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# Moritz Oppenheim, the Rothschilds, and the Construction of Jewish Identity

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**Moritz Oppenheim, the Rothschilds, and the Construction of Jewish Identity**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## **Abstract**

### **MORITZ OPPENHEIM, THE ROTHSCHILDS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF JEWISH IDENTITY**

By Everett Eugene Dodd, B.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006.

Director: Eric Garberson, Ph.D., Assistant Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies, Art History.

This thesis provides an overview of Moritz Daniel Oppenheim's portraits of the Rothschild family with attention paid to the artist's training and personal artistic pursuits, as well as participation in Gentile and Jewish discourses. Oppenheim's knowledge of art history and use of style in creating the identities of his Rothschild subjects are the focus of this study. Oppenheim's methods and use of art historical styles are discussed with deference to the public or private nature of the portraits, and the resulting works' engagement of both German and Jewish issues. Methodologies used include the history of style and identity theory.



## Introduction

Moritz Daniel Oppenheim (1800-1882) painted three generations of the Rothschild family from 1821 to around 1860, coming to be known as their premier portraitist and called "the painter of the Rothschilds, and the Rothschild of painters."

Oppenheim was raised in the Jewish ghetto of Hanau, Germany, in a traditional Jewish household, about twenty miles away from the Rothschild house in Frankfurt.<sup>1</sup> Like the Rothschilds he never converted to Christianity, and for this reason he is sometimes called the "first Jewish painter."<sup>2</sup> Considering that he was obviously not the first, and indeed worked alongside many artists of Jewish descent that had converted, this title refers to his devotion as well as his preeminence as a painter.

After Napoleon's invasion and the abolition of ghetto restrictions in 1809, young Oppenheim received an art education as any other citizen would have been free to do. He

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Kleeblatt, "Illustrating Jewish Lifestyles On Opposite Banks of the Rhine: Alphonse Levy's Alsatian Peasants and Moritz Daniel Oppenheim's Frankfurt Burghers," *Jewish Art* 16 (1990-1): 54.

<sup>2</sup> Lilliane Weissberg and Georg Heuberger, "The Rothschild of Painters and the Prince of Poets" in *Moritz Daniel Oppenheim: Jewish Identity in Nineteenth Century Art* (Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt am Main, 1999): 145.

studied at the Städelsches Institute in Frankfurt and the Academy of Art in Munich, copying plaster casts and later drawing from life.<sup>3</sup> The curricula in these schools emphasized direct observation from nature. As a self-proclaimed historian artist, Oppenheim traveled to Paris and Italy in his teen years and taught himself various styles of portraiture as well as the styles of antiquity and the Italian Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his life, he applied what he learned on his travels to his background in German styles of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well as the Biedermeier style that was current from his youth until around 1835. It is important to note that Germany, for these purposes, refers to areas of shared German culture and language, in present-day Germany, Austria, parts of Switzerland and further regions to the east.

Oppenheim brought his knowledge of art history to bear on canvases that he painted for the Rothschilds, skillfully manipulating conventions to reposition his subjects and even create new identities for them. This was achieved through Oppenheim's synthesis of style. The way the Rothschilds chose to be portrayed both publicly and privately, and Oppenheim's contributions to German artistic discourse have not been discussed thoroughly. The implications of Oppenheim as a Jewish artist working with Christian material is essential to any discussion of Oppenheim's later work, the Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Spitzer, "Moritz Daniel Oppenheim- Painter of the Rothschilds, Rothschild of Painters" *Israel Museum Journal* 19 (2001): 43.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Georg Heuberger and Anton Merk, eds., *Moritz Daniel Oppenheim: Jewish Identity in Nineteenth Century Art* (Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt am Main, 1999): 37.

genre scene, which has been the focus of most monographs dedicated to him.

I will attempt to show how Oppenheim, after his initial training, educated himself across the spectrum of styles prevalent in German-speaking countries during the first half of the nineteenth century. Likewise, I mean to show how he used these styles in painting portraits of the Rothschilds to reposition or create the subject's identity using the tropes of contemporary artistic discourse. Attending to the devout Jewishness of both Oppenheim and the Rothschild family, disenfranchised as they were from Gentile society yet always a part of it, I seek to show how these portraits employ Christian visual tropes to convey the subject's identity. The concept of *Deutschheit* is essential to understanding how Oppenheim achieved this, and demonstrating how the artist synthesized both foreign and German styles will require positioning these styles within the larger context of German art.

### **Oppenheim and the Rothschild Family**

Mayer Amschel Rothschild, an upper middle class merchant dealing in antiques and medals, started a money lending operation in 1793 which expanded prodigiously over the next fifty years to become the largest banking firm in Europe. The roots of the Rothschild family in the Frankfurt ghetto can be traced to Mayer's great-great grandfather Ivan, who built a house in the 1560s named "Zum roten Schilde," or House of the Red Shield. Before this time, the history of the family cannot be traced with certainty. It was from this walled, terribly overcrowded *Judengasse*, however, that the

family first rose to wealth and international influence. From 1770, Mayer and his wife Gutle Rothschild (formerly Gutle Schnapper) were busy raising a large family about which much is known. There were probably twenty children born to the couple between 1770 and 1793, of whom only ten survived. The daughters were excluded on all levels from the family business, but the sons would prove to be an essential part of the firm once they were old enough to leave home. There were five girls and five boys. From oldest to youngest the women were Jeanette, Isabella, Babette, Julie, and Henrietta. The men, again from oldest to youngest were Amschel, Salomon, Nathan, Carl, and James.<sup>5</sup>

By 1821, M.A. Rothschild & Sons was an international firm, anchored in five cities around the continent in Frankfurt, Vienna, London, Naples, and Paris.<sup>6</sup> The brothers were ennobled as barons at the Viennese court in short order, except for Nathan, who declined. The Rothschilds' position was exceedingly rare in that they had refused to convert to achieve noble status. Additionally, given that the Rothschild name had become synonymous with negative connotations of "the Jew" in the public eye, the family most likely would have realized the need for a favorable public image. Once they had left home, each of the Rothschild sons independently hired several artists to paint their portraits, but Moritz Oppenheim was the premier painter of the family.

As a religiously observant man who shared a traditional upbringing with the

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<sup>5</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The House of Rothschild* (New York: Penguin, 1999): 42.

<sup>6</sup> Living in these cities were Amschel, Salomon, Nathan, Carl, and James, respectively. Derek A. Wilson, *Rothschild: A Story of Wealth and Power* (London: Deutsch, 2002): 79.

Rothschild brothers, Oppenheim was familiar with the plight of German Jews. Hanau, where the artist was born and grew up, lies only fourteen miles east of Frankfurt.

Oppenheim was called "the first Jewish painter" specifically for his devotion, and that the Rothschilds did not hire an established Christian painter is significant. Instead they chose a young, unestablished Jewish painter who was only twenty-one years old at the time, and maintained a relationship with him for the next forty years. Nathan's daughter Charlotte (1807-1859) was a close friend and pupil of Oppenheim.<sup>7</sup>

By mid-century the Rothschilds had found themselves without equal in the courts of Europe and referred to themselves as a royal family and as the heads of the Jewish cause. Their portraits upheld and reinforced this image of the family, and the way that Oppenheim's beliefs coincided with the Rothschild's own would deeply inform all the portraits he painted for them.

It is unclear how the Rothschilds first met Oppenheim, but it is apparent that they were in philosophical and artistic agreement from the beginning. It has been mentioned in the Rothschild literature that Oppenheim met the youngest brother, James in Paris when the artist lived there briefly in 1820 and 1821, and that James then dispatched young Oppenheim to meet with Carl in Naples. Oppenheim notes in his memoirs that "My social contacts in Paris were not of the sort to advance my acquaintance with the higher realms of art." He was probably speaking of artists, not Rothschilds. He goes on to

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<sup>7</sup> Mitchell Benjamin Frank, *German Romantic Painting Redefined: Nazarene Tradition and the Narratives of Romanticism* (Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2001): 37.

mention that he had progressed in his painting technique while in Paris, referring specifically to his studies of French Classicism with David's pupil Jean Baptist Regnault and of seventeenth century Netherlandish art.<sup>8</sup> What is known for sure is that Oppenheim met with Carl at his house in Naples in 1821, perhaps having never met with James. Oppenheim did write in his memoirs, however, that Carl took a specific interest in him because he was Jewish.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter, Oppenheim was inextricably linked with the Rothschild family's art production for roughly the next forty years. From around 1830 on, Oppenheim established himself in Frankfurt and worked in a Biedermeier style, but still skillfully employed the varied styles he had learned in his youth.<sup>10</sup>

### **State of the Literature on Oppenheim**

Moritz Oppenheim's oeuvre has only been reconstructed in recent decades. The first retrospective exhibition of Oppenheim's work was held at the Israel Museum in 1900 to honor the one-hundredth anniversary of the artist's birth (he died in 1882.) Like so many Jewish artists and Jewish art collections, however, his work was ravaged by World War II, and many of his paintings have been destroyed or lost. His oeuvre was reconstructed by the Bezalel museum, now part of the Israel Museum, in the late 1950s. Since the 1900 exhibition there have been three monographic Oppenheim exhibitions in

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<sup>8</sup> Merk, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Weber, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Merk, 40.

1977, 1983, and 1999. The most recent of these has resulted in the most complete catalog of his work to date.<sup>11</sup>

Oppenheim has been portrayed by historians primarily as a maker of pictures of traditional Jewish family life, and indeed he painted mainly genre scenes from 1865 to 1882. These works of the artist's later life mostly depict large and small groups of people around dinner tables, then considered the center of a Jewish home. Oppenheim's paintings have been connected to "ghetto novels," which were written by Jews about ghetto life.<sup>12</sup> The novels, as well as Oppenheim's paintings of traditions and holidays as he had experienced them during his boyhood in Hanau, were marketed to the Jewish bourgeoisie. Yet the proceedings depicted in the paintings were generalized and perhaps calculated to be understood by the Gentile majority. In this way they were intended to demystify or destigmatize the religion to outsiders.<sup>13</sup>

However, due to the idealized nature of the scenes, these and others of Oppenheim's works have largely been interpreted as Oppenheim's personal reminiscences, or as attempts to record and preserve his traditional Jewish upbringing. Oppenheim was known as "the first Jewish painter" during his lifetime for his faithful adherence to Judaism in a time when many painters converted to achieve success, such

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<sup>11</sup> Merk, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Kleeblat, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Elisheva Cohen, *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press): 167.

was his reputation for being a religious man. It is his devotion which has prevented the literature from acknowledging his contribution to the larger discourse of German art, instead keeping his work within the realm of Jewish art. More recent historians, however, have considered his ability to paint for Jewish and Christian audiences alike, especially in reference to his later work.

Richard Cohen has written extensively on Jewish art of the nineteenth century and the way that issues such as disenfranchisement, orthodoxy, and emancipation are addressed in artists' works. His analysis of Oppenheim's "*Pictures of Traditional Jewish Family Life*" sees the works as statements about emancipation, Christian hegemony, and disparate ideological currents within Judaism itself.<sup>14</sup> The result is Oppenheim's inclusion in the larger Christian discourse concerning Jewish art as the works, he contends, were intended not only for Jews.

But Oppenheim's paintings of the Rothschild family have not been viewed through same lens by historians. The specific ways that they utilize style to position the Jewish subject(s) within a Christian pictorial discourse has been largely overlooked. That Oppenheim's stylistic synthesis in the Rothschild portraits shows this has been suggested, but never taken up in earnest in the literature. In the catalog for the exhibition "Moritz Daniel Oppenheim: Jewish Identity in Nineteenth Century Art," Annette Weber has come closest to achieving this. Her readings of the way Oppenheim's portraits function as a "mirror" for Jewish issues, as well as a medium for Oppenheim to construct his own

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<sup>14</sup> Cohen, 167.



identity as a Jewish bourgeois is essential to my thesis. She also reads the portraits of the Rothschilds as a construction of identity, but stops short of a thorough discussion of Oppenheim as an artist with personal interests and conventions, and an engagement as "other" in Christian discourse.

### **Finding the "German Style"**

Translated roughly as "Germanness," *Deutschheit* describes the search for German identity that had developed in the heated political atmosphere of the Napoleonic era. A sense of shared national identity catalyzed by anti-Napoleonic sentiment and the subsequent search for a new common culture were the foundation of *Deutschheit*. The Napoleonic wars were at their height around 1812, and the melding of patriotic sentiment and the rediscovery of a legendary, medieval Germanic past that characterizes *Deutschheit* can readily be seen as a reaction by German artists to international pressure.<sup>15</sup>

In the arts, German artists would commonly synthesize German and foreign styles. These artists would frequently travel, as Oppenheim did while working with the Nazarenes in Rome from 1821 to 1825, returning to Germany with hybridized styles. This hybridization is especially apparent in the Biedermeier style. Moritz Carrière described *Deutschheit* as "the German essence, inspired and informed by the spirit of

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<sup>15</sup> K. Bell, *Spirit of an Age: Nineteenth Century Paintings from the Nationalgalerie* (London: National Gallery, 2001): 20.

Christianity and ancient Hellas.”<sup>16</sup> The concept involved foreign styles for the reason that the stabilizing effect of a central academy did not exist for German art, as Paris for French, or Rome for Italian.

German art’s lack of a center was commented on by Frenchman Edmond Duranty as late as 1878 after reviewing the German exhibition at the Paris World’s Fair.<sup>17</sup> In Duranty’s time Munich, Berlin, Düsseldorf, Weimar, Karlsruhe, and Frankfurt were considered to be the main German art centers. These cities were first named in a three volume study of German art by Athanasius Graf Raczynski published in 1837, which formed the basis of a contemporary understanding of German art before the Munich Exhibition of 1858.<sup>18</sup>

Biedermeier was a style based in the discourse of *Deutschheit*. The term Biedermeier itself is anachronistic. It emerged as a historical term in the late nineteenth century, around fifty years after the style fell out of favor in the 1830s and 1840s. Biedermeier describes the search for a pan-German style that preceded the Munich exhibition in 1858, which was seen as the birth of a "new" German art. Biedermeier is a characteristically dry style based in careful observation and detail. Its precedents are acknowledged to lie in foreign styles, most notably seventeenth century Dutch painting. The technical and philosophical objectivity of Biedermeier stands in contrast to the free

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Bell, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Bell, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Bell, 41.

idealism of the Romantics.<sup>19</sup> In that foreign styles were used as models for refinement that would take on a German character, however, the two are not dissimilar. Stylistically, Biedermeier is considered to be predominantly neoclassical, and so lies in opposition to the styles of the German Romantics such as Caspar David Friedrich or even to Nazarenes like Overbeck and Pforr, as Georg Himmelheber points out.<sup>20</sup>

Biedermeier can be seen as an example of *Deutschheit* in this way. As Himmelheber notes, the scientifically observed style of Biedermeier is not an imitation of Dutch painting, as the resulting works do not have the same effect, and tend to be lively and individualized. That Oppenheim painted both in Nazarene and Biedermeier styles is significant to the point I am making, which is that Oppenheim was adept at working in a range of styles and able to employ them in constructing the identity of his Rothschild sitters.

The Romantics, although stylistically different from Biedermeier artists, nevertheless explored what it meant to be German as well. Symbolic markers such as turbulent seas or threatening storms in Friedrich's paintings allude to the vicissitudes of time, his splintered oaks to a divided Germany. The works of the Romantics frequently reveal the spiritual tendencies of *Deutschheit*. The painting cycle "The Times of Day" by Philip Otto Runge is a good example of German Romantic art of this period in that it is

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<sup>19</sup> Georg Himmelheber, *Biedermeier 1815-1835: Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, Decorative Arts, Fashion* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1989): 27.

<sup>20</sup> Himmelheber, 9.

intended to be an expression of poetry, philosophy, and political discourse, synergy being a salient feature of *Deutschheit*.

The Nazarene style of painting that Oppenheim also worked in is the interpretation by Germanic artists of Italian painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Precedents lie commonly in the works of Raphael, Tintoretto, Titian, and Corregio. These artists' works, although sometimes used in strikingly similar compositions by Nazarene artists, were altered to reflect the values of the group. Oppenheim's connection was in that he employed their technique while living in Rome, less so their thematic imagery.<sup>21</sup> When painting in an Italian style the Nazarenes, however, wished it to be known that they were still German artists. The nature of German art of this period has been discussed in the literature by Mitchell Benjamin Frank for the Nazarenes and Georg Himmelheber for the Biedermeier style.

Frank's work examines the Nazarene's engagement with both German philosophy and Italian art. The philosophies of Hegel, Schlegel, and Fichte, which were so influential to the course of German art after 1858 in the form of works by Romantic painters Caspar David Friedrich and Philip Otto Runge, were part of the Nazarene ethos from the group's beginning. To Frank, the bond of Christian brotherhood that was so essential to the Nazarene's art expresses a philosophy based on the group identity shared among the expatriate artists. Insofar as these artists were German by birth and embracing German philosophy, this is an example of *Deutschheit*, of the search for what it meant to be

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<sup>21</sup> Merk, 24.

German by culture, not geography. The Nazarenes had reformed their group in Rome when they were expelled from the Vienna Academy after the city was occupied by the French. Again, the necessity of having to move around experienced by German artists as a result of international pressures is a key feature of *Deutschheit*.<sup>22</sup>

Himmelheber's similar analysis of Biedermeier attributes its development to German patriotism and accordingly views the style in nationalistic terms. His attempts to tie together Biedermeier architecture, fashion, sculpture, and the decorative arts rely on notions of stylistic synthesis. Still, he acknowledges that disparity remains between the stylistic directions within, for example, Biedermeier architecture and sculpture or within Biedermeier painting itself. The variety of foreign and local styles as well as the abundance of provincial variations of these allowed Biedermeier artists to work in disparate directions while at the same time being subsumed under the loose term "Biedermeier." Himmelheber therefore attempts to streamline, or rather tie together more neatly this concept by defining it as a primarily anti-French, neoclassical movement borne of German nationalism and comprised of international styles. Citing the uprisings and rebellions against totalitarianism that occurred around Europe in the early nineteenth century, Himmelheber frames Biedermeier's beginnings around 1815 as a product of social upheaval and concurrent also with its subsiding in the 1830s. The fervent public sentiment manifest in these uprisings, and its direct bearing on what course Germany was to take in the future is an example of the individual's role in *Deutschheit* as he or she

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<sup>22</sup> Bell, 24.

derives a personal identity from the shared culture of the group. This, as well as the German public's increasing taste for foreign products of a distinctly German character (often using synthesized foreign styles) also informed the parameters of Biedermeier. It is in this sense that Biedermeier and *Deutschheit* are inextricable from one another.

### **Scope of this Thesis**

Chapter one will discuss the Nazarene and Biedermeier styles, ending with a section on Oppenheim and the Rothschilds' position as "other" in a Christian society. This establishes Oppenheim as an artist with personal conventions and working methods that he developed from contact with both German and non-German styles. It also demonstrates the artist's engagement with German art despite his working in a non-German style. Chapter two will introduce the reader to several of Oppenheim's portraits of the Rothschilds, showing how Oppenheim employed the styles he had acquired abroad in painting the family. It also demonstrates his engagement with Jewish issues as a young portraitist in Frankfurt, and how he addressed these pertinent social and political issues in his Rothschild portraits.

## Chapter One

This chapter provides a historical outline of the Nazarene group that Oppenheim painted with as a young artist working in Rome and the Biedermeier style that dominated his portraits of the Jewish bourgeoisie in Frankfurt. At the end of the chapter, an argument is presented about Oppenheim and the Rothschilds as "other" within a Christian discourse.

### The Nazarenes

The Nazarene style of painting, which Oppenheim first practiced in Rome from 1821 to 1824, was then and is still considered to be an essentially German style even though it was centered only in Italy. It was founded by Johann Friedrich Overbeck and Franz Pforr at the Viennese Academy in 1808. The original name of the group was the *Lukasbund*, or "Brotherhood of St. Luke," and it included four other members: Konrad Hottinger, Joseph Sutter, Ludwig Vogel, and Joseph Wintergerst.<sup>23</sup> Due to ideological differences between the group and the academy's director, four of the *Lukasbunders* (Overbeck, Pforr, Vogel, and Wintergerst) moved to Rome, where they became known as

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<sup>23</sup> Frank, 11.

the Nazarenes for their monastic lifestyle and mode of dress. A well-known Prussian artist of the Düsseldorf Academy named Peter Cornelius joined them there.<sup>24</sup> The Nazarenes lived in cloister apartments at the Franciscan monastery of Sant' Isidoro and stressed devotion to art and friendship. They were supported by German patrons living in Italy. As expatriate artists that clung to German habits and customs but practiced an Italian style, the Nazarenes had adopted in their art a political stance relevant to Germany from the time they started to work in Rome.<sup>25</sup>

No matter where the Nazarenes painted or what styles they practiced, it was their apparent conviction that what it meant to be German resided in the mind and not in a geographic location, for wherever the group painted they did so with the clear objective of enriching German art. In 1814, Nazarene Peter Cornelius wrote, "At last I come to what according to my innermost conviction would, I feel, be the most powerful, I would say the infallible, means of giving German art a new direction compatible with the great era of the nation and with its spirit."<sup>26</sup> As for what kind of art Cornelius had envisaged, he is referring to fresco, the large-scale medium of painting that had fallen out of favor in Rome by the early nineteenth century, to be completed in a grand communal effort by the Nazarenes. This, Cornelius thought, would awaken the art world to the Nazarene vision for the "new" German art. The fresco came to fruition in the form of a German commission granted to Cornelius by the Prussian Consul General in Rome, Jacob

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<sup>24</sup> Frank, 26, 79.

<sup>25</sup> Frank, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Keith Andrews, *The Nazarenes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 34.



Salomon Bartholdy. At Cornelius' prompting, three other Nazarenes were included, Overbeck, Schadow, and Veit. A friend of the Nazarenes, landscape painter Franz Catel, painted scenes above the doors.<sup>27</sup> To the Nazarenes, lifestyle was fundamental to producing art. Lifestyle engendered art, and art was a reflection of the artist's life.

To this end, the philosophies of Kant and Rousseau played a large part in the formation of the communal spirit of the Nazarenes. These two philosophers' assertion of the division between external environments and the self were essential not only to the Nazarenes' development but also to the development of the cult of the self that figured so prominently in the "new" German art of the Romantics Friedrich and Runge.

There is a primary emphasis on personal conviction and expression in the work of both movements' artists, which is perhaps why the Nazarenes were associated in 1830 by Heine with the Romantics.<sup>28</sup> While the Nazarenes explored *Deutschheit* through a utopian ideal based on Italian precepts, the Romantics did so through symbolism and spiritual imagery. Romantics like Friedrich, Runge, and Carstens may have painted in different styles and were artistically at odds with the Nazarenes, but it is clear that the philosophies practiced by both groups were similar, and so too was their art. The Romantics working out of Copenhagen and Berlin and the Nazarenes in Rome were considered equally valid participants in the discourse of *Deutschheit*, even if the Nazarenes eventually lost favor with critics.

Ferdinand Tönnies wrote his book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Community*

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<sup>27</sup> Andrews, 34, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Frank, 1.

and Society) in 1887, outlining both terms as sociological constructs. To Tönnies, the individual in society is self-determinant and lives apart from artificial constructs, while the same individual in a communal situation is guided by the motivations of the entire group. The difference, then, between society and community is that in the latter the individual lives with people who share similar convictions and beliefs, and group identity is therefore coincident to the identity of its individual members.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, to Nazarene thinking the shared ideals of the group were the wellspring of its members' artistic innovation. This is the basis of Frank's assertion that the monastic lifestyle practiced by the Nazarenes was an attempt to validate the group's art through the way they lived. But Tönnies did not formulate his principles of community and society until long after the Nazarenes had disbanded, to be sure. The concept of *Gemeingeist*, or communal spirit however, was first discussed in Berlin in the 1790s and figures in the philosophies of Schlegel and Novalis. This emphasis on the interests of the group over the individual, and the individual's validation through group interest is fundamentally similar to Tönnies' concept of community.<sup>30</sup> *Gemeingeist* was a term applied not to a small group, however, but to the German people in general. Heine noted, for example, how Berlin was comprised of citizens who themselves constituted what Berlin really was, a kind of "Volksgeist." In essence, it was the Berliners who made the city what it was through shared beliefs and practices, ultimately the very way they lived. *Deutschheit* was participation in a German cultural, not political state. The Nazarenes' engagement with

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<sup>29</sup> Frank, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Frank, 18.

these philosophies that so informed their work, then, might be seen as the Nazarenes' attempt to underpin their sense of group identity as German. Art historian Frank Büttner describes this sense of group identity, "Only by giving up its autonomy could art (according to the Nazarenes) resume its true place in the life of the people." It was the life that they lived, and the group with which they associated that the Nazarenes saw as allowing for the successful synthesis of the Italian and German styles.<sup>31</sup>

Nazarene painting is primarily based in the work of Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, Corregio, and Tintoretto. In Nazarene paintings, however, the Italianate material is reworked to express the Nazarene philosophy of brotherhood, as only the brushwork and compositional format are Italian. These Italianate scenes of the Nazarenes are set amidst German Gothic architecture with characters wearing "old German" or *altdeutsch* dress (*fig 1*).

Overbeck's portrait of Pforr from around 1810, now in the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, shows the artist in *altdeutsch* dress, and it is typical of group members' portraits of each other (*fig 2*). This type of friendship portrait is unique to the Nazarenes, and many were made, including several by Oppenheim (*fig 3*). To some extent they reinforce each member's place in the group. Pforr was the strongest member of the Nazarenes from the group's beginning, while Overbeck was the group's spiritual leader. As a result, Overbeck is often portrayed as a monk, and Pforr as an idealist. So strong was the Nazarene bond of brotherhood that they almost disintegrated after Pforr's untimely death from tuberculosis

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Frank, 21.

in 1812, which marked the end of the group's early phase.<sup>32</sup> After Pforr's death, Peter Cornelius exerted greater influence in the group and is pictured next to Overbeck instead (*fig 4*). Cornelius departed for Germany in 1819, which signaled the end of the Nazarenes as a cohesive group. The Nazarenes then split into two groups with oppositional tendencies. This split has been interpreted by Frank as paralleling Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* model, which posits that community inevitably gives way to society. The resulting introversive and extroversive tendencies of the two resulting groups are evidence of the Nazarenes' relation to Tönnies' philosophy.

If the Nazarene ethos of German Christian brotherhood gave the group its success, then they were also pilloried by their detractors through the same mechanism. To German thinkers dismissive of religion, the group's devotion to Catholicism was seen as symptomatic of larger faults such as philosophical impotence or worse, as Caspar David Friedrich called it, "the slavish aping of past styles." The critic and poet Heinrich Heine agreed with Friedrich, saying that ". . . they (the Nazarenes) had gone back into the old prison of the mind from which their forefathers had freed themselves."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Runge asked, "What is the use of reviving old art?"<sup>34</sup> The group was, however, considered to practice a German style even though they lived in Rome and worked in the Italian style, and their appropriation of German philosophy made this so. It was in this context that Heine called the work of the Nazarenes "neo-German-religious-patriotic-art," using

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<sup>32</sup> He was 24 years old. Frank, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Frank, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Bell, 27.

Goethe and Heinrich Mayer's term.<sup>35</sup>

By the time Oppenheim arrived in Rome in 1821, the Nazarenes as a cohesive group had disintegrated and split along Protestant and Catholic lines. There had always existed within Nazarene painting a divide between medieval scenes, favored by Pforr, and Catholic imagery, which was favored by Overbeck. Franz Pforr, the most accomplished member and leader of the original group had died almost a decade before and Peter Cornelius, who took his place, left for Germany two years prior to Oppenheim's arrival. Of the original *Lukasbunders*, only Overbeck and Sutter remained in Rome. Overbeck's group was called the Trinitisti, as they lived near the Trinità dei Monti church, and included Wilhelm Schadow, Joseph Sutter, and Philipp Veit.<sup>36</sup> The other group, the Capitoline, headed by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, was known for their meeting spot at the Palazzo Caffarelli on the Capitoline Hill. The work of both groups is referred to as Nazarene, and Oppenheim associated with both groups. In the Capitoline circle he met neoclassical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldson, who would become well known in the context of Biedermeier and also a dear friend of Oppenheim's.<sup>37</sup>

By associating with both the Trinitisti and Capitoline, Oppenheim took on some characteristics of both groups. One major feature of the two groups was that the Capitoline were no longer insular, and its members were no longer cloistered at local monasteries. A drawing of around 1818, now in the Städelsches Institute, shows the

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<sup>35</sup> Frank, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Veit was also Jewish and working with the same Christian imagery and style as Oppenheim.

<sup>37</sup> Merk, 24.

Capitolines at their best known meeting spot, the Café Greco, a very public place (*fig 5*). Overbeck's Trinitisti group still practiced the same communal living of the Nazarenes' early years, pointing up Frank's point about the movement paralleling Tönnies' formulations.

Oppenheim painted in a style that links him to the Capitolines while at the same time using the subject matter of the Trinitisti. One such example, *The Return of Young Tobias* in the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen is dated around 1823. It has the relatively loose handling of contour and baroque dynamism typical of the Capitolines, but with a multi-figure composition typical of the Trinitisti (*fig 6*).<sup>38</sup> His work of this period includes mainly Old Testament scenes, with some Christian ones as well.<sup>39</sup> Oppenheim even won a competition held by the Academy of St. Luke in Rome for his drawing *Christ and the Woman of Samaria* (now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem) but was not awarded the prize when it was found out he was Jewish.<sup>40</sup> It is clear from his writings that Oppenheim was quite busy in Rome studying whichever styles he came across, often maintaining a degree of separation between himself and these schools of painting. He did not, or as a Jew could not, find a place in only one school. At the same time, the young artist was developing an ability to move smoothly between styles. As a follower of both circles of Nazarene painting and neither at the same time, Oppenheim was participating fully in the search for *Deutschheit*, even to the point of synthesizing two German styles

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<sup>38</sup> Merk, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Merk, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Merk, 30.

that are scarcely distinguishable today, those of the Capitoline and Trinitisti. At the same time, however, Oppenheim's Jewish identity kept him on the periphery of *Deutschheit*, understood as a Christian discourse.

The Nazarenes continued to influence German art after their time in Rome. Peter Cornelius and fellow Nazarene Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld both returned to Germany in 1819 and 1828, respectively, and influenced later Romantic painters Moritz von Schwind and Ludwig Richter.<sup>41</sup> Philipp Veit lived in Frankfurt from 1830 to 1843, where he was the director of the Städelsches school at which Oppenheim had received his early art education. From the time they lived in Rome together, Oppenheim and Veit remained close friends.<sup>42</sup> A central figure of late Nazarene painting, Wilhelm Schadow, became director of the Düsseldorf school in 1826, and the Biedermeier style taught there at the time was abandoned at the school under Schadow's direction.<sup>43</sup> Oppenheim himself returned to Germany in 1825, moving to Frankfurt, where he lived for the rest of his life.

### **Biedermeier**

Around 1815, as the Napoleonic Wars came to an end and the opulent French Empire style fell out of favor, the Biedermeier style became established across German-speaking countries. It encompasses many different categories of art, from painting to interior design. The term Biedermeier derives from a comic character named Gottlieb

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<sup>41</sup> Frank, 79.

<sup>42</sup> Weyl, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Himmelheber, 30.

Biedermeier published in the *Fliegende Blätter*, a weekly satirical magazine. The character was the brainchild of a doctor, Adolf Kussmaul, and Ludwig Eichrodt, a lawyer, and lived a comically uneventful life.<sup>44</sup> In reference to the style, however, the name was only applied in the 1890s, and with derisive connotations. The German word *bieder* means "honest" but also "square." Biedermeier came to mean the "common man," with the connotation of a petit bourgeois. Even today in Germany *bieder* or Biedermeier can carry negative connotations.

And it certainly was a controversial style. Critics widely rejected its sparse utilitarianism and almost utter lack of ornament. Fritz Minkis summed it up, calling Biedermeier “. . . a ridiculous style of infinite dryness and unredeemed tastelessness.”<sup>45</sup> It was a neoclassical style, but stripped of detail in the extreme. Karl Zelter, writing to Goethe about the 1820 opening of the new national theatre designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel remarked, “The architects miss a pure style. . . Too many corners and miters; too many narrow windows, which they consider disturbing.”<sup>46</sup> This reflects, even if in a disparaging way, the nature of Biedermeier architecture where forms were unrelentingly square and block-like. There may have simply not been enough traditional indicators of style to convince the critics of Biedermeier’s potential. Ionic capitals were mixed with Doric columns, traditional Gothic forms were streamlined and classical proportions altered in such a way as to look almost "prefab" in our modern sense of the word.

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<sup>44</sup> Linda Chase and Karl Kemp, *The World of Biedermeier* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001): 43.

<sup>45</sup> Himmelheber, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Himmelheber, 16.



Himmelheber might agree that there is a close relation, as he sees Biedermeier architecture as one of the last styles of the preindustrial world, as indeed, chronologically speaking, it is. But what Himmelheber refers to is not Biedermeier's chronological place in history but rather its unprecedented consolidation of detail and use of outmoded structural supports in a purely decorative sense and by implication the unquestioned primacy of classical proportion in architecture. The strict adherence to the rules of classical architecture have in Biedermeier been altered to produce something markedly new, or something like the German classical.

Biedermeier sculpture as an architectural element was relegated to decorative detail. Statues in the interiors of buildings, for example, became equally as spare and streamlined as the architecture that surrounded them. Molding around their bases and around columns utilized the same polished right angles, essentially unsculpted marble slabs. Friezes were simplified to the point that they functioned only so as to reiterate the lines of the pediment itself and so were subordinate to architectural elements.

Painting as its own discipline, however, flourished. The spare, naturalistic style of Biedermeier painting produced portraits expressing great individuality, and Oppenheim's connections to Biedermeier are far more substantial than his comparatively short time spent in Rome. His painting of 1825, *Portrait of a Young Lady*, now in the Frankfurt Museum, serves to point up the combination of styles that characterized Biedermeier fashions in the Frankfurt of Oppenheim's time (*fig 7*). The subject wears a dress of simple design with a low-cut neckline that is reminiscent of French revolutionary styles. So too is the red shawl draped over her shoulder, while the furniture is in a Napoleonic style. As

Weber points out, this is a “beautiful girl” type of portrait, first produced during the French Revolution, which will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter. Not French, however, are her hairstyle and the manner in which she is wearing the shawl. They are evocative of Biedermeier fashions popular in Frankfurt when this portrait was painted. The parapet and enframing arch, as well as the careful modeling of her features are informed by German patrician portraiture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These elements were often used by Oppenheim. This young lady’s combination of clothing, hair styles, and locale is somewhat analogous to Biedermeier itself, with its large number of influences and forms.<sup>47</sup> It was also in the Biedermeier style that Oppenheim would later express a full engagement in discourses about Jewish emancipation, enfranchisement, and identity within a Christian context.

### **Oppenheim and the Rothschilds as "Other"**

Oppenheim and the Rothschild family, as Jews, were in a similar social situation as a result of their religion and devotion to it. In the 1820s, Jews in Germany, benefiting for just a short while from the complete abolition of ghetto restrictions, were free to enjoy the rights of full citizens. Emancipation was enjoyed by German Jews everywhere for a time, but restrictions were put back in place not long thereafter. Under any circumstances, however, both Oppenheim and the Rothschilds remained outsiders, marginalized as "other" in a Christian world. Additionally the fact that the Rothschilds were among the richest families in continental Europe, as well as the only Jews of such wealth, is

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<sup>47</sup> Merk, 34

essential to understanding them. Their economic resources translated directly into political power, leading their contemporaries to regard them and their meteoric rise to the ranks of the aristocracy with contempt. To many observers the Rothschilds were nouveaux riches, or upstarts, or both. Considering also that they exercised financial and political power to rival heads of state, the Rothschilds' public image was possessed of a duality that formed a vicious cycle.

This occurred because nations needed the Rothschilds and their bank. Since the early 1800s, Rothschild capital had been heavily invested in bonds and paper securities, which were offered by most European governments to bolster their operating budgets. Gold was exchanged by investors for government issued securities, then used by the government to function. In effect, buyers speculated on which governments would succeed in the future. The international bond market was embryonic at the time, and lacked the fiscal controls that regulate it today. As a result of this and their tenacious dealing, the Rothschilds basically cornered the gold market and thus owned, on paper, substantial portions of all the large economies in Europe, not to mention those as far away as Brazil, the United States, India and Australia.<sup>48</sup> This translated, of course, into indirect but real political power.

Wellington would not have been able to invade France and Spain if not for Nathan's private fortune. In France, Napoleon was able to finance the invasion of Germany only after James' discreet intercession. Salomon also covertly loaned money to the Tsar to aid Russia's military efforts, with the specific provision that no paper invoice

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<sup>48</sup> Ferguson, 73; Wilson, 79.

would ever link the two words "gun" and "Rothschild" together. Salomon evidently knew how the press would handle such information. In the early nineteenth century, to wage extended war in Europe was simply not possible without the Rothschilds' consent to sell off their shares.<sup>49</sup>

In this way the Rothschilds gained an unjust reputation for being war profiteers. That the Rothschild brothers resided at five different courts from London to Vienna, and expected to be at the service of their respective sovereign was a fact willingly overlooked by detractors. And as Carol Ockman has noted, "the Jew" was the other, and anti-Semitism was fueled by events as reported through the press.<sup>50</sup> For it was in the press that images of the string pulling, money-lending Jewish banker were invariably trotted out (*figs 8,9*). Indeed, the words "Jew" and "Rothschild" were often used interchangeably. In his 1844 pamphlet entitled *On the Jewish Question*, Karl Marx made a sideways reference to the House of Rothschild, writing, "Every tyrant is backed by a Jew, as is every Pope by a Jesuit."<sup>51</sup> In Frankfurt, Amschel's house was besieged several times by mobs. During the Hep riots in Vienna, Salomon's mansion was actually occupied by an angry mob while he hid at a friend's house.<sup>52</sup>

The cycle is discernible in that the more the Rothschild bank participated with partiality in the economic affairs of Europe, sometimes on both sides of the conflict, the

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<sup>49</sup> Virginia Cowles, *The Rothschilds: A Family of Fortune* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973): 96.

<sup>50</sup> Carol Ockman, Two Large Eyebrows a l'Orientale: Ethnic Stereotyping in Ingres' *Baronne de Rothschild*, *Art History* 14 (1991): 524.

<sup>51</sup> Ferguson, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Cowles, 109.

more backlash was engendered towards the family. As a result, the more successful the family was, the more vicious the stereotype they were put up against became.

The label "Kings of the Jews," was applied to the family constantly in the press but this was perhaps not so different from the family's own viewpoint, although for different reasons.<sup>53</sup> In personal correspondences they often referred to themselves as "our royal family," and they patterned themselves after the heads of state they dealt with: Napoleon; Louis Phillipe; Lord Liverpool, the Prime Minister of Britain; and the Austrian minister Klemens von Metternich.

Often they used their fortune as leverage to improve the condition of those they referred to as "co-religionists." Many times they loaned money to people (not the least of them the Pope) on the condition that they emancipate their Jewish populations. The Rothschilds exerted influence on behalf of Judaism in almost every state where they did business, and in others where they had no financial stake like Syria and Romania.

They were avid patrons of Gentile artists and composers who generally favored Jewish emancipation, such as Balzac, Chopin, and Rossini.<sup>54</sup> Some family intimates were active Zionists like Benjamin Disraeli, Heinrich Heine and a bit later, Theodore Herzl.<sup>55</sup> Edmond, James' son, is often known as a father of modern Israel for his purchase and cultivation of land in Palestine.<sup>56</sup> Since then, the senior male Rothschild has taken on the

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Davis, *The English Rothschilds* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1983): 82; Herbert R. Lottman, *The French Rothschilds* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995): 23.

<sup>54</sup> Wilson, 84.

<sup>55</sup> Ferguson, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Cowles, 182.

identity, at least in France, of the defacto leader of the country's Jewish community.<sup>57</sup> In their unique position as both outside the world of Gentile aristocracy yet as Jews granted a rare acceptance into it, the Rothschilds considered themselves protector and promoter of Jewish causes.

With the help of artists, specifically Moritz Oppenheim, the family constructed a favorable identity that responded to their critics in the public sphere by linking themselves with visual tropes that were associated with or employed by royal families of the past. Painted by a Jewish artist working so firmly within the parameters of *Deutschheit*, Oppenheim's Rothschild portraits take the logical next step regarding what it meant to explore Germanness. These portraits explored for Jews, while at the same time impressing on Gentiles, the possibilities of a new image of the Jewish aristocracy within Germany and in a larger European context as well.

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<sup>57</sup> Lottman, 264.

## Chapter Two

This chapter analyzes how Oppenheim constructed the Rothschilds' image as a successful, increasingly well-known Jewish family by using a variety of traditionally Christian styles. As portraitist for the family, works done for the Rothschilds figure prominently in Oppenheim's oeuvre and are concurrent with his participation in the discourses of *Deutschheit*. Private portraits also show an engagement with Jewish issues such as orthodoxy, emancipation, and Zionism.

Oppenheim's portraits of the Rothschilds can be grouped generally into two categories, public and private. Public portraits of the Rothschilds take the form of sober Biedermeier compositions in dark palettes of the five brothers only, and were used to aid the image of M.A. Rothschild & Sons. These portraits in the first group do not characterize or depict the brothers' Jewishness as in the private portraits. They imitate, or rather manipulate the conventions of portraiture in the court circles where each brother operated to allow for depictions of a new class of wealthy, educated Jewish gentry.

Portraits in the second group mostly show the family at leisure, with young children, toddlers, and their attendant young mothers, often in pastoral settings. Hunting portraits of the men are also common. From among this group, two wedding portraits of Charlotte and Lionel will be discussed here. Private portraits also include likenesses of

Gutle Rothschild, the matriarch of the family, with overt markers of Jewish bourgeois status. The portrait of Gutle also alludes to the entire Rothschild family's heritage, as Jewish descent is matrilineal.

### **Oppenheim in Frankfurt**

Between 1829 and 1831, Moritz Oppenheim solidified his position in Frankfurt as a portraitist of the Jewish bourgeoisie. He mentioned to his pupil and friend Charlotte Rothschild that he was kept busy with commissions from both Jewish and Gentile clients.<sup>58</sup> Oppenheim seems to have been actively engaged in the Jewish life of the city, however, for his portraits read as a veritable dictionary of Jewish activists and luminaries. The artist painted influential Zionists Ludwig Börne, Heinrich Heine, Moses Mendelsohn, Gabriel Reisser, and Salomon Stiebl as well as wealthy Jewish bankers, lawyers, doctors and other members of the burgeoning Jewish upper class. Extant portraits show that he used the Biedermeier style almost exclusively, and they are typical of the countless portraits produced in this period for the city's Gentile and Jewish citizens alike.

A self-portrait by Oppenheim painted in 1825 that is now in the Hanau Museum depicts the artist as both modest and well off, an image he projects in his memoirs (*fig 10*).<sup>59</sup> This portrait of a young, class-conscious artist is very similar to the way Oppenheim would depict the Rothschild men in their portraits, not only for its careful,

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<sup>58</sup> Weber, 173.

<sup>59</sup> Weber, 174.



observational brushwork and posture, but also in its arresting, self-assured gaze and understated dignity. The engaging gaze is an example of the Rousseauian ideal that informed Biedermeier portraiture.<sup>60</sup> This ideal stresses moral wellbeing over worldly success, the emotional over the physical, and individual devotion to the collective interest. It also indicates the situation that Oppenheim, as well as other German Jews, faced in the wake of emancipation and the resultant rise of a Jewish bourgeoisie.

Across all levels of society there remained a medieval divide between Jews and Gentiles, but the recent French occupation had forced change in German society by granting Jews more rights. Specifically in Frankfurt, ghetto restrictions had been abolished shortly after the invasion of 1809. The result was a burgeoning Jewish upper class that more closely resembled the Gentile upper class. Freedom of trade, and of a free education, were some newly granted prerogatives of German Jews, but short of religious conversion they were still excluded from the upper echelons of society.

The Rothschilds of course were a rare exception. As Annette Weber has stated, “the key to Oppenheim's achievement as portraitist of the Rothschilds was his ability to formulate a new image of their role in the liberal bourgeois society of the nineteenth century.”<sup>61</sup> Oppenheim's own achievements as an artist, instead of the less than dignified vocation of “portraitist,” informed his image of the Rothschilds greatly. As time progressed, Oppenheim's clientele became increasingly Jewish, until his commissions

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<sup>60</sup> Weber, 188.

<sup>61</sup> Weber, 187.

were coming almost exclusively from Jewish patrons.<sup>62</sup> It was during this time in the mid-1830s that he became increasingly involved with the Rothschilds, but his engagement with Jewish issues remained present in his portraits. While Oppenheim's public portraits of the Rothschilds communicated simultaneously to Jewish and Christian audiences the social and fiscal standing of the Rothschild family, his private portraits communicate in primarily Jewish discourses.

In Frankfurt, Oppenheim's working methods were similar to those employed in his Italian period. When Philipp Veit, Oppenheim's friend from Italy and then director of the Städelsches school, retired under pressure in 1842 and took several loyal students with him, Jakob Becker of the Düsseldorf school became the new director. The primacy of landscape and genre scenes in Düsseldorf that Becker brought to the school clashed severely with the historicism practiced under Veit. The result was that Veit and his followers formed a sort of anti-Städel movement in Frankfurt. Oppenheim, as he did in Italy with the Trinitisti and the Capitoline, worked on the periphery of both groups without commitment to either one. He synthesized the styles of both to produce something original, just as he had done in Rome.<sup>63</sup> A self-portrait drawing of 1840 of Oppenheim with a portrait of Veit upon his easel (Leo Baeck Institute, New York), recalls the friendship portraits of the Nazarenes that the artist was so familiar with, such as the lasting impression of Italy upon Oppenheim's work (*fig 11*).

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<sup>62</sup> Merk, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Merk, 47.

## Family Portraits

Amschel Mayer was by far the most religiously observant of the brothers. He kept strictly kosher, observed traditional codes of dress, and never worked on the Sabbath. Oppenheim's ability to synthesize stylistic conventions is evident in a canvas commissioned by him in 1849 of the Rothschilds at prayer (*fig 12*).

Although it is not rightly called a group portrait as no individual is distinguishable, except a grandson by the window (who is perhaps five or six years old), it nevertheless shows all the male Rothschilds gathered in Amschel's private synagogue at his residence on the Bockenheimer Landstrasse in Frankfurt.<sup>64</sup> Of course, there are more than five brothers at the table. There appear to be twenty figures altogether, including two clearly visible children. In 1849, there were exactly twenty-one Rothschild males five years of age or older, so it seems that Oppenheim has depicted three generations in one room, assuming one person was not depicted.<sup>65</sup> Therefore as a statement of the strength of a family united, it is similar to public portraits that Oppenheim had painted of the brothers a decade before, to be discussed in the next section (*figs 23,24*). Rather than being united in brotherhood, however, here is an even larger family unit united in their faith. Oppenheim has used his own knowledge as an artist to strategically blend visual conventions, in this case genre painting and family group portraits.

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<sup>64</sup> Weber, 175.

<sup>65</sup> Nathan died in 1836, and Salomon's first grandson Mayer Anselm Leon died in infancy in 1828, leaving twenty-four Rothschild males who were alive in 1849. Three of them (Leopold, Edmond James, and Mayer Albert) were either three or four years old. Salomon Albert and James Edouard were both five years of age in 1849, totaling twenty one Rothschilds aged five or older.

Draped in prayer shawls, the group of men is either just beginning, or just finishing, their prayers for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. As Yom Kippur starts at sundown, the light coming through the window can either indicate dusk or dawn. A man at the very back of the room stands over the ark, which contains the Torah, and is leading the others in prayer. Oppenheim would later paint a public group scene of the Rothschild men (*fig 25*), discussed in the next section, for the purposes of business politics, where the artist similarly conceived the commission as a genre scene.

The painting of Yom Kippur from 1849 is different in style from Oppenheim's portraits of the family from the 1830s. This shift in style occurred in the last third of the Oppenheim's life, when he devoted his work entirely to the genre scene. *Yom Kippur* shares some typical characteristics of Oppenheim's genre scenes. When looking at his "*Pictures of Traditional Jewish Family Life*," one will see that the majority of these scenes take place inside a Jewish household where the table is almost always visible if not central to the composition (*figs 13, 14*). Out of the twenty scenes in "*Pictures of Traditional Jewish Family Life*," almost half are of specific holy days such as Purim, Passover, Sukkoth, and Hanukkah. Like the painting *Yom Kippur*, these scenes frequently have a central table. Furthermore, the scene of the Rothschilds at prayer would be one of the only multi-figural compositions that the artist ever painted if one discounted the connection to "*Pictures of Traditional Jewish Family Life*." As a rather crowded composition of a group with this number of people, *Yom Kippur* has parallels only in Oppenheim's later work (*figs 15, 16*). As an artist with his own pictorial vocabulary and knowledge of art history and style, Oppenheim has here positioned the Rothschilds

within his own oeuvre as a quintessential Jewish family.

A portrait of Gutle Rothschild, now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, emphasizes the family's religion with signifiers of prosperity and devotion that were readily noticeable to Jews (*fig 17*). This portrait was never meant to be hung in an office or shown to the public, and it shows the matriarch of the Rothschild family in keeping with the provincial Jewish customs that she practiced all her life. She died, aged ninety-six, the year this portrait was painted in 1849. Gutle lived in the same house the family had bought in 1783 for fear of bringing her sons bad luck. She is shown wearing her Sabbath attire and a wide collar that was a marker of distinction among Jews in the Frankfurt ghetto. In earlier works depicting the Jewish bourgeoisie, Oppenheim used the collar and bonnet as similar marks of distinction (*figs 18, 19*). Sumptuary laws forbidding jewelry in the synagogue had become antiquated by this time and thus she is shown wearing her jewels.<sup>66</sup> The vignette in the upper right corner shows the *Judengasse's* narrow streets that Gutle never moved away from. The highly detailed painting of her clothes, the table at which she sits, the vignette, and the frontal pose are common to German patrician portraits of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. An example of one such portrait is Jacob van Oostanen Cornelisz's *Portrait of a Lady* of 1524 (*fig 20*).<sup>67</sup>

In this painting the artist has depicted the family's origins with as much veracity as he has seemingly painted Gutle's face with all of its signs of age. The careful modelling of the face, typical of Oppenheim, indicates that this is a likeness of the elderly

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<sup>66</sup> Muhlstein, 143.

<sup>67</sup> Weber, 178.

matriarch. Oppenheim has linked understood Christian visual tropes with markers of Jewish respectability, and in so doing has created an iconography of a dignified, wealthy and competent Jewish woman that is, disregarding the exceptional subject, typical of Oppenheim's other portraits of Frankfurt's Jewish bourgeoisie. Her straightforward gaze shows no apprehension, or even frailty, and the book and newspaper at her right hand show a cognizance of literature and current events. She is portrayed by Oppenheim as a lady of the times, emancipated and dignified. At the same time, by linking the family with German aristocratic portraiture of the past as well as traditional Jewish markers of distinction he has participated in creating a new image of the Jewish bourgeoisie.

In his later paintings "*Pictures of Traditional Jewish Family Life*," Oppenheim commonly depicts Jewish women as the center of the home as well as ritual activity. He affords mothers great respect as fundamental to Jewish life, and indeed Jewish descent is matrilineal.<sup>68</sup> A portrait of a Jewish mother, then, makes a statement which extends to the entire family. These portraits of Gutle are intended to record and preserve the family's heritage, as well as attest to the entire Rothschild family's faith.

As self-proclaimed royalty, another way the Rothschilds sought to preserve their heritage was by protecting their bloodline. The first generation of brothers married the daughters of highly influential Jewish families, but then developed the sentiment over time that they were without equal.<sup>69</sup> For whatever reason, after the second generation was old enough to marry, only a Rothschild was suitable for a Rothschild.

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<sup>68</sup> Kleeblat, 61.

<sup>69</sup> Wilson, 82.

In 1836, a pair of portraits was painted of Charlotte and Lionel as newlyweds that is now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem (*figs 21, 22*). They were first cousins, as Charlotte was Carl's daughter, and Lionel was Nathan's son. As a commemoration of two branches of the family uniting, it is an important record of the Rothschild family's noble aspirations, and it may have been anticipated that it would be seen by those outside the family as well. The intimacy of the depictions, however, mark it as a primarily private portrait. These wedding portraits are peculiar for their size, and Oppenheim usually did not paint such large portraits, as was common in the Biedermeier style in Frankfurt. Charlotte's portrait measures 118 by 103 centimeters; Nathan's measures 119.5 by 112.5 centimeters. They are typical of Oppenheim's synthesis of styles, however. In Charlotte's portrait we see Vesuvius smoldering in the distance across the bay of Naples, which alludes to her origins in the Italian branch of the family. Similarly, the rolling hills and castle in the background of Lionel's portrait speaks to his English upbringing, and the style appears English, recalling the lush greenery of Constable. Although the species of tree that grows behind him is ambiguous, it is certainly not of the type which grows behind Charlotte. It bears no fruit, and one can tell from the scraped trunk that it has thick bark. This indicates a tree indigenous to the temperate climate of the British Isles. The orange tree in Charlotte's portrait would undoubtedly grow in a warmer climate. Furthermore, the deep space in the background of Charlotte's portrait contrasts with the confined arboreal setting of Lionel's portrait. The way that Oppenheim has conceived this portraits as a set, yet with oppositional formal devices is revealing when one considers how the artist often wove together disparate styles and compositions.

Iconographic elements position both the sitters as aristocracy of the first order, however. The wreath in Charlotte's right hand and the white glove in Lionel's, for example.

Importantly, Oppenheim has brought his own knowledge of art history to these portraits. As Weber states, Oppenheim first gained a reputation in Frankfurt by painting portraits of *schöne Judenmädchen*, or “beautiful Jewish girls,” using the artist’s own term. This type of portrait, conceived as an homage to feminine beauty, has its origins in French Revolutionary styles. In Germany, King Maximilian of Bavaria commissioned from Joseph Stieler a “Gallery of Beauty” filled with these portraits in 1831.<sup>70</sup> Two portraits of young girls from 1825 (in the Historisches Museum, Frankfurt, and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, respectively) are examples of this type of painting by Oppenheim (*figs 7, 23*).<sup>71</sup> The wistful, indirect look in the eyes and coquettish tilt of the head are identifying characteristics of a “beautiful girl” type portrait. This, as well as what Weber calls a “slightly affected posture” are all present in Charlotte’s portrait, especially in the way she raises her left hand close to her mouth. The amount of jewelry she wears and billowing material of her dress are contrived to further enhance her feminine beauty. The presence of these characteristics show the influence of the “beautiful girl” type of portrait on Charlotte’s depiction. That she is not painted in a lavishly appointed interior as in figures 7 and 23 is explained by the necessity of matching the setting in Charlotte’s portrait with Lionel’s, and the two portraits’ special function together as a commemoration of a wedding accounts for the pastoral setting.

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<sup>70</sup> Weber, 189.

<sup>71</sup> Weber, 189.



Sixteenth century Italian painting, which is virtually synonymous with the Medici family, has also been reworked by Oppenheim in these two portraits. Charlotte's portrait alludes to the noble portraiture of the Medici family, who were so instrumental in patronizing the style that Oppenheim worked in as a Nazarene, as the orange tree, a totem of the Medici family, grows directly behind her. Because the Rothschilds were such avid patrons of the arts, this was a connection that would not have been lost on contemporary viewers, and indeed the family was compared to the Medicis quite often. Given Oppenheim's exposure to Italian painting, this allusion to Medici portraiture must have been intentional. And that the Medicis, a Gentile family, were already linked with the Rothschilds in the public eye is essential. By depicting the Rothschilds in this way, Oppenheim is both highlighting and reinforcing the family's identity as a noble family.

By the time these were painted the Rothschilds were no longer strictly a German family. The children of the brothers were, after all, raised outside German culture in each of their respective cities. As the family became engaged in European political affairs more than the affairs of German high society, perhaps *Deutschheit*, Oppenheim's way of communicating in German discourse, became less relevant as well. His approach widened with the family. Yet the essence of *Deutschheit*, which is stylistic and idealistic synthesis, remained in his work. For the London branch of the family to intermarry with the Naples branch was a statement of power consolidation, and growing influence of an increasingly diverse (if genetically homogeneous) Rothschild dynasty. These portraits show not only Oppenheim's ability to adapt to changing parameters in his art, synthesizing his knowledge of art history to produce hybrid styles, but also the growing

Rothschild influence across Europe.

### **Five Brothers**

The motto of M.A. Rothschild & Sons is "*Integritas, Industria, Concordia*" (Integrity, Industry, Unity). Mayer Amschel had established it while on his deathbed in late September of 1812.<sup>72</sup> Exclusively public portraits of the five brothers were meant to enhance business politics and the image of the firm and to reinforce these chief directives.

In 1859, Oppenheim painted two paintings that are now in private collections to document the firm's fidelity in a similar fashion to the way he painted the Rothschilds at prayer (*figs 23, 24*). These are scenes of the Rothschild family's transactions with the Elector of Hesse-Kassel, first viewed by the public in 1861.<sup>73</sup> Like the painting of the Rothschilds at prayer, they are also very similar in style to the "*Pictures of Traditional Jewish Family Life*." The scenes depicted never actually occurred, but the underlying subject matter concerns a single financial transaction that was central to the family's foundational myth, which was made widespread in the 1827 edition of F. A. Brockhaus' *General German Encyclopaedia for the Educated Classes*.<sup>74</sup>

The story it relates is that in 1803, the Elector of Hesse-Kassel, whose assets were in jeopardy due to the French invasion, entrusted his treasure to Mayer Amschel

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<sup>72</sup> Ferguson, 74.

<sup>73</sup> Weber, 183.

<sup>74</sup> Ferguson, 65.

Rothschild. The French army eventually surrounded Frankfurt, where the Rothschild bank was headquartered, and Mayer Amschel had to bury the treasure in his garden to avoid its capture even if his own house was looted. Upon its safe return, the Elector exclaimed gratefully that his money would remain at the disposal of Mayer Amschel for the next twenty years in return for his faithful service. Again, nothing of the sort happened, and in reality only a few of the Elector's items were ever in the Rothschild's care.

In the first painting, however, Mayer Amschel Rothschild receives for safekeeping the treasure of the Elector of Hesse-Kassel, and in the second the five brothers Rothschild give it back years later. It is worth noting here that it is the brothers who return the treasure, not Mayer Amschel. In this way the two paintings are intended to show the continuity of the business, as well as five brothers who have grown from young boys (at the time of the first scene, though not all are pictured) into fastidious gentlemen bankers.

The way that Oppenheim has portrayed the brothers is also of interest, as their depictions show the personal imagery that he had developed for each. Amschel Mayer, the oldest of the brothers, hands the treasure to the Elector with a humble yet direct gaze that is repeated in his personal portraits, and behind him Salomon looks into the distance with a disaffected stare, a gaze also repeated in portraits of him. To the left of Salomon is James with, as Weber points out, a curl on the right side of his hairline, just barely distinguishable here, and a characteristic shape to the top of his hair. Nathan stands in the doorway, shown in his characteristic high collar with a high, rounded forehead. Carl,

kneeling, has facial hair on his cheeks with a neat part in his hair. By the time that these scenes were painted in 1859, Oppenheim had developed this visual lexicon for distinguishing the brothers and depicting them as Jewish gentlemen.

These distinct likenesses are already present in a lithographic group portrait done by Oppenheim eight years earlier in 1851 that is now in a private collection (*fig 25*). Clockwise from the top are Amschel, with his direct gaze, Salomon with his disaffected one (although appearing here more engaged than usual), Carl with facial hair, James with a curl, and Nathan with high collar and brow. In Oppenheim's hands these stylized personal traits become literal iconographies of the prosperous Jewish banker meant not only to distinguish the brothers, but also to highlight the special place of each within the firm. Amschel appears old and wise, and his position at the top of the portrait positions him as the leader. Nathan is generally painted with a light playing above his brow, perhaps to allude either to his premature death or the financial brilliance for which he was famous from a young age.<sup>75</sup> James' hair reveals him to be something of a dandy, something for which he was known, and fitting for the youngest of the brothers. Carl frequently seems to radiate composure as he was the diplomat of the family, and Salomon's rarely directed gaze reveals him to be of a more elusive character.<sup>76</sup>

These works were created in the 1850s, long after the Rothschilds were an established family. Almost twenty years earlier, in commemoration of Charlotte and

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<sup>75</sup> A column with creeping ivy, a well-known symbol of premature death in the nineteenth century, frequently accompanies Nathan after 1836.

<sup>76</sup> Weber, 178.

Lionel's wedding in 1836, the first of many sets of the brothers' portraits was painted, and each brother's characteristic likeness is shown already in these early portraits as well (*figs 26-30*). At this time four of the brothers had houses adjoining their banks so business could be done from home, and these paintings were intended to hang in each of the five branches.<sup>77</sup> They later served as a model not only for other sets of portraits of the brothers but also for subsequent generations of male Rothschilds. Still today similar portraits are displayed in Rothschild banks. In 1836, the portraits projected a uniform image of professionalism, upper class demeanor, business acumen, and acted as silent rebuttals to the stereotypical image of "the Jew" that the Rothschilds so frequently faced.

Oppenheim painted the five portraits following arguments among the brothers as to what direction the firm's investments would take. Two of the brothers, James and Nathan, were increasingly involved with industrial enterprises such as the building of railroads, while the other three wanted to finance more trade with international clients such as the United States government.<sup>78</sup> The amiable resolution of these negotiations is commemorated in Oppenheim's five portraits, which are intended to highlight the spirit of fraternity to which the brothers so rigorously adhered. The preponderance of free masons, male fraternities, clubs, and social groups point up the great importance that was placed on brotherhood (both familial and social) in the nineteenth century. Oppenheim's engagement with the Nazarenes (otherwise known as the "Brotherhood of St. Luke,") is also consonant with this ideal of brotherhood.

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<sup>77</sup> Spitzer, 46.

<sup>78</sup> Ferguson, 295.

The three-quarter format that is used here, however, is not typical of Biedermeier and was not used in later business portraits. The Rothschilds almost never commissioned the larger format, but this was not because of any disdain for ostentation, as the brothers frequently covered up their lack of pedigree in lavish shows of wealth.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps the festivities surrounding the wedding of Charlotte and Lionel, and the unification of the London and Naples branches of the family contributed to Oppenheim's grand conception of the 1836 portraits.

A possible political motive for the unusual format is offered by Weber, however, who considers the portraits to be informed by contemporary court portraits. That is, they imitate the royal court portraits of heads of state and other potentates that the Rothschilds sought access to prior to the revolution of 1848.<sup>80</sup> The general format of the brothers' portraits, seated before heavy drapery, with views into pastoral landscapes, and classical architecture would certainly seem to indicate this. She cites as examples portraits of statesmen from the pre-1848 period such as Talleyrand, Metternich, and Emperor Karl Franz of Austria for comparison. Thomas Lawrence's 1815 portrait of Klemens von Metternich seated is an excellent example offered by Weber (*fig 31*). His gentlemanly, languid pose is reminiscent of the way Oppenheim painted Salomon's disaffected gaze. As in the brothers' portraits, heavy drapery, rich embroidered fabric and a dark background are all employed in a three-quarter seated composition. It is no secret that the Rothschilds did attempt to gain access to as many courts as possible, and this was a vital

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<sup>79</sup> Weber, 174.

<sup>80</sup> Weber, 179.

part of their business strategy. It was in this spirit that Mayer Amschel had once said “A court always leads to something.” Oppenheim's ability to seamlessly integrate the Rothschild image with that of their Christian peers at court was essential to the brothers' social and business plans.

A later set of five portraits painted by Oppenheim from around 1850, also in private collections, shows the brothers' engagement in court life (*figs 32-36*). As in his other portraits, Oppenheim's characteristic iconographies for the brothers are present here as well, but these portraits are much more typical of Oppenheim's work for the brothers. They are painted in a Biedermeier format, with intimate proximity to the sitter, and a spare, naturalistic style. The similarity of the five as well as the darkened backgrounds lends an air of sobriety and unity. But specifically in the 1850 set the brothers' attire is appropriately aristocratic for the city where each lived. The conspicuous medals upon Amschel and Carl's chests attest to the brothers' ennoblement at the Viennese court in 1822. James wears the simple black bow tie of a conservative Parisian, while Nathan wears the frilled collar of a well-to-do Londoner. Nathan appears youthful compared to the others because he died in 1836, and so was painted younger than his brothers. All five of them wear the black coat and vest of a court uniform, and as the attire speaks to the specific courts that each brother sought to become established in, we may ascertain that they were intended to be seen by the brothers' titled peers across Europe. When displayed at the brothers' banks in major cities across Europe, they were even more a statement of solidarity among the Rothschilds, just as earlier portraits had made a similar statement.

## Conclusion

As an artist, Moritz Oppenheim was commissioned to paint the Rothschilds as they wished to be portrayed. This meant that he necessarily had to establish an iconography where there was none before. Indeed, the portraits of the five brothers served as workshop models for several other portraits that were traced or copied from them, especially since Nathan died in 1836, and several portraits were made of him posthumously.<sup>81</sup> Oppenheim's style was adopted in subsequent portraits of the Rothschilds into our own century, and that his paintings accompanied the brothers on their rise to power is a testament to their effectiveness as political and social tools. One such example of a third-generation Rothschild portrait is a painting from 1851 of Carl's son, Adolph (1823-1900) (*fig 37*). It bears a striking similarity to that of his father with its darkened background, silhouetted black overcoat, medals indicating the subject's nobility, and even has the facial hair that Oppenheim used as a distinguishing characteristic of Carl. An undated portrait of Edmond (1845-1934), James' son, presumably painted near the end of the century nevertheless was informed directly by Oppenheim's portraits of 1836 (*fig 38*). This is evident in the three-quarter composition and direct gaze of the subject. A photograph of the honorable Nathaniel Charles Jacob (b.1936), Nathan's grandson of the fifth generation shows him in front of Oppenheim's portrait of 1836, still

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<sup>81</sup> Weber, 181.



on prominent display at a press conference in 1969 (*fig 39*).

The Rothschild identity that Oppenheim created together with the family was facilitated by the artist's training which he started as a young man and independently pursued until his death. As an engaging personality in public life, and as the Rothschild's "court artist," he was a valuable asset to their work in Jewish emancipation and the beginnings of a Jewish state. His wide knowledge of style and art history contributed immeasurably to the construction the Rothschild family's identity. Just as a connection with the Rothschilds enriched Oppenheim's artistic career, so too did the artist enrich the family's public and private image. And as a young German artist in Paris, Rome, Frankfurt, Oppenheim's simultaneous participation in both Jewish and Christian discourses laid a foundation upon which he would later help construct a new image of the burgeoning Jewish bourgeoisie in the wake of emancipation. With the knowledge of this "historian artist," the Rothschilds were able to construct an identity that was commensurate with the values and ideals they wished to project to the world, and even to themselves, their very own "royal family."

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## Figures

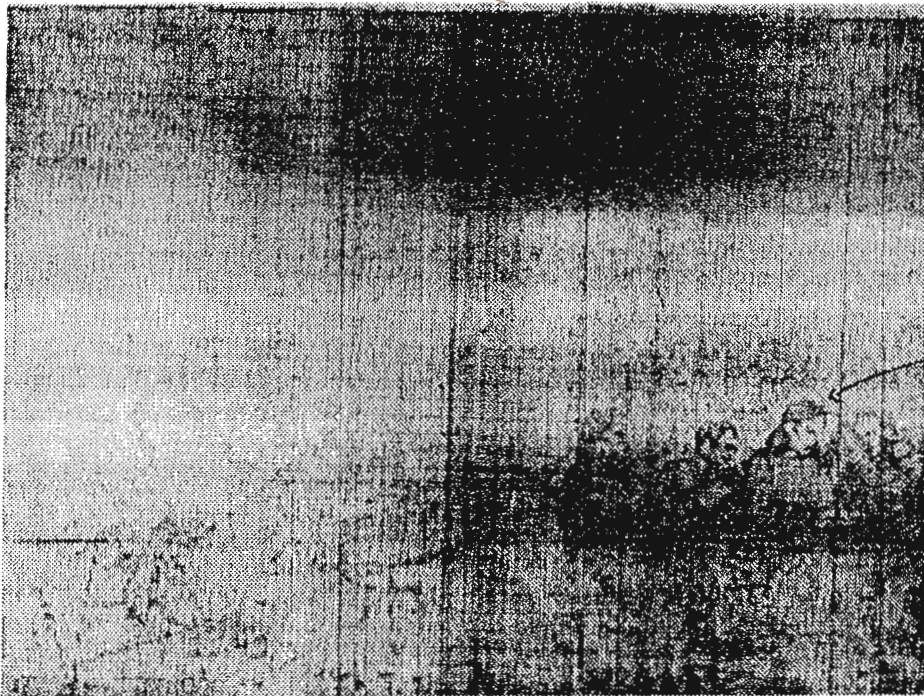




3. Franz Pforr, *Sketch of Overbeck*, date unknown (Nationalgalerie, Berlin)



4. Friedrich Overbeck and Peter Cornelius, *Double Portrait*, 1812 (Private collection, Munich)



Peter Cornelius.

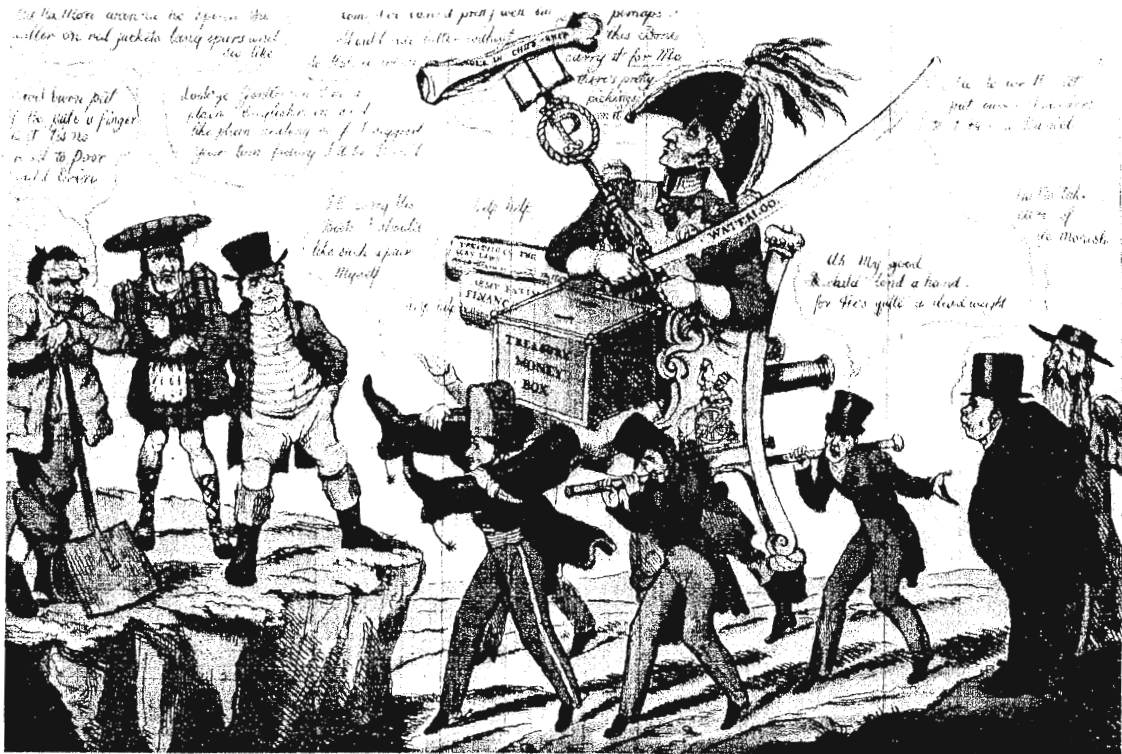
5. Carl Philipp Fohr, *The Café Greco In Rome*, 1818 (Städelsches Institute, Frankfurt)



6. Moritz Oppenheim, *The Return of Young Tobias*, 1823 (Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen)



7. Moritz Oppenheim, *Portrait of a Young Lady*, 1825 (Historisches Museum, Frankfurt)



8. Robert Cruikshank, Caricature of Nathan, c1828



9. Caricature of James, 1862

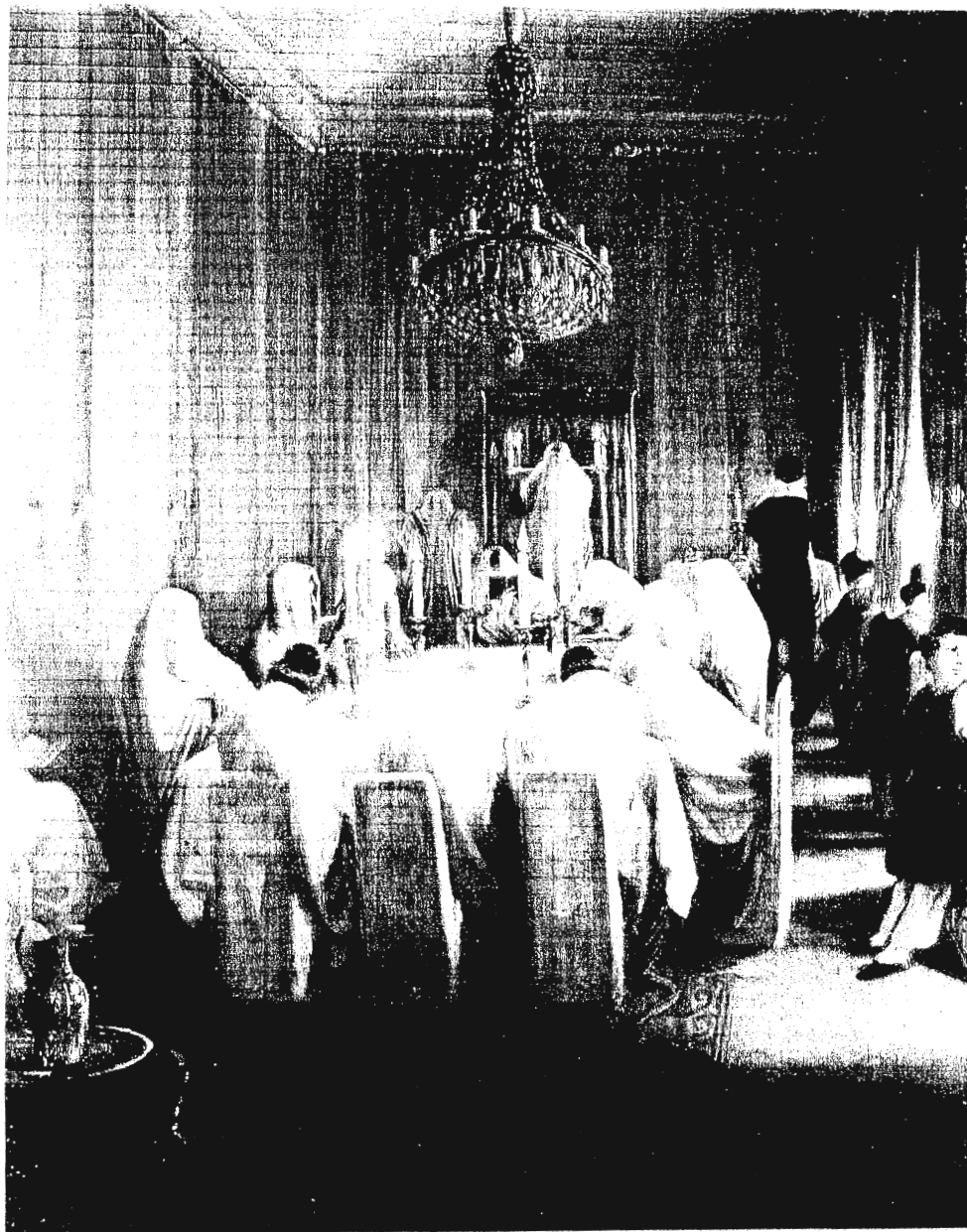


10. Moritz Oppenheim, *Self-Portrait*, c1825 (Hanau Museum)



11. Moritz Oppenheim, *Double Portrait of the Artist and Philipp Veit*, 1840 (Leo Baeck Institute, New York)





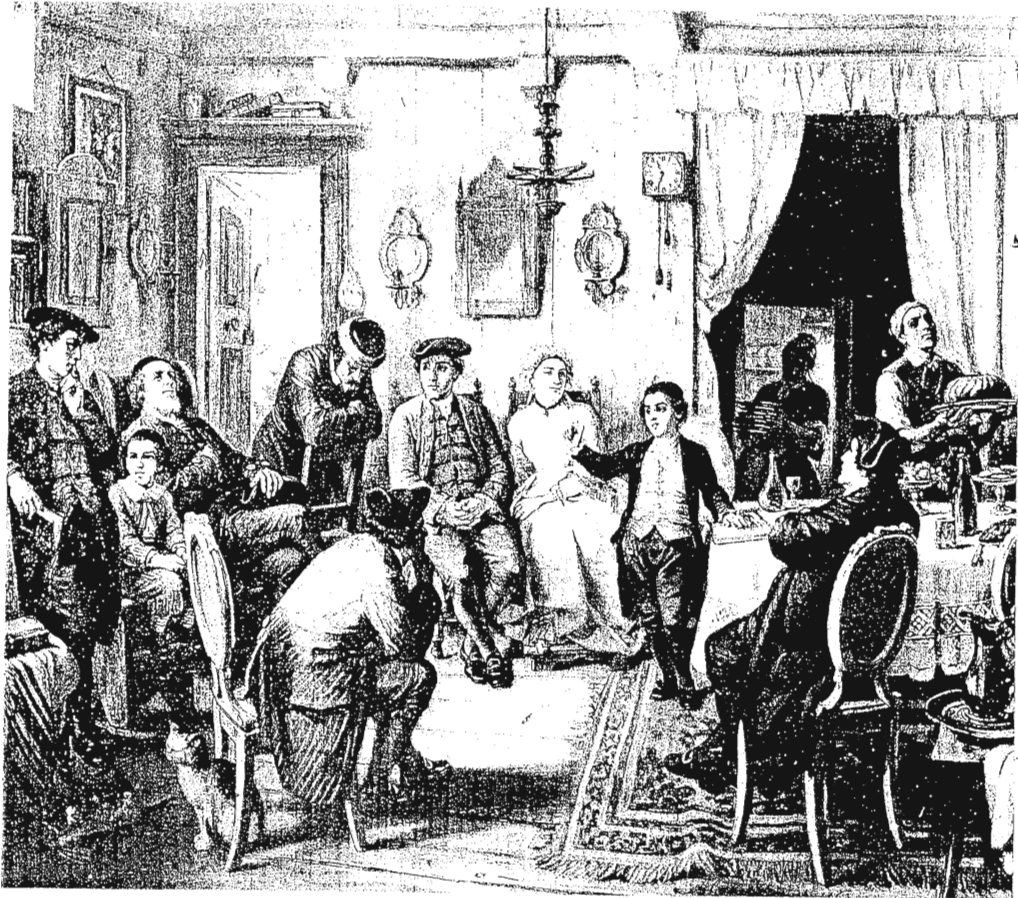
12. Moritz Oppenheim, *Yom Kippur*, 1849 (Location unknown, Photo Bridgeman Art Library, London)



13. Moritz Oppenheim, *The Passover Seder*, 1868 (Jewish Museum, Frankfurt)



14. Moritz Oppenheim, *Sukkoth*, 1867 (Jewish Museum, Frankfurt)



15. Moritz Oppenheim, *The Bar Mitzvah Discourse*, 1872 (Jewish Museum, Frankfurt)



16. Moritz Oppenheim, *Purim*, c1880 (Jewish Museum, Frankfurt)



17. Moritz Oppenheim, *Gutle Rothschild*, 1849 (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)



18. Moritz Oppenheim, *Frau Kohn*, 1818 (Jewish Museum, Cape Town)



19. Moritz Oppenheim, *Hanna Baeur*, 1840 (Collection of Trude Heilbrun)





20. Jacob van Oostsanen Cornelisz, *Portrait of a Lady, perhaps Queen Isabella of Denmark*, c.1524 (Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid)



21. Moritz Oppenheim, *Charlotte Rothschild*, 1836 (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)



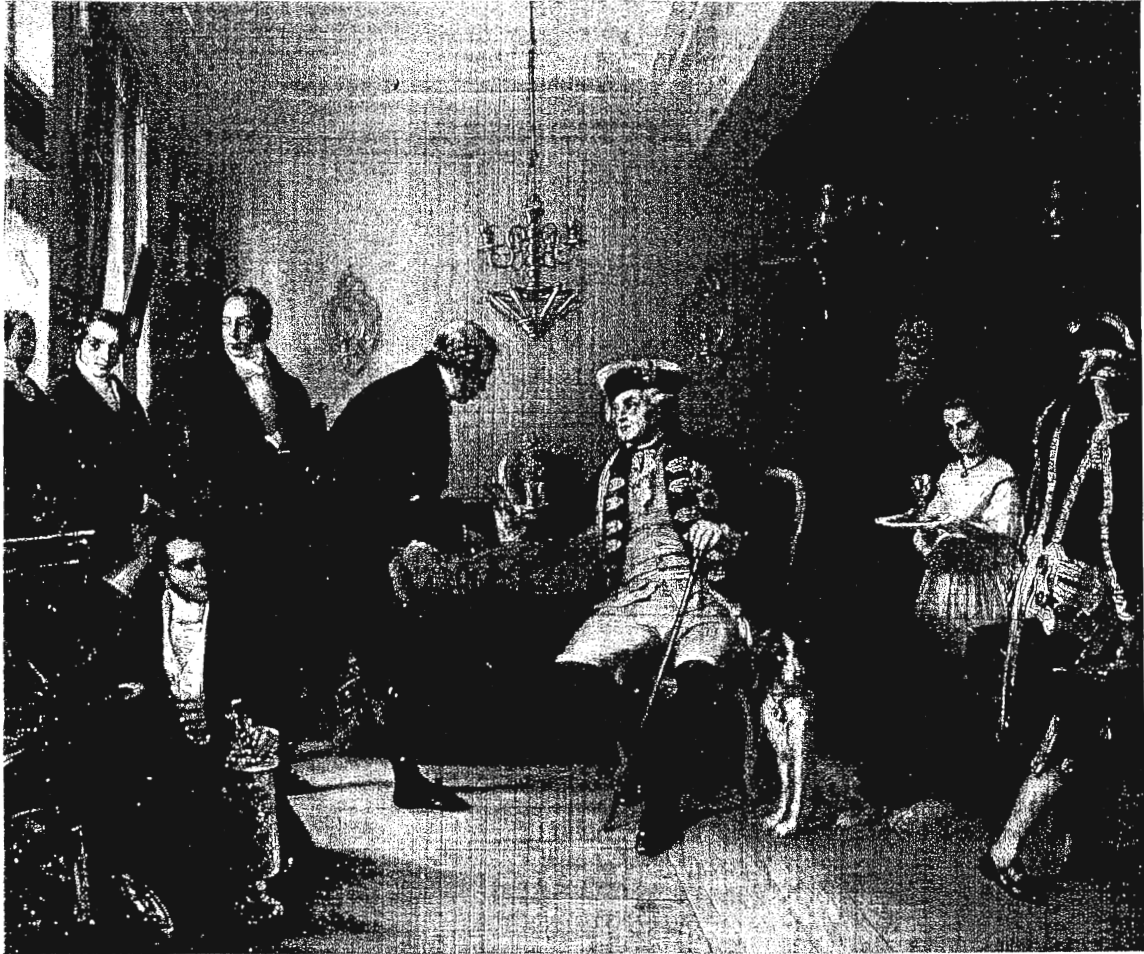
22. Moritz Oppenheim, *Lionel Rothschild*, 1836 (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)



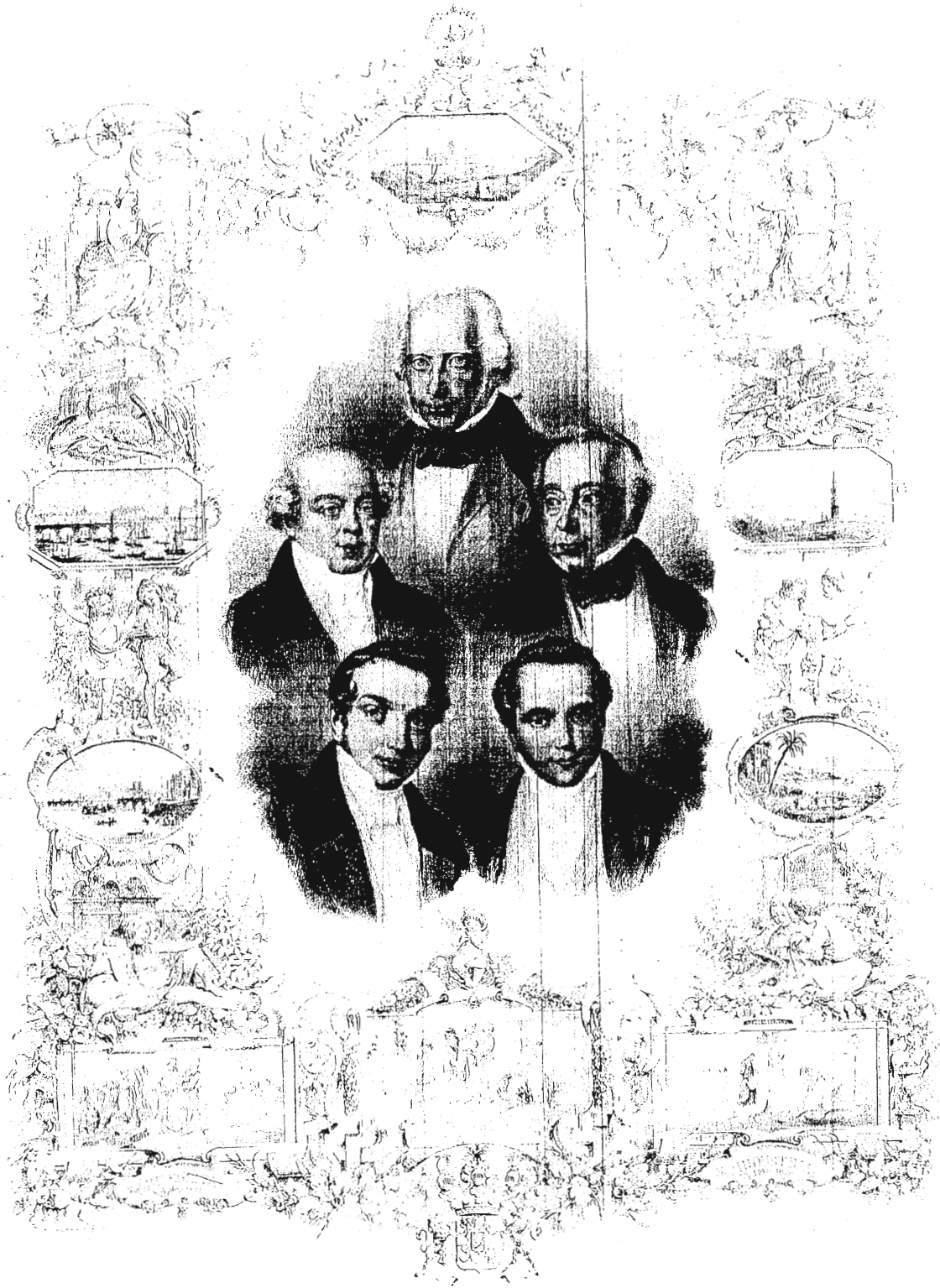
23. Moritz Oppenheim, *Portrait of a Young Girl*, 1825 (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)



24. Moritz Oppenheim, *Mayer Amschel Rothschild Receiving the Elector's Treasure*, 1859 (private collection)



25. Moritz Oppenheim, *The Brothers Rothschild Returning the Elector's Treasure*, 1859 (private collection)



26. Moritz Oppenheim, *The Five Brothers*, 1852 (private collection)



27. Moritz Oppenheim, *Amschel*, 1836 (Location unknown, Photo Marcus E. Ravage)





28. Moritz Oppenheim, *Salomon*, 1836 (Location unknown, Photo Marcus E. Ravage)



29. Moritz Oppenheim, *Nathan*, 1836 (Location unknown, Photo Marcus E. Ravage)



30. Moritz Oppenheim, *Carl*, 1836 (Location unknown, Photo Marcus E. Ravage)



31. Moritz Oppenheim, *James*, 1836 (Location unknown, Photo Marcus E. Ravage)



32. Thomas Lawrence, *Klemens von Metternich*, 1815 (Prado, Madrid)



33. Moritz Oppenheim, *Amschel*, c1850 (private collection)



34. Moritz Oppenheim, *Salomon*, c1850 (private collection)

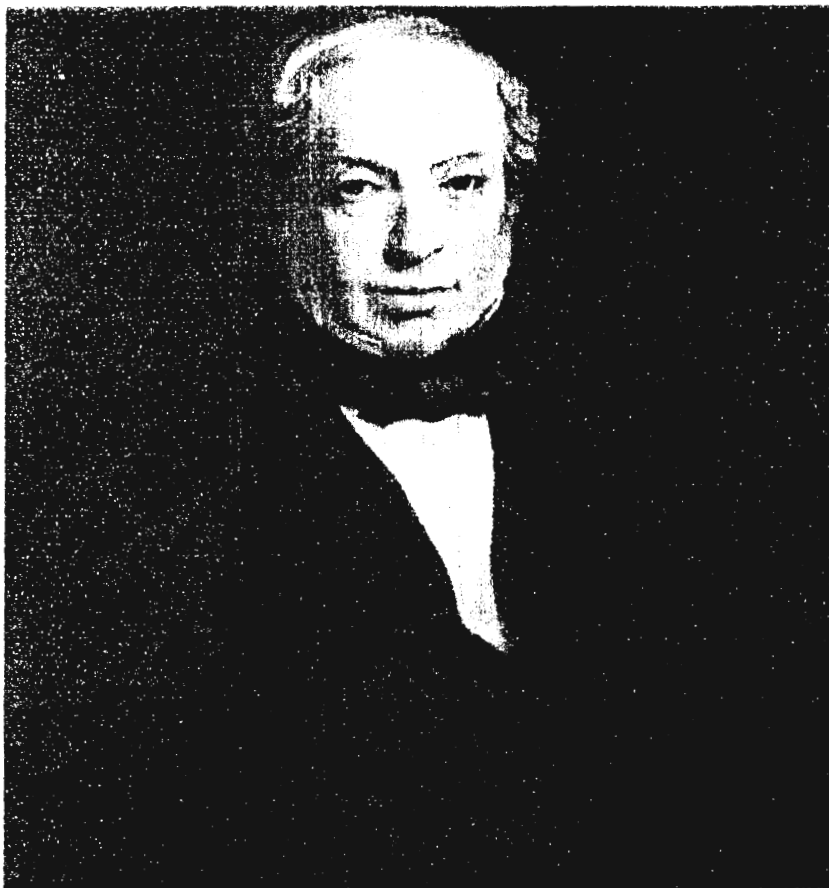


35. Moritz Oppenheim, *Nathan*, c1850 (private collection)





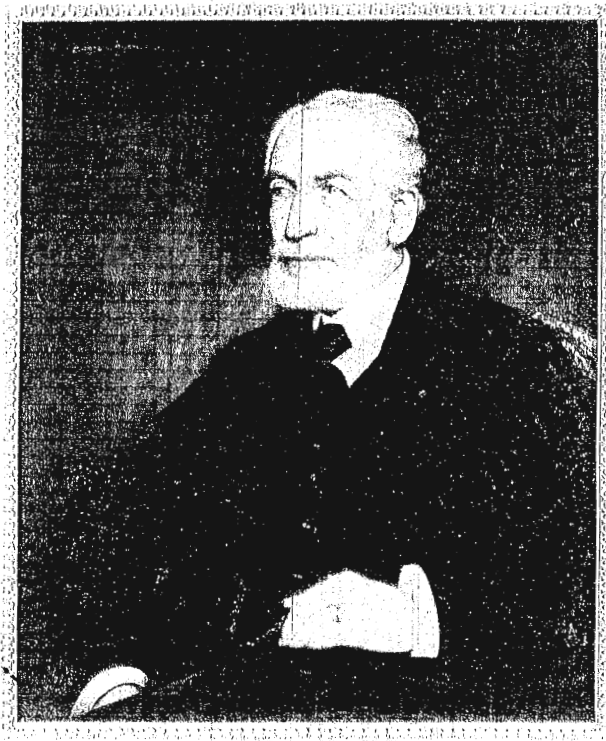
36. Moritz Oppenheim, *Carl*, c1850 (private collection)



37. Moritz Oppenheim, *James*, c1850 (private collection)



38. Moritz Oppenheim, *Adolph Carl*, c1851 (Israel Museum, Jerusalem)



39. *Edmond*, c1900 (Rothschild Archive, London)



40. The Hon. Jacob Rothschild in 1969 seated in front of portrait of Nathan