

BERTHA WEGMANN

1847–1926

127. *Portrait of Moses Melchior*

(*Portræt af Moses Melchior*)

Oil on canvas, 34³/₈ x 33¹/₂ in. (88 x 85 cm)

PROVENANCE: Niels Lindeskov Hansen og Hustrus Familiefond, no. 43; Bruun Rasmussen, Vejle, Auction 59, 1998, lot 158.

LITERATURE: Lise Svanholm, *Bertha Wegmann på Øregaard*, Copenhagen 1998; Lise Svanholm in Mirjam Gelfer-Jørgensen (ed.), *Danish Jewish Art*, Copenhagen 1999.

A scion of the widely respected Melchior family, Copenhagen exporter, and lifelong bachelor, Moses Melchior (1825–1912) was but one of many Melchiors to sit for portraitist Bertha Wegmann, for she was a good friend of several members of this well-known family.

One admires the technical skill with which Wegmann deftly separates the tone and texture of two very dark backgrounds—the rich black of the subject’s suit against the dark blue plush of the settee. We are aware that through the contrast of the dark fabric and the warm flesh tones of the subject, she brings our attention immediately to Melchior’s reserved but benevolent face, which broadcasts intelligence and composure. We do not find it hard to believe that this is not only a successful businessman but also a dedicated philanthropist, one who shares money and personal time for countless committees of charitable organizations.

A Wegmann portrait of Moses’s older brother and business partner, Moritz Gerson Melchior, hangs in the Fredriksborg Museum today. He, his wife Dorothea, and their daughters provided friendship to the artist; Moritz provided financial support as well during Wegmann’s early student days in Munich.¹ These two brothers were the grandsons of the prolific Moses Marcus Melchior (1736–1817), who arrived in Copenhagen in 1750 from Germany to establish a healthy wholesale business and to produce fourteen offspring and sixty-three grandchildren, of whom Moses and his brother Moritz were but two. It is understandable that the family progenitor should find the environment hospitable in Copenhagen: although it wasn’t until 1814 that Jews were given full civic rights in Denmark, their business acumen was more than accepted by the Danes many years prior to that.

The brothers Melchior were shipping merchants, and it is known that Moses trained with Jacob Holm & Sons from 1841 to 1843. Thereafter, he joined his father’s firm, Moses and Son G.M. in Copenhagen and in 1850 became a partner with his brother Moritz. Moses led this business until his death in 1912.

The company exported Danish agricultural products. From 1853–1855 they set up (but subsequently closed) a branch in Australia. They established trade in the Danish West Indies and other islands nearby. Sugar and rum were shipped to Europe. Food and building materials were brought back to Denmark. The ships also transported mail from the Danish government on the Islands to the Americas for further routing. After the Spanish-American War, Moses & Son G.M. established a branch in New York called Armstrong, Melchior, and Dessau.

More recent members of the Melchior family have continued the tradition of community and religious leadership in Denmark. Moses’s first cousin twice removed (their paternal grandfathers were cousins) was

Marcus Melchior (1897–1969). It was Marcus Melchior who, in 1943, warned of the upcoming arrest of Danish Jews, urging them to go into hiding among non-Jewish friends and prepare to flee to Sweden. As Chief rabbi of Denmark from 1947, Marcus Melchior worked to promote understanding among all religious trends in Judaism while personally advocating modern orthodoxy. He spent ten years exposing the lies of Nazism to the Danes, preaching the values of tolerance and democracy.

Rabbi Marcus Melchior's son, Rabbi Bent Melchior, born in 1929, is very active in the International Jewish community and the author of many books. Rabbi Michael Melchior, grandson of Rabbi Marcus Melchior and an eighth-generation Danish rabbi, is currently the Minister of Israeli Society and the World Jewish Community.

B.H.

¹According to Lise Svanholm's catalogue of the Bertha Wegmann exhibition at Øregaard Museum, 1998.