

# ESTHER IN AMERICA

THE SCROLL'S INTERPRETATION IN  
AND IMPACT ON THE UNITED STATES

Edited by  
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Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought  
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*The Scroll's Interpretation in and Impact on the United States*

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## *Editor's Introduction*

**O**n September 7, 1853, the escaped slave born Isabella Baumfree, now calling herself Sojourner Truth, addressed the crowd assembled in New York City for the Women's Rights Convention, despite the hisses and howls. So rowdy and disruptive were the young males protesting against those assembled that the event became known as the "Mob Convention." Truth, who could neither read nor write, chose, in this fraught moment, to remind those in attendance of an ancient scroll that told the tale of the Jewish queen in Persia and the holiday of Purim. "There was a king in the Scriptures," she said, "and then it was the kings of the earth would kill a woman if she come into their presence; but Queen Esther come forth, for she was oppressed, and felt there was a great wrong, and she said I will die or I will bring my complaint before the king. Should the king of the United States be greater, or more crueller, or more harder?"

Sojourner Truth's usage of Purim as a prism through which to view her fight for equal rights was no anomaly. Throughout our history, Americans have turned to the Scroll of Esther, the *megilla*, as they navigated their liberties, morals, passions, and politics. These recurring references are no accident. Rather, they reflect an appreciation of a story whose themes – freedom, power, fraught sexual dynamics, ethnicity, and peoplehood – continue to define American identity to this day.

*Esther in America* traces the story's interpretation in and impact on the United States. The first section, "Esther in Early America," opens with my analysis of the depiction of its eponymous heroine in a Puritan manual for women's behavior that was strikingly progressive for its time. Israel Ben-Porat details the scroll's surprising role in the development of the quintessentially American principle of religious freedom. During the American Revolution, as Eran Shalev describes in his chapter, it was Britain's King George III whom the rebels perceived to be embodying the role of King Ahasuerus, manipulated by the Haman-like prime minister, Lord North. The mark of Esther's cousin Mordecai is felt, as I argue, in the account of another diaspora-minded Jewish leader by the same name, Mordecai Manuel Noah. And, as Tzvi Sinensky suggests, Esther's heroic persona finds a literary echo in that beloved heroine of American letters, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne.

In "Emancipation and Proclamations," Ariel Clark Silver, Erica Brown, and Meir Soloveichik examine how Esther shaped the fight against racism and slavery, from the Persian capital Shushan to the American South to Abraham Lincoln's White House. As Silver writes, abolitionist leaders Angelina Grimké, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Sojourner Truth "elicited Esther to address the immediate existential threat: the sale, suffering, and slaughter of slaves in America prior to the Civil War."

The following section, "Feminist Esther," features Sinensky's tracing of the unexpected revival of Vashti as a model to be emulated despite her downfall in the story's opening verses. Zev Eleff details the attention paid to Esther between 1870 and 1900, including Annie Jonas Moses' publishing of a Purim play in Mobile, Alabama, that, as he notes, "aimed to disabuse erstwhile Esther detractors and disseminate the virtues of the protagonist's femininity." Shaina Trapedo analyzes Queen Esther pageants and perceptions of Jewish, and American, beauty in the early twentieth century and today. And Malka Fleischmann examines the trauma of silenced women in the *megilla* alongside the contemporary #MeToo movement.

In "Diaspora Life and Dual Identities," Emily Colbert Cairns examines the "sainthood" of Esther, particularly beloved by Latin American *conversos*, living outwardly as Christians and inwardly as Jews. In



light of the scroll's Jewish heroine and hero having pagan-inspired names, Dara Horn reexamines the traditionally held belief that the names of immigrants were changed at Ellis Island. Alex Maged documents the work of New York's first Jewish orphanage in view of the themes of adoption and parenthood in the Bible, and Shmuel Hain examines the practice of reading the scroll twice on Purim as reflective of the story's "diasporic duality."

From children's literature (Emily Schneider) to art (Samantha Baskind) to the *megilla* in movies (Yosef Lindell), "Pop Culture Purim" offers critical analyses of Esther in the American popular imagination.

Tevi Troy and Philip Getz, in their contributions to "Presidential Politics and Purim," write of First Ladies and fraught governmental crises, with characters and machinations that mirror those of ancient Shushan.

In the book's concluding section, "The *Megilla* and Modern Morality," Mishael Zion ruminates on Hitler and Haman in American memory. Shalom Carmy and Jason Weiner each offers an analysis of the scroll's lessons based on the teachings of the renowned Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, examining the book's philosophy and the concept of self-endangerment as it pertains to medical decision-making, respectively. Continuing the examination of major twentieth-century rabbinic leaders, Yosef Bronstein offers a close reading of the Purim lectures of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and Ari Lamm mines the sermons of Rabbi Norman Lamm. The book concludes with Liel Leibovitz's call to action against "America's Hamanite Moment" and Dov Lerner's learned reflection on the "textual ethics" of the *megilla* and the United States Constitution.

As these scholars, rabbis, communal leaders, and writers demonstrate, the Book of Esther has inspired and impacted the American project since its very inception. Rabbis and ethicists, abolitionists and artists, preachers and presidents, have understood the text to speak to their moment. It has offered solace to immigrants, forged solidarity, impacted politics, and, in the spirit of Esther 4:14, roused individuals to realize that deliverance was not to come from some other place, but from their own heroic actions on behalf of their people. As we Americans once again find ourselves navigating antisemitism and bigotry, questioning

the limits and purposes of power, reassessing gender dynamics, and grappling with how to keep an ethnically diverse empire from imploding, it is once again to Esther we must turn, to the timeless scroll that continues to urge us to find strength and redemptive possibility in the least expected of places.

# Esther in American Art

Dr. Samantha Baskind

**T**he Book of Esther, with its dramatic narrative and distinct character types, makes ripe material for artists. With rare exception, Western artists over the ages were not especially familiar with the nuances of the story or its vast commentary, from classical sources such as Flavius Josephus to rabbinic commentaries to more modern interpretations such as that by Louis Ginzberg. Rather, artists boiled down the Book of Esther to a parable of good versus evil and villain versus heroine. The tale's themes of beauty and exoticism, peril and menace, and festivity and bounty offered fertile visuals. As such, artists from both Europe and America were typically attracted to the multilayered saga less for its roots in sacred scripture and more for the opportunity to depict beautiful women, splendor, and histrionics. The diverse ways the Book of Esther has been conceived by a variety of American artists, Jewish and non-Jewish, and across media, offers a case study for examining the manifestations of one biblical story in the history of American art through a social, political, religious, and cultural lens.

Classical European artists gravitated to several aspects of the account of Esther's tale. Renaissance master Michelangelo painted three scenes from Esther on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, with the most

prominent being Haman's punishment (1511). Rembrandt, the greatest artist of the Dutch Golden Age, painted a psychologically probing canvas of Haman's recognition of his fate (c. 1665, Hermitage) and his countryman Jan Steen portrayed Ahasuerus' wrath more than once (e.g., 1668, Cleveland Museum of Art). There are many paintings of a courageous Esther pleading before Ahasuerus, like that by the Italian artist Paolo Veronese (c. 1555, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). Artists were especially drawn to the melodrama of Esther fainting before Ahasuerus, an extratextual addition in the Septuagint, including the Italian artist Filippo Lippi (c. 1475–80, Musée Condé, Chantilly) and Antoine Coypel, from France (c. 1704, Louvre). The feast offered a chance to paint plenty and pomp, as seen in Flemish artist Frans Francken the Younger's unique and highly detailed copper painting (first half of the seventeenth century, National Gallery, Prague). There are scenes of Esther prettying for her meeting with the king (Jean-François de Troy, c. 1739, Louvre), Esther accusing Haman (Jan Victors, 1651, Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina), the triumph of Mordecai (Paolo Veronese, 1556, Church of San Sebastiano), and occasionally a canvas of Vashti (Jacopo del Sellaio, c. 1490, Uffizi Gallery).

Esther found an especially wide audience in seventeenth-century Holland. Dozens of paintings and prints were made by prominent Dutch artists, many more than Rembrandt, Jan Victors, and Jan Steen, noted above. While attention to the story was initiated by its wide recognizability and spectacle, the Book of Esther's popularity in Holland may also be attributed to the Dutch people's identification with the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible. In their struggle for freedom from Spanish tyranny and religious oppression, the Dutch saw the Jewish oppression experienced in Persia as an appropriate metaphor. Although not in the realm of art, Americans too connected Esther and Purim to their revolutionary efforts in the late eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> This lack, though, corresponds with the dearth of biblical art, and art in general, during the country's early decades.

The strain of Puritanism in America after the birth of the country discouraged religious art, preferring the verbal as a means to communicate ideas about God. As US vice-counsel to Italy and art collector

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1. See Eran Shalev's chapter in this volume.

James Jackson Jarves perceived in 1864: “The popular faith [in America] is more rigidly puritanical in tone. This not only deprives art of the lofty stimulus of religious feeling, but subjects it to suspicion, as of doubtful morality.”<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century, several American artists traveled to Europe, returning to their native land with a new appreciation of the grand manner of history painting – subjects encompassing historical, biblical, mythological, and literary themes. After visiting England, Samuel F. B. Morse hoped to make such painting viable on American soil. Morse’s mother rebuked his religious and mythological paintings from a practical standpoint: “You must not expect to paint anything in this country, for which you will receive any money to support you, but portraits.”<sup>3</sup> Morse, Thomas Cole, Washington Allston, and a few other prominent artists of that generation attempted biblical themes, but America’s taste for history painting of any sort was somewhat rare.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the major subjects of artists became the unbridled land of the newly founded country, portraiture, and genre scenes depicting the lives of the people – if not out of interest in painting such topics then for the monetary reward.<sup>5</sup>

One of the earliest well-known American artists to portray Esther, William Rimmer (1816–79) painted a nineteenth-century traditional

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2. James Jackson Jarves, *The Art-Idea*, ed. Benjamin Rowland, Jr. (1864; reprint Cambridge, 1960), 150–151.
  3. Samuel F. B. Morse, *Samuel F. B. Morse: His Letters and Journals*, vol. 1, ed. Edward Lind Morse (Boston, 1914), 159.
  4. The 1972–73 traveling exhibition, “The Hand and the Spirit: Religious Art in America 1700–1900,” gathered notable works that explore religious matter, mostly from a Protestant perspective and primarily biblical imagery. For the catalog see Jane Dillenberger and Joshua C. Taylor, *The Hand and the Spirit: Religious Art in America 1700–1900* (Berkeley, 1972).
  5. Recent scholarship illuminates the role of religion in American art, although most often Judaism plays a small part in these discussions. For some fairly current literature on American art with religious subjects, see Sally Promey’s comprehensive article “The ‘Return’ of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art,” *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (September 2003): 581–603. Religion in its more spiritual dimensions has been addressed by scholars, including Joshua C. Taylor, “The Religious Impulse in American Art,” in *Papers in American Art*, ed. John C. Milley (Mapleshade, 1976), 113–132. My contribution to this topic, *Jewish Artists and the Bible in Twentieth-Century America* (University Park, 2014), analyzes why and how American Jews so prominently created imagery prompted by the Bible in a much secularized twentieth century.

rendering of her coronation (1847; fig. 1). Modeled after a vibrantly colored canvas by Frenchman Jean-François de Troy, one of his seven studies depicting episodes from the Book of Esther for the Gobelin Tapestries, Rimmer's rendition stays faithful to the detailed, academic classicism of its predecessor but in somewhat muted colors. Christian Schussele (1824–79), who designed the American Medal of Honor, painted *Queen Esther Denouncing Haman to Ahasuerus* (1866; fig. 2), another academic work (art, in style and subject, advocated by traditional European art academies), but this one smaller in size, highly horizontal, and in watercolor. Conceived as a populated theatrical performance, Esther histrionically extends her hands toward the king while beseeching for the redemption of her people, with an enthroned Ahasuerus leaning forward and reaching his royal scepter toward his queen. The figures wear Bedouin clothing and headdresses, and the palace has been conceived as a grand and imagined exotic space, although not in ancient Persia. The Assyrian and Babylonian statues denote the influence of Orientalism, a prevalent nineteenth-century construct finding inspiration in theme and style from an imagined exotic East, on Schussele's art. George Frederick Bensell (1837–79) envisioned the same moment in an even more Orientalized,



Fig. 2. Christian Schussele, *Queen Esther Denouncing Haman to Ahasuerus*, 1866. Watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper, 10 7/16 x 18 5/8 in. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Leo Asbell Fund Purchase

over five- by eight-foot canvas of *Esther Accusing Haman* (c. 1860, collection unknown). The luminous reds and golds, and decorative tapestries, rugs, and sculptures in the court, connote the influence of European Romantic painters and are stylistically meant to suggest an “authentic” Middle Eastern atmosphere. Moses Jacob Ezekiel (1844–1917), the first Jewish American artist to gain international repute, mentions a sculpted torso of Esther in his memoirs (c. 1891, lost).<sup>6</sup>

A number of female artists, in this early period and later, were attuned to the Book of Esther for its attention to a female figure. M. Louise Stowell (1861–1930), a non-Jewish watercolorist, made many works of a biblical nature including paintings featuring Moses, Noah, and Elijah, along with Christian subjects. She pictured Queen Esther and Vashti in precisely delineated individual images influenced by the flat linearity of Japanese prints and Arts and Crafts design – both highly fashionable at the time.<sup>7</sup> Her tiny watercolor, *Esther Sues and Saves the Jews*, hung in the juried Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts watercolor exhibition in 1905 (fig. 3). She offers a self-sacrificing Esther in a Near Eastern court, on her knees in front of a towering Ahasuerus, begging the king to subvert Haman’s intended genocide of her people. Another female artist, Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), also found Esther appealing, although in this case her affinity for the subject came not just because of the account’s empowering female protagonist but also from an allegiance to her observant Mormon background. Teichert’s delicate painting, also an individual portrait of the queen, was made from a live model in her Latter-Day Saint community (1939; Brigham Young University Museum of Art, Provo, Utah). Aside from Teichert, drawn to the subject for its religious nature, most other artists aspired to make history paintings, the most prestigious category of art in the hierarchy of genres as long-defined by the official academies in Europe. In America as a whole, though, non-Jewish artists rarely portray Esther, and until the

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6. Moses Jacob Ezekiel, *Moses Jacob Ezekiel: Memoirs from the Baths of Diocletian*, ed. Joseph Gutman and Stanley F. Chyet (Detroit, 1975), 296, 301.
  7. Stowell wrote of this larger influence in an article published in a leading art journal. See M. Louise Stowell, “Japanese Color Prints and Some of their Makers,” *Craftsman* 5, no. 1 (1903): 52–67.

late twentieth century, Jewish artists only occasionally address Esther and other figures in her story, as well as related images of Purim.

As American Jewish artists began to make their mark in the twentieth century, some explored Esther's narrative. In the 1950s, Ruth Gikow (1915–82) and Abraham Rattner (1895–1978) depicted Esther, each in their own distinctive style. Ukrainian-born Gikow painted some biblical figures and especially stories in which women play a substantial role, in canvases such as *Queen Esther II* (1952, Saginaw Museum, Saginaw, Michigan) and *King Solomon and His Wives* (1961, private collection).<sup>8</sup> Perhaps partly influenced by her husband Jack Levine's focus on biblical matters, Gikow eschewed her characteristic images of social issues and then-contemporary existence, ranging from teenyboppers to civil rights demonstrators, to paint these subjects. Both conceptions take full advantage of Gikow's command of shimmering color application in her representation of the figures' Orientalized clothing, especially *Queen Esther II*. Gikow does not image a dramatic event but rather offers an encounter between Esther and a maidservant. Some male artists who paint Esther with her maidservants take a different tack. In nineteenth-century France, Théodore Chassériau (1841, Louvre) shows Esther as a sensual nude from the waist up being prettied for her meeting with the king by exotic maidservants.

With an estimated one-third of his works concerning religious or biblical themes, critics consistently note the important influence of Judaism on Rattner's expressionist art. As art historian John I. H. Baur observed in a 1959 exhibition catalog: "Art, for Rattner, is never primarily an esthetic activity. It is a means to an end, an expression of what he repeatedly calls 'livingness,' and a search for the divine in man. It is colored by his own deeply religious, if unorthodox, nature, by his immersion in the old testament and a sense of his rich Jewish heritage."<sup>9</sup> Rattner specifically felt that God's presence influenced his art: "A painting, if it

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8. Unfortunately, the literature on Gikow is scarce. For a brief monograph with numerous plates, see Matthew Josephson, *Ruth Gikow* (New York, 1970). Also Diane Cochrane, "Ruth Gikow: Chronicler of our Times," *American Artist* 37, no. 366 (January 1973): 44–50, 73, with some thoughts from Gikow.
  9. Lloyd Goodrich and John I. H. Baur, *Four American Expressionists: Doris Caesar, Chaim Gross, Karl Knaths, Abraham Rattner* (New York, 1959), 39. For a monograph on Rattner with excellent color plates, see Allen Leepa, *Abraham Rattner* (New York, 1974).





Fig. 1. William Rimmer. *The Coronation of Queen Esther*, 1847. Oil on panel, 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 26  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. Mead Art Museum, Amherst College. Gift of Herbert W. Plimpton: The Hollis W. Plimpton, Class of 1915, Memorial Collection. Bridgeman Images



Fig. 3. M. Louise Stowell, *Queen Esther Sues and Saves the Jews*, 1905. Watercolor and black ink on paper, 10 11/16 x 8 3/4 in. Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester. Virginia Jeffrey Smith Fund, in honor of Grant Holcomb and Marie Vie

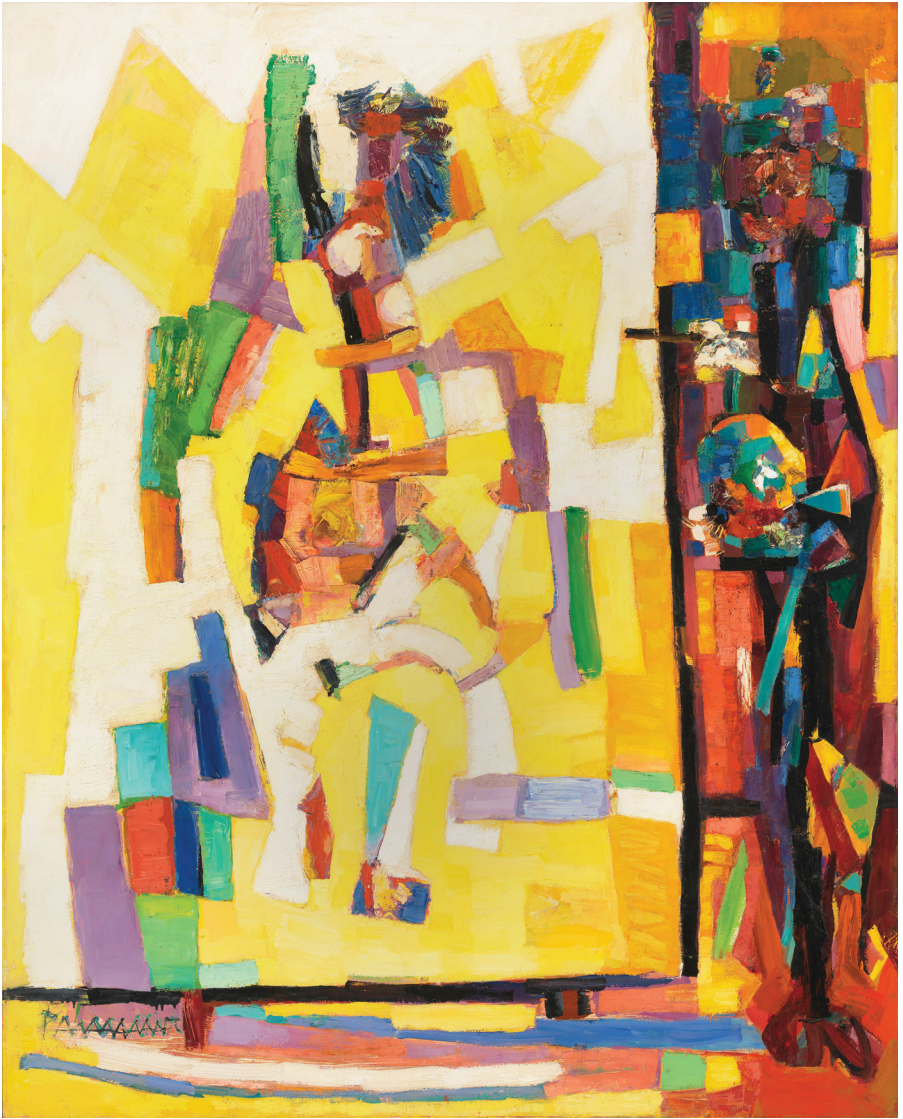


Fig. 4. Abraham Rattner, *Song of Esther*, 1958. Oil on composition board, 59 15/16 x 48 1/16 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Inv.: 58:36. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY

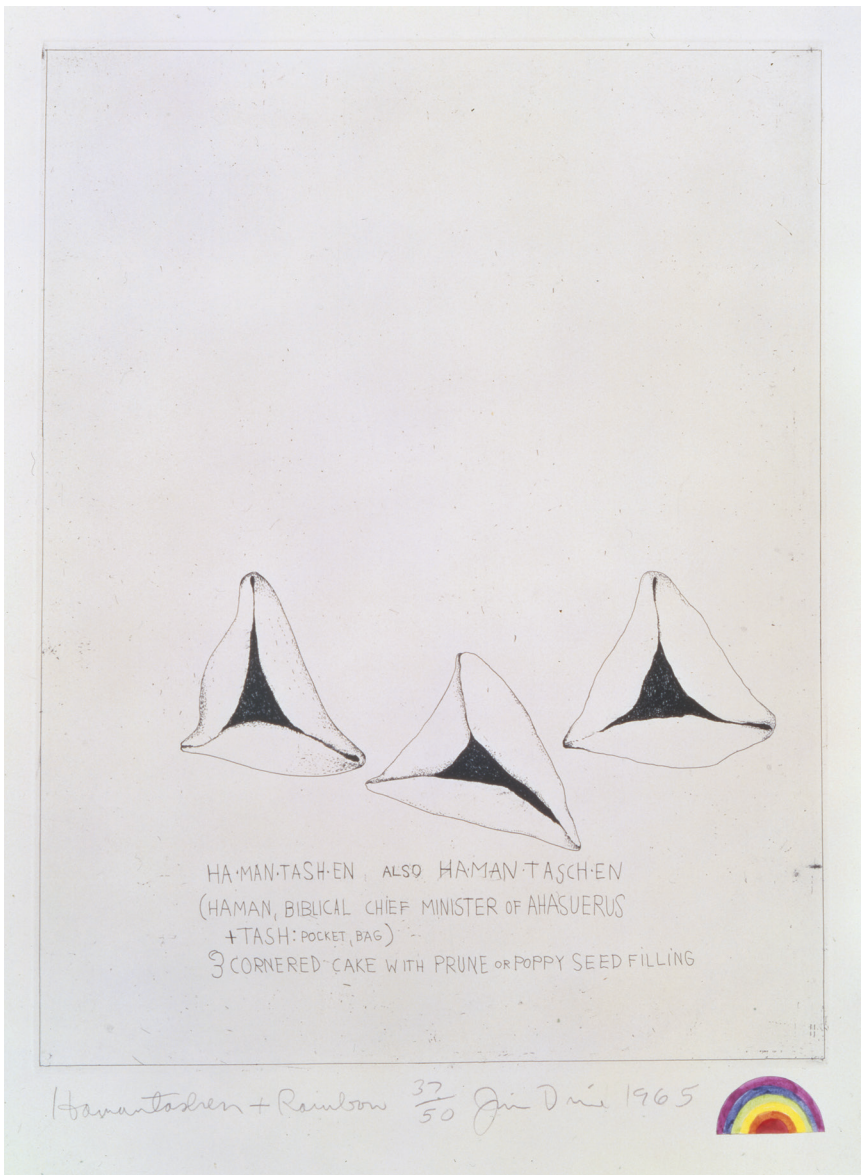


Fig. 5. Jim Dine, *Hamantashen and Rainbow*, 1965. Etching and watercolor on paper, 29  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 22 in. Jewish Museum, New York. JM 38-65. Photo credit: The Jewish Museum / Art Resource, NY © 2020 Jim Dine / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Fig. 6. Robert Indiana, *Purim: Four Facets of Esther*, 1967. Screen print on paper, 29 7/16 x 23 1/2 in. Jewish Museum, New York. Commissioned by The Jewish Museum, JM 109-67. Photo by John Parnell. Photo credit: The Jewish Museum / Art Resource, NY © 2020 Morgan Art Foundation Ltd / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY