe: "Why have you brought us up from Mitzrayim to die in the wilderness? For we have no bread and no water, and our soul is sick of this unsubstantial nourishment."
6. And God sent the venomous snakes against the people; they bit the people and many people of Yisrael died.
7. And the people came to Moshe and said: "We have

sinned because we have spoken against God and against you. Pray to God that he may turn away the snakes from us.” And Moshe prayed for the people.

8. And God said to Moshe: “Make yourself a venomous snake and place it upon a tall pole and it shall come to pass that anyone who is bitten, let him look upon it and he will live.”

9. And Moshe made a copper snake and placed it upon the tall pole, and it came to pass that if a snake had bitten a man, he would look upon the copper snake and live.

10. The sons of Yisrael journeyed on and camped in Obboth.⁸

This is a somewhat problematic section of the Torah (years before the episode of the golden calf, God is commanding Moses to make a graven image). Charles Sherman, a contemporary sculptor in Los Angeles, California, illustrated this *Serpent of Moses* in his statue of the same name. If one looks at the head of the serpent in profile, it appears quite similar to the icon atop Rembrandt’s staff, except for a slight difference in angle.

Similar references are also present in many places in Christian literature,⁹ as well as in mythology. In John 3:14-15, Jesus indicates that the bronze serpent is a foreshadowing of himself, and “That whosoever, believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”⁹ In Galatians 3:13, the serpent was lifted from the earth and placed on a tree. “Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree;”⁹ In this context, the “looking upward” toward the *Serpent of Moses* while in the desert in order to be cured of snakebites is an act of extreme faith, because there is no rational reason to believe that gazing upward at such an image would be curative.

Thus, Rembrandt appears to have very deliberately chosen the icon of the *Serpent of Moses* from biblical sources, pointing to a people who were recently freed from slavery in Egypt, a culture wherein the snake was revered as the most powerful symbol of healing. The serpent coiled around a staff has been said to be a mimetic agent supposed to heal those who were bitten by snakes in the desert.¹⁰ The reason for the choice of this image has also to do with the themes of the meaning of life and of immortality Rembrandt was exploring, especially in the context of the modernity of the post-reformation Enlightenment period. By juxtaposing a symbol of the biological sciences with a religious narrative, Rembrandt attempts to elevate the scientific to the same standing as religious discourse.

The serpent embodies nature’s proclivity for dialectics—the symbol of evil as well as man’s protector; the venom and the antidote; and a perpetual cycle of death and

rebirth. The Asclepeion symbolism in *Death of the Virgin* speaks to broader, yet still relevant, questions regarding life and death, and points to physicians as the bearers of such wisdom, rather than quackery.

Death of the Virgin

The foreground (of the etching) appears to be the realm of the Old Testament, and the background, with the apostles, suggests the New Testament. The Virgin, both a descendent of King David and the bearer of the Savior is the junction between the two. It is very likely that Rembrandt deliberately wanted to depict a “Jewish Priest” beside the holder of the staff to stress this division. His commentary suggests that even the most powerful symbol of healing of the Jews, the Serpent of Moses, cannot save the Virgin.

Other important dualities abound throughout *Death of the Virgin*, formally and conceptually. To one side, the physician takes Mary’s pulse as a precise determination of the moment of death, while a priest observes from the other attending to the spiritual dimension. The priest employs a solemn mindfulness while the physician—and the only other figure to make actual contact with Mary’s body being the apostle giving her drink—actively tend to Mary’s physical well-being. The physician searches for a heartbeat; the priest prays for Mary’s soul. Both faith and science have a stake in the corporeal self, and Rembrandt activates this duality through the icon. Literally and figuratively, faith and empiricism frame Mary’s body.

The physician and the priest symbolize stark ideological contrasts, as do the heavenly (upper) and mortal (lower) realms of the composition. The confident depth of line and tone in the etching’s lower register starkly contrasts with the light, ephemeral quality of the upper register. Mary’s body, rendered with a combination of both approaches, belongs somewhere between these two levels.

The tonal distinction (unprecedented in the visual history of the *Death of the Virgin*) between the heavenly and mortal realms demonstrates Rembrandt’s preoccupation with their polarity; it also acknowledges the ghostly uncertainty of the afterlife. These distinct upper and lower registers are united via the serpentine staff. This Rod of Asclepius-Serpent of Moses-Caduceus visually creates a channel between death and the hereafter.

Scholars have frequently discussed Rembrandt’s near-obsessive engagement with religious subject matter.¹¹ Far less attention has been paid to Rembrandt’s equally dogged interest in scientific ideology. As an artist at the mercy of local benefactors, Rembrandt worked for patrons from diverse social classes, religious faiths, and occupations. With

the emergence of the Scientific Revolution in 17th century Netherlands, physicians gained prominence in Dutch society and began to generate an influx of artistic patronage.

Negotiating the diverse preferences of his clientele required Rembrandt to be exceptionally well read. His works show a staggering wealth of biblical, classical, and scientific knowledge. His compositions are fraught with so many layers of meaning that one can hardly separate the Catholic iconography from the Protestant, the biblical narrative from the contemporary parable, and the Jewish aspect of life in 17th century Amsterdam.

For Rembrandt, this serpentine symbol was charged with socio-political implications reflecting emerging Cartesian theories. Descartes, a peer of Rembrandt's discussed the separation of the physical self and the abstract soul as a duality of personhood.¹² John Durham points out that in *Death of a Virgin*:

...death, even the death of a holy person, [is] a reality to be met without panic and without hysteria, but with an honest finality despite unavoidable pain. This etching is crammed with nearly every possible reaction to death, from the tender care of the apostle supporting Mary's head, to the medical attention of the physician taking her pulse, to the weeping grief of the woman behind him, to the swooning plea of the woman standing by the bedpost, to the fervent petition of the young apostle standing behind her, to the accepting prayer before inevitable death of the woman kneeling in front of him, to the plain curiosity of the fellow parting the curtain to look in, to the gossiping distraction of the two serving maids seated on the step, to the indifference of the man at the lower right corner, to the official solemnity of the reader and the pompous priest at the left corner of the bed, to the heavenly swarm of reaching, receptive angels. The range of expressions on the faces of those who gather on the far side of Mary's bed is a catalog of human reaction to death....By 1639, Rembrandt and Saskia [his first wife] had buried two children, and his drawings of his wife from these months show her to have been seriously ill...I wonder whether *The Death of the Virgin*...may represent Rembrandt's struggle between acceptance and denial...that tell us something of what must have been going through his mind in 1639.¹¹

In these, and many other Rembrandt works, the viewer is prompted to consider the meaning of corporeality and mortality, and to re-examine religious dogma.¹³ These appear to be among myriad themes that Rembrandt conjured

up in this masterful multilayered treatment, giving insight to the meaning for him of the graphical images.

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