
Israëls family [Israels]

Dieuwertje Dekkers and Anna Wagner

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Dutch family of painters and printmakers.

(1) Jozef Israëls

(*b* Groningen, Jan 27, 1824; *d* Scheveningen, Aug 12, 1911).

He was, during his lifetime, the most internationally celebrated Dutch painter of the 19th century and a leader of the Hague school. He was particularly noted for his scenes of life among the Dutch fishing and peasant communities.

1. Life and work.

Dieuwertje Dekkers

From 1835 to 1842 he trained at the Academie Minerva in Groningen; his first teachers were Johan Joeke Gabriel van Wicheren (1808–97) and Cornelis Bernudes Buys (1808–72). In 1842 he continued his training in the studio of Jan Adam Kruseman in Amsterdam and took classes at the Koninklijke Academie, making his *début* in 1844 in Amsterdam. From September 1845 until May 1847 he was in Paris, where he worked in the studio of the history painter François-Edouard Picot and took classes at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under James Pradier, Horace Vernet and Paul Delaroche. After returning to the Netherlands he entered the competition for the Prix de Rome in painting at the Koninklijke Academie in Amsterdam. Between November 1847 and 1850 Israëls was again enrolled there and was recognized as one of several promising history painters in the circle of Jan Willem Pieneman, the Academie's principal director. It was at this time that he painted his first ambitious works, the biblical *Aaron and his Sons* (1848; untraced) and the more literary *Daydreaming* ('*Ophelia*') (1850; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Mus.), which established his reputation.

In the autumn of 1850 Israëls went to Düsseldorf; he returned a few months later via Oosterbeek, later to become a Dutch centre for painting *en plein air*, where the landscape painter Johannes Warnardus Bilders (1811–90) was staying. He settled temporarily in Amsterdam but returned in 1853 to Paris, from where he visited Barbizon. Although the sketches he made there show peasant interiors, the bulk of his work was hardly affected by the Barbizon school. He preferred to take his subjects either from Romantic poetry, inspired by the example of Ary Scheffer, or from Dutch national history, following the history painter Louis Gallait. In addition he continued painting small, sentimental genre paintings and portraits.

The strength of Israëls's initial ambition to become a history painter can be gauged in particular from *William of Orange in Council with the Regent Margaret of Parma* (1855; Amsterdam, Hist. Mus.), which he exhibited at the Exposition Universelle held in Paris in 1855. The painting had a mixed reception from critics, who seemed to prefer larger and more tragic scenes featuring ordinary people living in isolated communities. The generally unfavourable climate for history painting in the Netherlands at

that time may also account for Israëls's decision to paint two scenes in 1856 featuring fishermen. It was especially with his large figure painting *Passing Mother's Grave*, also known as *The Way past the Graveyard* (1856; Amsterdam, Stedel. Mus.), that Israëls introduced into Dutch art a powerful variant of French Realism. The success of this work encouraged him to specialize increasingly in paintings of fishermen. He portrayed both the grimmer side of the fisherman's life and his carefree open-air existence but, surprisingly, took little interest in the details of fishermen's working lives until the late 1880s. With the possible exception of the motifs of the card player and the distribution of bread, he also avoided the depiction of social conditions. Frequent subjects treated throughout his life include women awaiting the return of the fishermen (*After the Storm*, 1858; Amsterdam, Stedel. Mus.), the death of fishermen (*Fishermen Carrying a Drowned Man*, 1861; London, N.G.), fishermen's daughters at work (*Ida, the Fisherman's Daughter at the Door* or *Girl Knitting*, 1858; Antwerp, Kon. Mus. S. Kst.) and fishermen's children playing on the beach (*Children of the Sea* or *Little Boat*, 1863; Amsterdam, Stedel. Mus.).

In the 1860s Israëls began to paint more interior scenes, emphasizing such themes as motherhood (*Expectant Mother*, c. 1863; ex-Nunez priv. col., Breukelen), domestic harmony (*Happy Family*, c. 1870; Glasgow, A.G. & Mus.) and loving children (*Getting Better* or *Grandmother's Treasure*, 1862; New York, Met.). Other well-known subjects include orphans (*Katwijk Orphanage*, 1866; smaller replica, Moscow, Pushkin Mus. F.A.), kitchen scenes (*Birthday Party* or *Woman Making Cakes*, c. 1872; ex-M. Newman Gal., London, 1973; see *Connoisseur* (April 1973), p. 57) and old women (*Sleepers*, c. 1868; Aberdeen, A.G.).

In 1871 Israëls moved from Amsterdam to The Hague, where several major figures of the Hague school were already living. It was in these surroundings that his interest in etching was aroused. Also from this period are his first major watercolours, in which he explored themes already adopted in his oil paintings. He had been using this technique for some time and from 1861 exhibited watercolours at the recently formed Société Belge des Aquarellistes. From 1871 Israëls also exhibited his watercolours in England and Scotland, where they were particularly popular. He made etchings for Dutch as well as foreign art dealers and for etching societies. Most important was his connection with the Paris firm Arnold & Tripp, which published *The Smoker* and *Shell Fisher* in 1882.

In the 1870s Israëls began to broaden his repertory to include peasant scenes. Early works in this genre, such as the *Shepherd's Prayer* (1863; Toledo, OH, Mus. A.) and *Cottage Madonna* (c. 1867; Detroit, MI, Inst. A.), suggest the influence of Millet, who became a major source of inspiration for Israëls. His peasant subjects, also frequently repeated, include coming back from work (*Return from the Fields*, c. 1878; sold New York, Sotheby's, 28 Oct 1982), having a meal (*Lunch in a Peasant Cottage in Karlshaven*, 1885; Dordrecht, Dordrechts Mus., which is a more elaborate version of the successful *Cobbler's Family at Supper* or *Frugal Meal*, 1876; Glasgow, A.G. & Mus.), the shepherd with his flock (*The Shepherd*, c. 1885; The Hague, Gemeentemus.) and the mother and child (*Maternal Bliss*, c. 1890; Amsterdam, Rijksmus.). Around 1880 Israëls became increasingly concerned to depict old age (*Growing Older*, 1878; The Hague, Gemeentemus.) and dying (*Alone in the World* or *Nothing Left*, c. 1880; The Hague, Rijksmus. Mesdag).

In 1881 Israëls met Max Liebermann; this was the beginning of a lasting friendship and reciprocal influence. In the early 1880s the emphasis of his work shifted towards depictions of labourers at work, often carrying heavy loads (*Fishermen's Wives from Zandvoort*, c. 1890; ex-Bedarida priv. col., Livorno). Towards the end of his life he was increasingly drawn to the Jewish environment as a source

of inspiration (*Jewish Law Scribe*, 1902; Otterlo, Kröller-Müller) and also returned to biblical subjects (*Saul and David*, 1899; Amsterdam, Stedel. Mus.). This tendency must be viewed against the background of Israël's strong identification with Rembrandt.

Throughout his life Israël painted portraits; from the 1860s his sitters were primarily prominent persons (e.g. the *Liberal Statesman J. R. Thorbecke*, 1872; Leiden, Rijksuniv.). His portraits of fellow artists, such as *Willem Roelofs* (1892; The Hague, Gemeentemus.), also achieved fame. His *Self-portrait* (1908; Amsterdam, Rijksmus.) is a particularly revealing work. It shows the artist standing in front of his *Saul and David*. The subject had obsessed Israël since his youth because of the contrast between melancholy (Saul) and idealism (David).

In broad terms Israël's style can be said to have developed from colour towards tonal painting. His early history paintings show a smooth handling of the brush, a bright palette, strongly marked outlines and sharp contrasts between light and dark. In 1856 he began using broader brushstrokes and thicker layers of paint, his approach to form becoming less defined and his palette gradually darker. Not until the late 1870s was there any distinct change, with a grey tonality replacing his previously warm colour scheme and effective use of chiaroscuro and broad streaks replacing the subtly intermingled brushstrokes. Although he abandoned anecdotal detail, the titles remain as a reminder of the narrative character of his work. During his final period, from c. 1890, he used even broader brushstrokes, while brightening his palette again slightly.

Israël's working methods have not yet been properly studied. On his journeys he recorded ideas for paintings in a sketchbook, later trying out several in watercolour. He stayed in fishing villages such as Zandvoort, Katwijk and Scheveningen and studied peasant life in Laren, Dongen and the country surrounding Delden. He also borrowed motifs from the work of such artists as his son (2) Isaac Israël, Millet, Max Liebermann and other contemporaries or from the 17th-century Dutch genre painters. Israël was not a *plein-air* painter. He usually placed his models in a fisherman's interior that he had reconstructed in his studio in the garden of his house in The Hague. He once remarked about his method: 'I choose a model which more or less corresponds with the type I have in mind, and then I paint from this model, *adding to it* what I have in my head.'

2. Reputation and influence.

Dieuwertje Dekkers

Israël was a well-known artist in his own lifetime, not only within the Hague school circles but also abroad, particularly in Britain, Germany, North America and Italy. The distribution of reproductions caused his work to become popular at an early stage. His reputation was further enhanced by his participation in important international exhibitions: *Fishermen Carrying a Drowned Man* (1861; London, N.G.) was a triumphant success at both the Paris Salon of 1861 and the London International Exhibition of 1862. He was also fortunate in his contacts with art dealers, collectors and critics, for whose sake he would often travel. His work was appreciated in particular for its simplicity of subject-matter and the sensitivity with which it was rendered. Only the more radical critics thought it sentimental. The large number of exhibitions devoted to Israël between 1885 and 1924 is an indication of the intense interest in his paintings. He received numerous medals and appointments. In The Hague

he was Chairman of the painters' society, the Pulchri Studio, as well as the Hollandse Teeken-Maatschappij (Dutch Drawing Society); he was an honorary member of the Munich Secession, corresponding member of the Secession in Berlin and maintained close ties with the Venice Biennale.

Israëls became widely known for establishing Scheveningen fishing scenes as a popular genre. Among his followers in this were Adolphe Artz, Philip Lodewijk, Jacob Frederik Sadée (1837–1904) and Bernard Blommers. Israëls has also been considered the forerunner of the Laren school, which was led by Albert Neuhuys. In Britain he influenced the work of Frank Holl as well as the Newlyn school, the Glasgow Boys and painters at the Edinburgh School of Art, while in Germany he was a major source of inspiration for Hans von Bartels. The early Dutch paintings of van Gogh also owed much to the subject-matter and handling of Israëls.

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(2) Isaac (Lazarus) Israels

Anna Wagner

(b Amsterdam, Feb 3, 1865; d The Hague, Oct 7, 1934).

Son of (1) Jozef Israëls. He was largely self-taught, showing precocious talent and attending the Academie in The Hague in 1878–80. His first paintings date from 1880–84 and include a self-portrait, portraits of women and military subjects such as *Bugle Practice* (1881; The Hague, Rijksmus. Mesdag). They were composed in the studio in a precise style, soft grey and brown tones predominating, showing the influence of the Hague school. In 1887 Israels moved to Amsterdam, where he was at the centre of the Tachtigers (Eighties Movement) of writers and painters. Among his friends were George Hendrik Breitner, Lodewijk van Dyssel, Frans Erens, Max Liebermann, Jan Pieter Veth and Jan Voerman. In Amsterdam, after a brief and abortive period at the Rijksacademie, he sought a more fluent technique with which to record contemporary life. His drawings and watercolours are predominantly of cafés, cabarets, dance halls and the street life of Amsterdam. In 1889 he visited Paris, where he met Stéphane Mallarmé, Berthe Morisot, Odilon Redon and Emile Zola. In 1894 he painted *Three Servant Girls* (priv. col.), the first of his *plein-air* pictures. From then on he applied transparent colours (mainly pink, blues, green and light brown) to capture the fleeting effects of light in oil,

watercolour and pastel. His oils were painted in flat broad strokes. For the rest of his life he employed his very personal Impressionist style, which emphasized the interplay of light, colour, line and movement. His favourite subjects were beach, street and park scenes (e.g. *Dressmaker in the Jardin des Tuileries*, Dordrecht, Dordrechts Mus.), seamstresses in fashion houses, cabarets and circuses, fairs, ballet schools and the theatre. He also painted portraits, nudes and occasionally still-lives.

Between 1903 and 1914 Israels had a studio in Paris but played little part in the Parisian artistic world. In 1913–14 he was in London, and from 1915 to 1934 he was mainly in The Hague, except for travels abroad, including South-east Asia (1922). He also produced etchings (1912–13) and lithographs (1933).

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