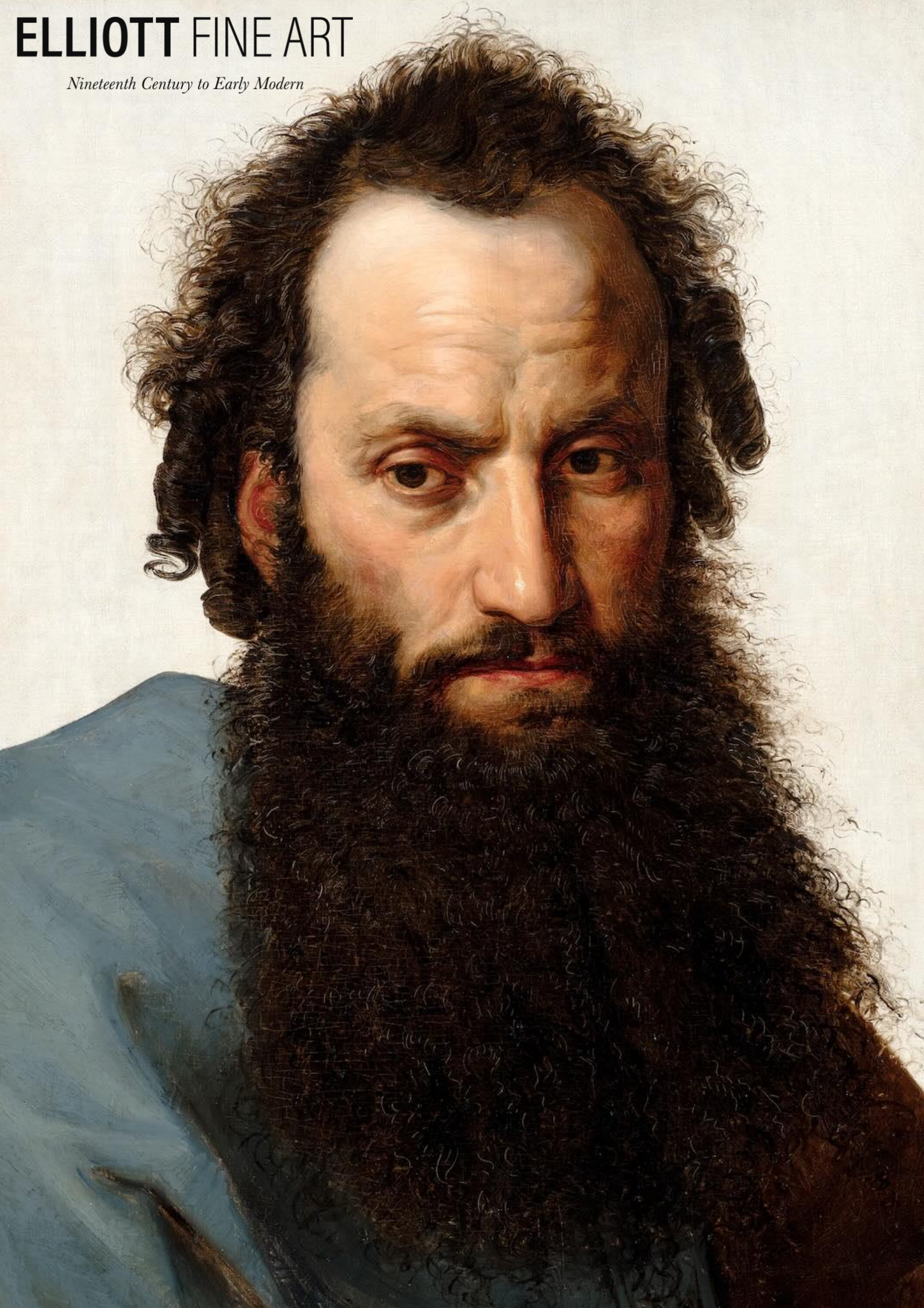
# ELLIOTT FINE ART

*Nineteenth Century to Early Modern*

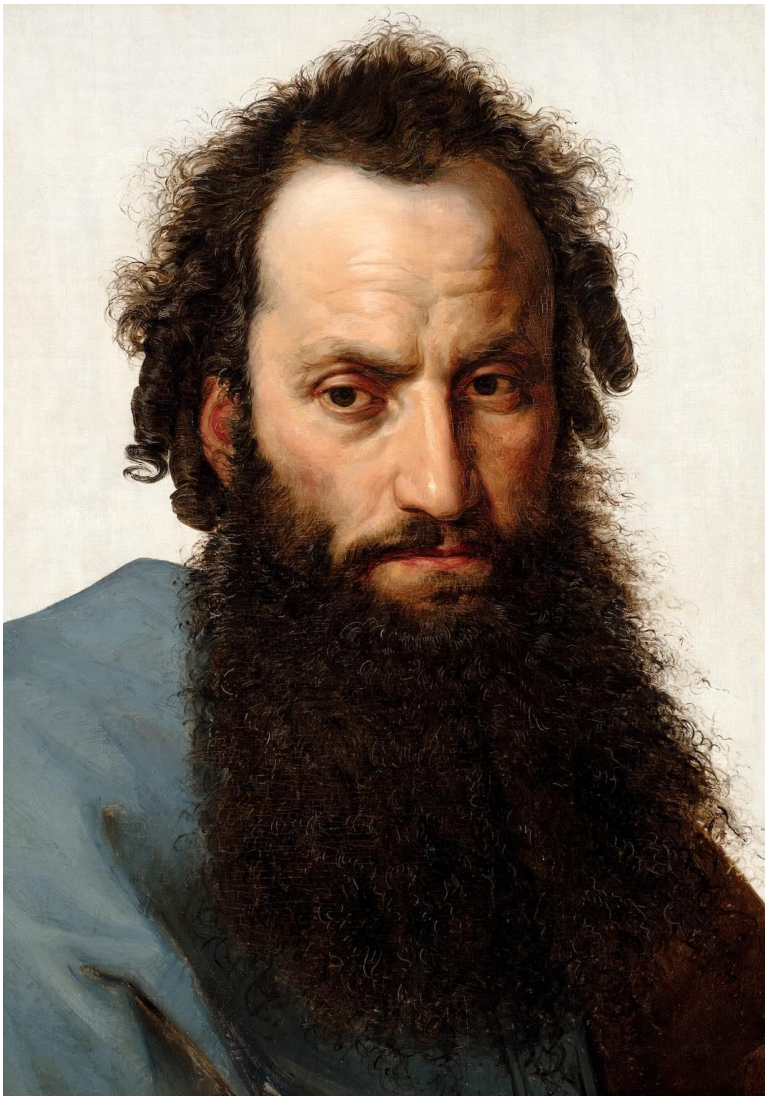


Attributed to Julius Hübner
(Oels 1806 – 1882 Loschwitz)

*Head study of a Jew*

Oil on canvas
52.5 x 38 cm.

Provenance:
Private Collection, Paris, until 2025.



This powerful bust-length painting of an Orthodox Jew, closely related to Julius Hübner's signed and dated 1834 version in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (fig. 1), represents a rare and compelling example of early 19th-century academic engagement with Jewish subject matter in German art. The present version, though unsigned and undated, exhibits a level of technical precision and psychological sensitivity that strongly supports its attribution to Hübner himself. If not an autograph replica, the painting otherwise surely originates from within the artist's close professional circle, possibly executed by one of his pupils at the Dresden Academy, where Hübner began teaching in 1841 and later served as director, or even by his brother-in-law the Jewish artist Eduard Bendemann, who likewise showed a sustained interest in themes relating to his faith. Regardless of authorship, the work is deeply embedded in Hübner's artistic and intellectual milieu.

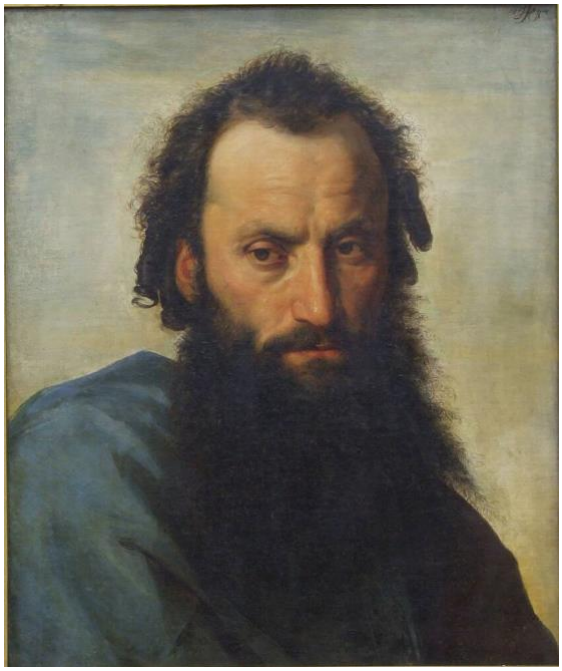


Fig. 1, Julius Hübner, *Head study of a Jew*, 1834, oil on canvas, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

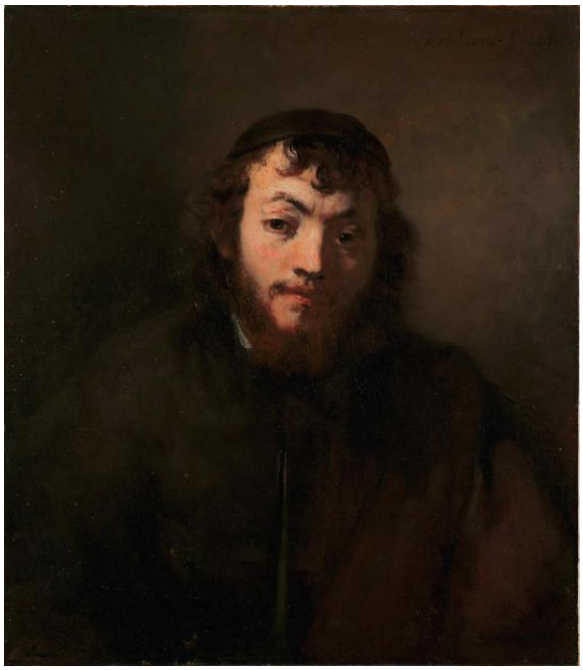


Fig. 2, Rembrandt, *Bust of a Young Jew*, 1663, oil on canvas, Kimbell Art Museum

The composition is austere and absorbing, the sitter's gaze direct and penetrating beneath a furrowed brow, the thick beard rendered with almost sculptural clarity, and the robe shaped in broad folds of subdued colour. It is an image of restraint and dignity. The lighting is carefully balanced, allowing the structure of the face and textures of the hair to emerge clearly without theatrical effect. Notably, the artist has used the end of the paintbrush to incise individual strands of hair into the wet paint of the beard, a technique used by Hübner in other paintings. This specific technical feature, combined with the overall painterly quality, further supports the attribution to Hübner himself.

The influence of Rembrandt is unmistakable (fig. 2), not only in the choice of subject, but in the emotional gravity and frontal immediacy of the composition. Rembrandt's numerous depictions of rabbis and Jewish elders in 17th-century Amsterdam offered a model of artistic empathy, a tradition of presenting Jewish figures with psychological depth rather than narrative or symbolic abstraction. Here, that legacy is reinterpreted through the visual clarity and academic discipline of early 19th-century German painting.

The painting must also be read against the shifting social and political landscape of its time. In the first half of the 19th century, the presence and portrayal of Jews in German art reflected a society negotiating the tensions between Enlightenment ideals, romantic nationalism and residual prejudice. The emancipation of Jews in German-speaking territories had begun under Napoleon, but the progress was fragmented and unstable. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, many of these rights were curtailed by reactionary regimes. Jews remained legal outsiders in much of German society, often confined to specific professions and neighbourhoods, their full integration into civil life a subject of ongoing political debate.

Against this backdrop, the Jewish subject became a symbolically charged figure, not always in a pejorative sense, but frequently employed to explore broader themes of piety, historical continuity, and cultural otherness. Hübner's depiction stands out for its seriousness, dignity and precision. The sitter's garments, hair and bearing are rendered with quiet attention to religious and cultural specificity, yet without exoticism or caricature. This tone aligns with the wider Biedermeier fascination with 'authentic' types, figures rooted in tradition, resistant to the flux of modernity, and imbued with a kind of spiritual or cultural permanence.

What makes this work particularly notable is its rarity. In the first half of the 19th century, Jews in European painting were typically represented in biblical or historical contexts, or else as actors in moralising or narrative genre scenes. Academic studies or sympathetic, non-narrative depictions of individual Orthodox Jews are extraordinarily scarce. This is not a conventional portrait, nor a story-driven image; rather it is a type study, an image of physiognomy and presence, rendered for its own sake. In this sense, the painting occupies an unusual space between portraiture, ethnography and romantic idealism.

Few comparable works exist from this period. Eduard Bendemann's *Jews Mourning in Exile* (fig. 3), of 1832, captures a similar mood of spiritual gravity but within a narrative context. A closer formal and conceptual parallel may be found in John Jackson's *Portrait of a Rabbi* (fig. 4), which likewise focuses on a solitary Orthodox figure rendered with observational care and expressive restraint. Dating to circa 1817, Jackson's work slightly precedes Hübner's, and the two together represent rare and early examples of this kind of representation in European painting.

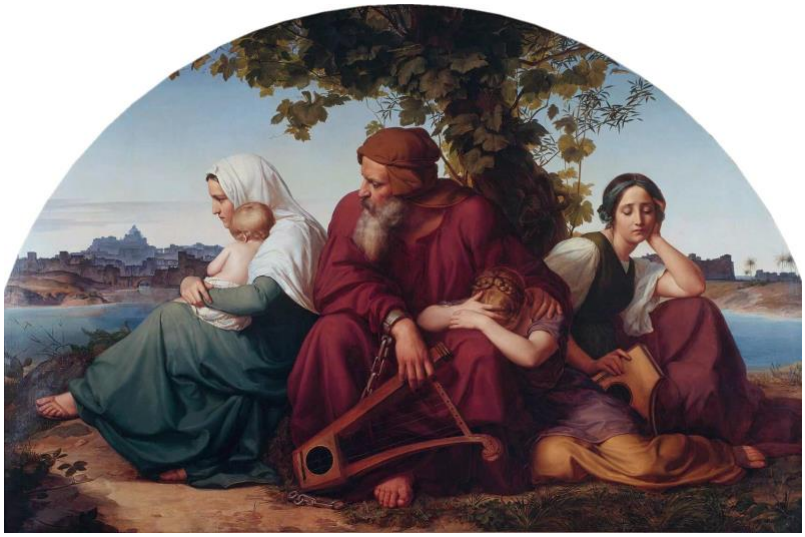


Fig. 3, Eduard Bendemann, *Jews Mourning in Exile*, 1832, oil on canvas, Wallraf-Richartz Museum

Taken together, this work exemplifies a moment in which German academic artists, especially those of Hübner's generation, were beginning to look at Jewish identity not solely through the lenses of religion, typology, or history but also as a subject of direct human interest and formal exploration. Whether painted by Hübner himself or by an artist in his circle, it stands as an image of a Jew not as symbol or curiosity but rather as a figure of psychological presence, rendered with gravity and precision.

Fig. 4, John Jackson, *A Rabbi*, 1817, oil on canvas, Royal Academy