

Jozef and Isaac Israëls

Realist and Impressionist Painting

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[M E R E L V A N D E N N I E U W E N H O F]

The writer Frans Erens wrote of Jozef and Isaac Israëls, father and son: 'Being the great son of a great father is a rare occurrence in history, and especially in the history of art.'⁽¹⁾ Both were prominent artists: one in his realism, while the other broke with this in favour of a vigorous, impressionistic approach to his subjects.

Jozef Israëls (1824-1911)

Jozef Israëls was born in 1824 in Groningen, the third of ten children. In his childhood years there was great emphasis on the Jewish religion and art. Already in his early teens he took drawing and painting lessons in Groningen, before leaving in 1842 for Amsterdam to work at the studio of the renowned portrait painter Jan Adam Kruseman (1804-1862). Israëls had this to say about how the master interacted with his pupils: 'Sometimes he allows 1 or 2 days to pass before he comes to look at our work, he mostly allows his pupils to work in their own way, only drawing their attention to truths.'⁽²⁾ A year later he was admitted to the capital's Royal Academy, where he was taught by Jan Willem Pieneman (1779-1853), among others. He also took lessons in Paris from artists including Paul Delaroche (1797-1856) and Horace Vernet (1789-1863).

Painter of life in fishing communities

During the initial period as an artist, Jozef Israëls searched for a style and genre that suited him. His early works, informed by his education, were in the Romantic tradition. Critics of these paintings have already observed that Israëls 'is a sensitive artist'.⁽³⁾ Sentiment is indeed clearly evident in works such as *Meditation* (1850), in which a young woman is depicted staring melancholically into the water. The image and composition are strongly reminiscent of *Young Woman in Tears by the Sea* (1823-1827) by Ary Scheffer (1795-1858), a painter in the Romantic style whom Israëls admired. After painting a number of historical pieces, Israëls turned his attention to genre painting, in which he found a



theme that was to become his speciality: depicting the life of fishing people. Increasingly he moved away from Romanticism, though the realism that replaced it was always rendered with a degree of sentiment.

Israëls was not the only painter to work in the fishing genre. Other nineteenth-century artists worked on this theme too, including the artists of the Düsseldorf School, whom Israëls probably met during a visit to Düsseldorf in 1850.^[4] The theme is also related to depictions of labourers and peasants, as painted by French Realists such as Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), in which the lives of ordinary people were portrayed. Israëls' paintings likewise evoke nineteenth-century poetry, in which the life of fishing communities was a popular subject.^[5]

It is not only in terms of theme that parallels can be seen between Israëls' painting and the poetry of his contemporaries. He gave poetic titles to his depictions of ordinary people, and the feeling he brought to his paintings was often compared to poetry. *Passing Mother's Grave*, in which a fisherman who has just returned from the sea is passing by the grave of his late wife with their two children, was acclaimed with the words 'insightful poetry'.^[6] The painting marks a turning point in Israëls' oeuvre. One of his first fishing scenes, it is exceptionally large for a genre piece and takes on a different meaning because of its size. This was probably inspired by a visit to the World's Fair in Paris, where Realists had presented images of working-class people depicted on a monumental scale.^[7] The image of the humble, barefoot fisherman is life-size, and the low position from which the painting is viewed lends a sense of the majestic and heroic. The drama of the image is enhanced because the viewer knows that a fisherman's return usually means a joyful reunion with loved ones. Moreover, in art and literature it is usually the fisherman's wife who waits anxiously for her husband to return. The painting was well received. Today it is still regarded as one of the most important works in the oeuvre of Jozef Israëls.

His next major success came in 1861 with *Fishermen Carrying a Drowned Man*. The style of this painting is more realistic than *Passing Mother's Grave*, but equally emotive: a procession of people carries home the body of a drowned fisherman. The small group in the foreground – the grieving wife and children –

Isaac Israëls, *Military Funeral*,
1881-1882, oil on canvas,
Collectie Gemeentemuseum
Den Haag.



Jozef Israëls, *We Grow Old*,
1883, oil on canvas,
Collectie Gemeentemuseum Den Haag

is particularly poignant. Israëls omitted the histrionic element and depicted the characters' grief with restraint and empathy. The painting received an honourable mention at the Paris Salon and was shown at the World's Fair in London. Israëls' sister, who lived in London, informed him: 'You're famous! [...] Your picture is the talk of the town!'^[8] It was indeed extremely well received, with words such as 'the most touching picture of the whole exhibition'.^[9]

After his breakthrough in the mid-1850s, Jozef Israëls exhibited at several major exhibitions every year, such as the 'Exhibitions of Living Masters' in various Dutch cities, the Paris Salon and the International Exhibitions. His fame also grew internationally. He painted several variants on the fishing theme, such as fishermen's wives waiting for their husbands to return and elderly people living out their days in poverty. More light-hearted themes included children playing on the beach. Many of his paintings are set in the humble interiors of fishermen's homes, which Israëls initially used as an example. In 1879 he had a fisherman's interior built in his studio, and it was described in 1906 in *The Pall Mall Magazine*: 'there it was – his "binnenhuisje" – the background for so many of his pictures. A low dark cottage window, with rough, small panes, white half-way curtains, and oaken shutters [...] matted peasants' chairs stood in the shadow; the screen lent possibilities of corners.'^[10]

Israëls was famous and made an excellent living from his art. The business sense of his wife Aleida Schaap (1843-1894), whom he married in 1863,

certainly contributed to his success. The fact that, from 1859 onwards, his art was often compared to that of Rembrandt, also did much to enhance his reputation. The artist himself encouraged this myth-making by writing a book about Rembrandt in 1906, and later in his career he even painted similar themes, such as *The Jewish Wedding*.

Isaac Israëls (1865-1934)

By the time Isaac Israëls⁽¹¹⁾ was born, in 1865, his father had become one of the most prominent artists in the Netherlands. In 1871 the family moved to The Hague, where art was flourishing. Artists were inspired by the city's location between the sea and the polder landscape, which offered many artistic possibilities. The work of a number of young artists in The Hague was heavily influenced by Realism, and in 1875 the art critic Van Santen Kolff coined the term The Hague School,⁽¹²⁾ to which Jozef Israëls was considered to belong.

Isaac Israëls grew up in his father's studio, which was not only the place where his paintings were created, but was also a meeting place for artists, writers, art dealers and collectors. It was almost inevitable that Isaac would become an artist too. In 1871, when his son was only six years old, Jozef Israëls wrote of him: 'he is a clever animal painter and with the aid of the lord he will be a better colourman than his father'⁽¹³⁾. Indeed, Isaac indicated at an early age that he wanted to become an artist. His parents supported him in this, and decided that, after completing his basic education, he would focus fully on his career as an artist. His command of languages was excellent, due to his interest in literature and to the fact that the family travelled extensively abroad. From 1878 they attended the Salon de Paris



Isaac Israëls,
Maids on an Amsterdam Canal,
ca. 1894, oil on canvas, 60
cm. x 80 cm. Groninger
Museum, Groningen

every year, which meant that Isaac encountered new tendencies in art from an early age.

He learned perspective drawing from his father and in 1880 he became a pupil of the Academy of Art in The Hague. Just one year later his work was shown at several exhibitions. He achieved his first successes with realistically painted military subjects. *Military Funeral* (1881-1882) was highly praised in 1882 at the Paris Salon. The title of the painting suggests a connection with his father's oeuvre, but Isaac's approach to his subjects was different. He observed the scene and painted what he had witnessed, without the intention of arousing emotions or telling a story. Jozef Israëls also noticed the difference in approach: 'My Zon paints the Warriors going to the War and I paint the Weeping Widows'.^[14] He probably wrote this with regard to the painting *Transport of Colonial Soldiers* (1883), which earned his son an honourable mention at the Paris Salon of 1885. Whereas his father's aim was to stir the viewer's emotions, Isaac favoured a more objective observation, leaving out the narrative element as far as possible.

Isaac Israëls achieved major successes at a young age and his future as an artist appeared secure. But he wanted to go his own way and break away



Isaac Israëls, *A Sunny Day on the Beach, Viareggio*, oil on canvas, private collection, previously in the collection of Simonis & Buunk Art Gallery, Ede

Jozef Israëls, *Passing Mother's Grave*, 1856, oil on canvas. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



from parental authority and his father's artistic influence. In 1886-1887 he took lessons at the Rijksacademie voor Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, together with George Hendrik Breitner (1857-1923). Israëls and Breitner already knew each other, because Breitner – who was slightly older than Israëls – had visited Jozef Israëls' studio in 1879 and was impressed with the young Isaac's paintings. Both artists quickly abandoned their studies at the academy, because they felt it had little to teach them. Entries for both artists in the Academy's register note that, since they were trained artists, the Academy was a 'totally inappropriate' place for them.^[15] Israëls did settle in the capital, and took the time there to develop his own style.

Letters written by Isaac's mother reveal that his parents were extremely concerned about him: '[...] when he was 17 years old, he was the brightest of all the young painters in our country – he could have remained so, but did not – why? Now he has killed his talent, he is on the wrong track with his art – he is in the mire, and it will be the end of him'.^[16] Israëls' Amsterdam friends, on the other hand, had every confidence that it would all turn out well. The writer and psychologist Frederik van Eeden wrote to Aleida Israëls-Schaap: 'He is quietly going his own way, as he always has. He does not want to be under anyone's influence and I assure you [...] that, with someone like Isaac, all will soon turn out well'.^[17]

Isaac spent several years working mainly on sketches and experimenting. It was not an easy time, as he himself records: 'Every morning I rise, determined to prevail, and every evening I give up. *Vaincu!*'^[18] But he persevered and found new subjects that interested him, such as dance halls and coffee pickers. This long quest suggests that he shared a trait with his father, who was once described as an example of 'self-assured strength, of relentless zeal, of a persistent will to overcome difficulties – in flagrant contrast to the sitting down in despair, the fretting and complaining, that a dealer is often obliged to witness in so many other artists.'^[19] In the first half of the 1890s, Isaac Israëls revealed his new style, characterised by a vigorous, impressionistic touch that came to typify his work. The first paintings in this style include 'snapshots' of city life



Jozef Israëls, *Fishermen Carrying a Drowned Man*, 1861 (?), oil on canvas, 129 cm x 244 cm. The National Gallery, London

in Amsterdam, such as maids walking along the canals, whom Israëls painted *en plein air*. In general, his new approach was well received by the exhibition reviewers. Israëls' work sold well during his life, and continues to do so today.

Sadly, Aleida Israëls-Schaap did not live to see her son's renewed and hard-won success; she died in 1894. In order to raise Jozef Israëls' spirits, father and son went on a long trip to Spain, accompanied by the writer Frans Erens, who was Isaac's best friend. According to Jozef, Erens was a valued travel companion: '[...] painters see everything in terms of outward appearance, and that is how it should be because that is their field. But it is a privilege to be accompanied by a philosopher and poet to observe and hold onto the deeper significance of what passes.'^[20] The trip does not appear to have had a great deal of influence on either artist's oeuvre. Although Jozef found the inspiration for a painting and travel journal, he had long since found his style and theme, and Isaac too had only recently mastered a new style. By contrast, his extensive travels later *are* reflected in his paintings.

Isaac Israëls painted a range of subjects, almost always with the emphasis on people, in particular women. Apart from the servant girls he painted in his early period, his oeuvre includes busy city scenes, seamstresses, mannequins in fashion houses, dancers in the theatre and people at leisure in parks. His beach scenes were often created in the company of his father and the German painter Max Liebermann (1847-1935), a friend with whom he often painted on the beach at Scheveningen, near The Hague, in the summer. Whereas Jozef was mainly interested in the local fishing community, Isaac painted the worldly bathers, from children on donkeys to women in the latest bathing fashions.

Isaac Israëls is regarded as one of the Amsterdam Impressionists and, like his father, had a great deal of contact with fellow artists. But unlike his father, who was involved in artists' societies and the founding of the *Hollandsche Teekenmaatschappij* (Dutch Drawing Society), Isaac was more of an *Einzelgänger*. He preferred to go his own way, his freedom from ties enabling him, whenever the mood took him, to pack his things and leave for destinations such as Paris or London and spend as much time there as he chose.

Father and son were both among the most prominent artists of their time. Although their respective oeuvres differed, they admired each other's work.

It is often said of Isaac Israels that he chose a more 'distant' approach. If we compare his cheerful depictions with his father's sensitive work, this is indeed the impression we gain. Yet his sketches and portraits of people reveal a talent for capturing the subject's character with just a few lines. Here, perhaps, we can see traces of the 'deep human feeling' for which his father was known, albeit expressed in a completely different way. ■

NOTES

1. F. Erens, *Isaac Israels*, Amsterdam 1912, p. 9.
2. Letter from Israels to Mr Essingh, 16 July 1843, A.S. Kok archive, Rijksdienst voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie. A passage from the letter is included in: D. Dekkers, *Jozef Israëls 1824-1911*, Groningen/Amsterdam 1999, p. 362.
3. Darie Wetan (Joh.C. Zimmerman), 'Adagio con espressione. (De laatste gedachte van Weber)', *De Gids*, 15 (1851) deel 1, p. 630. Quoted in: D. Dekkers, *Jozef Israëls 1824-1911*, Groningen/Amsterdam 1999, p. 20.
4. D. Dekkers, *Jozef Israels, een succesvol schilder van het vissersgenre*, diss. University of Amsterdam 1994, pp. 41-63.
5. Examples are 'Heugenis van Zandvoort' by E.J. Potgieter and 'De gewone mens en de gevoelige mens te Zandvoort' by J. van Oosterwijk Bruyn. See also D. Dekkers, *Jozef Israëls 1824-1911*, Groningen/Amsterdam 1999, pp. 21-22.
6. 'De twee Amsterdamsche tentoonstellingen van Kunstwerken in 1856', *Algemeene Konst- en Letterbode*, 1856, p. 378, quoted in: D. Dekkers, *Jozef Israëls 1824-1911*, Groningen/Amsterdam 1999, p. 22.
7. D. Dekkers, *Jozef Israëls 1824-1911*, Groningen/Amsterdam 1999, pp. 137-138.
8. A. Luden, 'A New Royal Academician. Josef Israels: His Life-story and his Art', *The Pall Mall Magazine*, May 1906, vol. XXXVII, No. 157, pp. 527-537.
9. Quoted without a reference in: A. Wagner, *Isaac Israels*, Rotterdam 1967, p. 6.
10. A. Luden, 'A New Royal Academician. Josef Israels: His Life-story and his Art', *The Pall Mall Magazine*, May 1906, vol. XXXVII, No. 157, p. 530.
11. In the case of Jozef, the surname Israels is usually written with two dots over the 'e'. In the case of Isaac, the dots are usually omitted.
12. R. de Leeuw, J. Sillevius and C. Dumas, *De Haagse School: Hollandse Meesters van de 19^e eeuw*, The Hague 1983. The artists of The Hague School included J. Israëls, H.W. Mesdag, J. Maris, M. Maris, W. Maris, J. Bosboom and J.H. Weissenbruch. In general their art is characterised by realism, but on closer consideration it is highly diverse in terms of subjects and style. The name 'The Hague School' therefore denotes the location in which all these artists worked, rather than a shared artistic vision.
13. Letter from Jozef Israëls to his friend and collector John Forbes White, dated 23 February 1871, Aberdeen Art Gallery collection. Quoted in: I.M. Harrower, 'Jozef Israels and his Aberdeen Friend', *Aberdeen University Review* XIV, March 1927, pp. 112-113.
14. Fragment from a letter from Jozef Israëls to the collector John Forbes White, quoted in: I.M. Harrower, 'Jozef Israels and his Aberdeen Friend', *Aberdeen University Review* XIV, March 1927, p. 112.
15. A. Wagner, *Isaac Israels*, Rotterdam 1967, pp. 16-19.
16. Letter from Aleida Israëls-Schaap to Albert Verwey, 12 December 1888, quoted in: J. Sillevius et al., *Jozef en Isaac Israëls, vader & zoon*, Zwolle/The Hague 2008, p. 35.
17. Letter from Frederik van Eeden to Aleida Israëls-Schaap, 20 June 1888, quoted in: J. Sillevius et al., *Jozef en Isaac Israëls, vader & zoon*, Zwolle/The Hague 2008, p. 35.
18. Described by Jan Veth in *De Taak*, 1922, quoted in: A. Wagner, *Isaac Israels*, Rotterdam 1967, p. 22.
19. *Een halve eeuw met Jozef Israëls*, 's-Gravenhage (Boussod, Valadon & Cie.) 1910, p. 10.
20. J. Israëls, *Een reis door Spanje*, Utrecht/Antwerpen 1989, p. 14 (original edition: 's-Gravenhage 1899).