The Rubenianum Quarterly

Dear Friends of the Rubenianum,

It is with great pleasure that I introduce the first issue of The Rubenianum Quarterly. The purpose of this new publication is to update you regularly on the progress of the publication of the Corpus Rubenianum, tell you about the various initiatives of the Rubenianum Fund, and inform you about the activities of our research and documentation centre.

Since the launch of the Fund, created at the beginning of this year to give a firmer financial footing to the Rubenianum, we have been overwhelmed by the surge of support from various parts of the world. Thanks to benefactors and donors from Belgium, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, France and the United States, it has been possible already to raise some €1.1 million – bringing us more than half way towards our minimum goal of €2 million. This bodes well for our ambition of completing the Corpus Rubenianum by 2020, and more generally of reinvigorating the Antwerp-based research on Rubens and on the Flemish art of his period. I would like to express a deep gratitude to all who have given their support, both financially as well as with their time, to this endeavour.

We will strive to have this lively and committed ‘Rubens community’ grow further in the years to come, allowing us to deepen our understanding and appreciation of one of the great moments in the history of western art.

Thomas Leysen
Chairman, Rubenianum Fund

Rubenianum Fund launched with a bang!

The Rubenianum Fund was officially launched at a black tie dinner at the Rubens House in Antwerp, on 10 February. At the invitation of three of Belgium’s leading private banks (Bank Degroof, Bank Delen and Petercam), some 80 guests attended this memorable event, including HSH Prince Nikolaus of Liechtenstein. The dinner was held in a transparent tent erected in the illuminated courtyard of the house, and the sudden snowfall only served to enhance the magic of the evening.

The guests were first given a tour of the museum by curator Ben van Beneden, and then heard Professor Arnout Balis explaining the history and the goals of the Corpus Rubenianum, and the evening was concluded by a strong plea by Antwerp’s Alderman for Culture, Philip Heylen.

Since this first event, and also thanks to the press coverage of the initiative, this innovative approach to raising the support for such a unique project has gained widespread attention both in Belgium and abroad. Subsequent fundraising events have been organized in New York, at the residence of the Belgian Consul-General, as well as in Belgium. In the coming months, it is planned to further broaden the appeal by dedicated efforts in several other European cities with historical ties to Flemish art and culture.

Thanks to the help of many volunteers and the strong support of the King Baudouin Foundation, the Rubenianum Fund has been able to get off to a flying start, and the first two additional scholars financed by the Fund will join the Rubenianum on a full-time basis as of 1 September.

From left to right  Prof. Arnout Balis, Thomas Leysen and Ben van Beneden 
at the opening event in the Rubens House
Corpus Rubenianum

The section of the Corpus devoted to Copies and Adaptations from Renaissance and Later Artists: Italian Artists (Vol. xxxvi, part 2) covers so much material that it has been divided into three volumes, all by Jeremy Wood, the first of which – devoted to Rubens's study of work by Raphael and his Schools – was published in 2009. The second volume, focused on Rubens's study of Titian and other artists working in North Italy, is currently in press and will be presented at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid in November 2010. Readers of this short interview are

Q: Can you tell us about yourself and how you handled this massive amount of material?

A: I was invited to contribute more decades ago than I care to remember, before I became a collaborator with Kristin Belkin. After she moved to Highland Park in New Jersey, working closely together became much more difficult because I remained on the wrong side of the Atlantic. As a result we decided to split the project so that she focused on the German and Netherlands copies (published as Vol. xxxvi, part 1, in 2008) while I took charge of the Italian material. The latter is much the larger section, containing no fewer than 255 items, making it one of the biggest – perhaps the biggest – in the entire Corpus. You might think that a small sketch after an Italian picture is very much easier to deal with than one of Ruben's major altarpieces. But the problem, from my point of view, is that many of the Italian prototypes have a very extensive literature and even more complex problems of interpretation in their own right. You only have to think of Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican Stanze (covered in the first of my volumes) or Titian's paintings for the camerino at Ferrara and the poesie for Philip II (discussed in my second volume, currently in press). Quite often the literature on the Italian sources itself makes reference to Rubens's copies and this immediately extends the bibliography that I have to cover alarmingly. And, of course, it’s not just a matter of understanding the history of these Italian works in their own right but also trying to grasp what Rubens may have known about them, which can be an entirely different matter altogether.

Preparing these volumes has been a bit like running a marathon: it’s needed some practice. I wrote essays on individual problems that came to my attention – for example, a group of Rubens copies that was obtained by Padre Sebastiano Rosta (1635–1704) which I discussed in Master Drawings (1714) which I discussed in

Q: What to extent do your volumes deal with drawings and to what extent with paintings?

A: The first volume is really more about works on paper because Rubens bought and retouched such a lot of copy drawings after work by Raphael, Giulio Romano and Polidoro da Caravaggio, but in the second volume the emphasis shifts more towards the painted replicas even though some of these are only known from early descriptions. When it came to Venetian art, Rubens preferred making very careful facsimiles on canvas or panel and in oil, and even more remarkably, on the same size as the originals. He began doing this style in the 1620s on a relatively young man, but as everybody knows, it was when he visited Madrid and London between 1628 and 1630 that Rubens embarked on making a large number of these replicas. Many writers have commented on how unusual it was for a mature artist to go back to being a student, and the paintings and prints that result, such as the Adam and Eve after Titian in Madrid, and the later adaptations of the Worship of Venus and the Andrians in Stockholm that he painted after his return to Antwerp, are among the most famous works of their kind in the entire history of copies. So, the short answer to your question is that the connections with Rubens’s own work as it became far more evident in the volume that’s about to appear.

Q: You mentioned that Rubens retouched some copy drawings – how can you tell the difference between the underdrawing and Rubens’s additions?

A: Célice, I know how interested you are in this because you yourself own one of Rubens’s most beautiful and important drawings of this kind. This problem has generated a great deal of discussion among writers on art over the centuries. Connoisseurs in the 18th century, such as Pierre-Jean Mariette (1644–1743) and Jonathan Richardson (1687–1743), knew all about this, even though they weren't infallible. Modern taste, the pressures of the saleroom – has been less comfortable with the idea that Rubens would take a journeyman copy and draw on top of it in his own style. The result, of course, is not a copy at all because Rubens may never have touched the original. Anne-Marie Logé has distinguished drawings scholar who has for long worked in the USA, deserves a great deal of the credit for observing that Rubens was far more of a retoucher than a copyist – my volumes are full of acknowledgements to her clear-sighted judgement. From my point of view, I find it surprising that some scholars have tried to identify what are basically standard 16th-century pen-and-ink copies after artists like Polidoro – other examples of which survive in large quantities for comparison – as works that are entirely by Rubens. It’s true that he sometimes retouched earlier sheets so extensively that they end up covered in his handwriting, but, more often, large portions of the underdrawing remain visible and untouched – which makes separating the hands much easier. That’s not the case with red chalk copies that Rubens retouched with more red chalk and sometimes with red wash. In those cases the different layers become blended, but luckily these examples are in the minority.

Q: What was the purpose of Rubens’s copying, retouching and reworking?

A: As the politicians say, I’m so glad you asked me that (meaning exactly the opposite, of course). This really is the most difficult question you could ask: I think one of the main dangers is assuming that there’s one consistent answer that will cover all the copies and adaptations and that remains valid throughout Rubens’s life. For example, people have always wanted to show that Rubens was particularly interested in Titian’s work because he admired his handling of paint, but it’s also obvious he studied his work because Titian is a number of famous men and women of the 16th century looked like, and he also provided a great deal of information about the dress of the period. Conversely, Rubens was also deeply interested in the work of Francesco Primaticcio, but writers have tended to shunt this because it doesn’t fit their preconceptions. I have a great deal to say about this in my three volumes so you will forgive me if I say, rather cheekily, that you’ll have to read them for a more detailed and – I hope – satisfactory answer?

Man in Armour

Arnout Balis

This is a very impressive and – at the same time – tantalizing painting. It is painted on oak panel, some 13 x 58 cm. It is confronted by a forceful man, an emblem of preparedness: look at the hilt and strap. He is clad in steel. In a way, this is a study in reflections. Steel becomes almost palpable thanks to the way it reflects a cold light. But this intensity and aloofness might have been too chilling to endure, so it has been alleviated by more emotionally engaging activity on the right: two pages, still in their teens and eager, are assisting the hero in putting on his armour (sometimes the action is identified as quite the opposite: the helmet has just been taken off and the breast armour is being unfolded). With affection his left hand is resting on the shoulder of the youngest boy. All this is shown on the right-hand side of the painting. On the left, with a forceful gesture (armed hand on the

Peter Paul Rubens, A Commander being armed for Battle. Sold at Christie’s (London) on 6 July 2010, for £1 million

There we are given not only a survey of recent scholarship but also the fruit of painstaking new investigations. And it is a beautifully written piece. This is a feature to be applauded: more and more sale catalogues can count as scholarly literature. Here textbook details, upon the possible provenance of the painting, a survey of opinions as expressed in the literature, technical details, possible sources of inspiration for the artist, the indications of the art of possible ‘study heads’, and (for the first time) a competent description of the particular armour here depicted (it appears to date from the first half of the 16th century). We can only be thankful for these additions to the literature.

Have we then, by now, reached a comfortable scholarly position? The matters we are confronted with are complicated in several respects, and some comments might allow us to highlight a few of the more urgent debates in Rubens scholarship (such as the importance of prestigious provenances or Rubens’s system of having replicas made) and the diagnostic techniques to cope with such problems.
Prince Hans-Adam II of Liechtenstein visits Rubens in Antwerp

On 22 April HSH Prince Hans-Adam II of Liechtenstein, patron of the Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, honoured Antwerp with a visit. Paul Huvenne, Director of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, and the Liechtenstein Commission presented the programme which included Antwerp's major Rubens highlights. The Prince was accompanied by Johan Katschen, Director of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and Manfred Leitner-Jasper, formerly Director of the Liechtenstein Collection in Vienna, who were guests of the visit. The guests were offered a private tour of Antwerp Cathedral and the Rubens House, and participated in the introduction of new curators. At the Rubenianum, Annott Balis introduced the Prince to the Burchard Archive, which forms the basis of the Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Final venue of this informal and most agreeable visit was the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, where the Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens collection is currently featuring in the exhibition 'Closing time: Jan Vansittart' (until 8 October 2011).

Rubenianum acquires Van Dyck documentation of Horst Vey

Last February the sad news reached the Rubenianum that the eminent German Van Dyck scholar Horst Vey had passed away on the 7th of March 2011. A passionate lover of Rubens and the Van Dyck studio, Horst Vey shared his extensive Van Dyck documentation, built on careful analysis, with the Rubenianum. A treasure of information and a great loss for Rubens scholarship.

In July the Rubenianum acquired the extensive Van Dyck documentation, inherited from the Liechtenstein Collection, built up by Horst Vey. Carefully organized and catalogued, the Van Dyck documentation is a unique asset for Rubens scholarship and artists working on Rubens and on Rubens' circle. It will be used for the research on the Rubenianum’s collection, and for the research on Rubens in the broader context of Baroque art.

In November 2010 Benefactors and Donors of the Rubenianum will be cordially invited to the book launch of the next volume of the Corpus Rubenianum – Jeremy Wood's Copies and adaptations from Renaissance and later artists. Italian artists. Prof. Carl Van de Velde and his catalogue drawings – Die Zeichnungen Anton van Dycks (1963), the first book to appear in the series, provides an introduction to the Palazzo Corsini in Rome. Further technical investigations and ultimately a confrontation of both paintings will help to determine whether the Saint Sebastian shows the Roman martyr affectionately being attended by two angels. Although conclusive evidence is still lacking, this tantalizing painting might well be the second version of Rubens’ Saint Sebastian at the Rubens House (1618–1655) and Jacob Jordaan’s Madonna and Child in a garland of flowers and vegetables dated 1660. The authenticity of one or the other of the versions, since he himself clearly preferred the Althorp painting. There was, for him, the evidence of the eye. It is worth quoting Held at some length since he clearly defined what might still be the starting point of a discussion on forming an opinion as regards authenticity. ‘In the last analysis, it is the work of art itself that finally decides the question and removes the doubt concerning its historical classification. It is only a careful and unperturbed examination of both paintings, backed by the small advantage that one of them is “the better” – in other words, more worthy of Rubens’ brush – that can lead to a decision as to which of the two versions is original. Yet [Held adds], as the differences of opinion show, even this approach does not guarantee impartiality. Here we are confronted with the most frequently asked questions, that about the “authenticity”. How can we install more certainty in that area of the history of art? Or: how can we define where the limits lie of what can be called “certain” and what is somewhat less secure.

From the moment, in the late 1950s, when it was clear that there were two almost identical paintings to consider as Rubens’ authentic works, there have been different candidates, have there been differences of opinion, and even some uneasiness amongst Rubens scholars, in so far as there were doubts about a possible third painting. The held was that of the opinion that it was the Detroit painting that had previously figured in connection with Rubens’ English collections (‘probably’, because Held too like a little bit further and speculating about the authenticity of one or the other of the versions, since he himself clearly preferred the Althorp painting. There was, for him, the evidence of the eye. It is worth quoting Held at some length since he clearly defined what might still be the starting point of a discussion on forming an opinion as regards authenticity. ‘In the last analysis, it is the work of art itself that finally decides the question and removes the doubt concerning its historical classification. It is only a careful and unperturbed examination of both paintings, backed by the small advantage that one of them is “the better” – in other words, more worthy of Rubens’ brush – that can lead to a decision as to which of the two versions is original. Yet [Held adds], as the differences of opinion show, even this approach does not guarantee impartiality. Here we are confronted with the most frequently asked questions, that about the “authenticity”. How can we install more certainty in that area of the history of art? Or: how can we define where the limits lie of what can be called “certain” and what is somewhat less secure.

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