Reflections on completing part XXVI of the Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard

It’s interesting to reflect on the three-quarters of a million words that make up my contribution to the Corpus Rubenianum. How did I manage to write so much and was it necessary? The first volume in the series, published in 1968, is a model of elegant concision by comparison. I’m sure that its author, John Rupert Martin, would – were he still alive – find my approach excessive and he could well be right. Martin would still recognize the Corpus that he launched in 1968, and yet the academic world that it now inhabits is a very different one, and this is not just because the Rubens literature has grown at a frightening rate. If I look back to some admired ‘complete catalogues’ published in the 1950s and 1960s they no longer seem to solve the problems of attribution that they address and are more like anthologies of the authors’ favourite works. In those innocent decades, nobody needed to explain what they were doing because it was thought to be self-evident.

I recently had an interesting email conversation with a distinguished Rubens scholar who said that, to her mind, the attribution of an artist’s work comes first and it’s only afterwards that the history of connoisseurship and criticism needs to be considered. I differ. I think attributions aren’t made in a historical or critical vacuum. Because of this, my Corpus entries are more focused on the early literature and the descriptions found in the first sale catalogues than has been usual in previous volumes. I find that early opinions on authorship are often refreshingly unexpected, and I think the language used in these texts is itself informative. Of course, from the outset Corpus authors have taken the early literature of connoisseurship into account, reflecting Burchard’s own meticulous respect for the sources. J. R. Martin, for example, made use of 18th-century texts on his topic, but he wasn’t much interested in the Rubens literature before Rooses (1886–92).

By a strange coincidence, the Rembrandt Research Project was set up in the same year as Martin’s publication, 1968. Although the RRP was better funded, and in some ways far more adventurous in its methodology, it has floundered, while the Rubens Corpus is set fair to reach completion. It seems that the model of the single-authored monograph has proved more durable than the team. Nevertheless, the exhaustive approach of the RRP – although ultimately self-defeating – has set new standards in cataloguing to which the Corpus must surely respond. Credit must be given to the RRP for readdressing the questions that need to be asked in such an enterprise, and, indeed, what it can hope to achieve.

Jeremy Wood

Rubens after Michelangelo, Night, drawing. Paris, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt

What’s in a name?

It all began in 1959: in order to promote the study of the Flemish art of the age of Bruegel to Rubens, the initiative was taken to found a specialized study centre, which was first called the Nationaal Centrum voor de Plastische Kunsten van de 16e en de 17e Eeuw, and later changed to Centrum voor de Vlaamse Kunst van de 16e en de 17e Eeuw. Though shorter, the name remained such an unwieldy mouthful that everyone simply referred to the ‘Centrum’.

From the beginning the ‘Centrum’ resided in the Rubenianum, the art history library and documentation centre of the City of Antwerp, and naturally the two organizations worked in close collaboration. This was especially the case when, in 1963, the City acquired the rich documentation of Ludwig Burchard and the ‘Centrum’ took it upon itself to publish the Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. But the name continued to be somewhat of a problem. While we refer to ourselves as the ‘Centrum’, to the rest of the world we are simply ‘those at the Rubenianum’. With the recent creation of the Rubenianum Fund, the R-word acquired a new, assertive buzz, all the more so since the ‘Centrum’ and the Rubenianum joined forces to produce the Rubenianum Quarterly and establish the very successful Rubenianum Lectures. So, to be in tune with the rest of the R-world, we too decided to rename our centre, and call it the ‘Centrum Rubenianum’. As a foundation, with members and a board, our legal status is different from that of the Rubenianum proper, which is administered by the City of Antwerp. So in-house we will continue to refer to ourselves as the ‘Centrum’, but do please go on calling us ‘those at the Rubenianum’.

Arnout Balis
Chairman of the Centrum Rubenianum
**Corpus Rubenianum**

**Interview with Bert Schepers and Prisca Valkeneers, editorial assistants**

In our very first issue of the Rubenianum Quarterly of July last year there was an interview with Jeremy Wood about his lifetime achievement: the publication in 3 volumes of the Corpus Rubenianum series ‘Copies and Adaptations from Renaissance and Later Artists: Italian Artists’. In hardy one year’s time, this most prolific corpus author managed to round off ‘Rubens and the Italians’, but this titanic work could never have been achieved so successfully without the help of two devoted editorial assistants: Bert and Prisca. As they were appointed together in September 2010, it’s time they shared with us the ups and downs, pitfalls and snipes in their copy-editing work. They form a well-adjusted team. Bert is the text editor while Prisca is in charge of the image editing. Their office is next to the prestigious Kolveniershof and from its windows they can contemplate the inspiring and romantic garden and residence of their ‘Commander in Chief’ Sir Peter Paul Rubens.

So here they come, the enthusiastic youngsters of the Centrum Rubenianum, prepared to answer some tricky and sharp questions by Cécile Kruyfhooft.

Bert, can you tell us about yourself in a nutshell?
I studied art history at Leuven University and my first working experience was in a four-year research project on mythological scenes in Flemish art – already devoting much attention to Rubens – here in the Rubenianum. After that I stepped into the Rubens research project at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels and collaborated on the 2007 exhibition ‘Rubens. A genius at work’. Then I went on to organize and manage the vast documentation of the project and set up a database. The lure of the Rubenianum was simply too strong to resist when I was asked to step into the revitalized Corpus Rubenianum, following the launch of the Rubenianum Fund.

Prisca, your turn now.
Art history is my second degree but my first passion. At the time I was working in Brussels and I decided to combine my challenging job as a nurse for the Ministry of Defence with the study of art history at Brussels University, where I was trained by Amon Bults. I took a sabbatical year to finish my master’s degree. In December 2007, I started on a part-time basis as an editorial assistant to Carl Van de Velde, here at the Centrum Rubenianum. My first experience with the editorial world came with Kristin Bellin’s volume on Rubens after Northern Artists and steadily I learned more about Rubens. I enjoyed this so much that I decided to study one of Ruben’s pupils, Justus van Egmont, as my PhD subject. Meanwhile, I took on a part-time job as an assistant to Paul Huvenne, general director of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp.

We’ll be making excellent coffee, what are your main tasks here?
Bert: Our editorial tasks range widely but are well defined. In general we provide assistance in all stages of the publication, in close communication with the authors and the printer. We mainly concentrate on the illustrations and layout while Bert is in charge of the text, and all under the guidance of Carl Van de Velde. When compiling the indexes the three of us join forces. Gradually we were given more and more responsibilities. Apart from our editing duties, we also maintain, organize and update the Burchard documentation, and resolve any queries that come our way. As a matter of fact, most of the time we are multitasking.

Prisca: And you do get enough sleep, then? How do you proceed when the texts come in?
Bert: Before the manuscript is handed over we have already done through preliminary work. Most important is the sorting out of the list of illustrations, gathering photos from the Burchard documentation and the Rubenianum picture library, ordering new or second-hand handling copyright. In this early stage we can already define the layout, the outlines of which are decided in agreement with the author. When the final manuscript is submitted, publication fever is definitely rising. We have to stick to strict timetables with the printers and work to tight deadlines, so time management is essential.

Prisca: Furthermore, all authors have their individual coach – a senior scholar – guiding them through the research and writing process. Questions of content are thus tackled at an early stage in agreement with the editorial board, which ensures the high standard of the series and facilitates the publication process.

Interview with the authors:
Bert: Recently a Corpus coordinator was appointed. Fiona Healy follows every author closely and fosters the esprit de corps among them (see Rubenianum Quarterly 2010, page 3).
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Prisca: She takes excellent care of the general communication on Corpus matters while we have a direct line with the author when it comes to specific editorial issues. Furthermore, all authors have their individual coach – a senior scholar – guiding them through the research and writing process. Questions of content are thus tackled at an early stage in agreement with the editorial board, which ensures the high standard of the series and facilitates the publication process.

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the oil sketch by Rubens now in the Cranmer collection (The Hague) and the engraving by Nicolaas Lauwers. The bearded man between Christ and Pilate also appears in both works, though without the bundle of rods and not in profile, as in the drawing. It is possible that the Cranmer sketch was a study for a lost altarpiece, known only through a copy that was previously in the cathedral of Nivelles. At the bottom of the sheet Rubens has roughly indicated two figures seen from behind in black chalk: perhaps an initial idea of how the group of priests and senators would appear in the oil sketch. Under the principal scene at the lower right, he has added a small sketch of Pilate seated on his throne, attended by a servant. The white highlight on Christ’s thigh and the softly hatched areas of chalk on his mane and bellowed evokes fragments of light and shadow. It reveals how Rubens sublimely manipulated his drawing materials in a subtle and highly elastic way for anatomical detail but nevertheless unusually confident. This was not a matter of a simple reproduction of the sketch of Hercules that fills the lower right corner, and it is difficult to say whether it was executed at the same time as the lower right side of the present sheet, between the legs of Tempesta’s soldier lying on the ground in the foreground. The inscriptions on the sheet indicate that it was finished later. While the figure of Eurytus adopts the same pose in the oil sketch of the same theme (now in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium), the attitude of Hippodamia is better indicated on the group at the upper right of the drawing. She thrusts both arms desperately in the air, a gesture Rubens may have borrowed from the depiction of Persephone seized by Hades on another Greek vase. Perhaps Rubens had already visited this path in the context of the oil sketch on the far left. Above it, he has tried out another solution that was not retained – with the execution of the figure that thrusts his body towards Eurytus as he gallops off to the right, Rubens has only lightly sketched in the folds pressing down on the bull’s neck. Hercules’ body is shown more in profile, and seems to be in the act of raising his arms to the side was interpreted as a Lapith trying to hurl a stone at Eurytus. This was undoubtedly his plan for the decoration of the Alcázar, referred to in a letter of 21 June 1639, which would suggest that the sketch was finished later. While the Alcázar was destroyed by fire in 1734, only a copy of Hercules and the bull survives, painted by Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo (London, Asley House). Rubens had studied both the oil sketch by Rubens now in the Cramer pavilion, which functions as a screen that forms an imposing gateway to the garden pavilion, which forms the entrance to the town through the central screen. In designing the extension to his house, Rubens sought inspiration in contemporary Italian masterpieces well grounded in both painting and the principles of Vitruvian architecture, especially Giulio Romano and Michelangelo. The treatments of such great Italian architectural theorists as Serlio and Vignola were an acknowledged source of inspiration. Rubens’s antique and Italian borrowings are apparent in his coloration and overall design of the façades of both screen and studio. In order to accentuate the function of his house, Rubens placed life-size statues of the Olympian gods Mercury and Minerva on the central pedestals of the screen’s balustrade. They were chosen as the tutelary deities because they were associated, more than any other of the gods, with wisdom and the arts. Thus Rubens pointedly portrayed Mercury as the god of poets, holding a palette and brushes and, instead of his caduceus, a lyre. Minerva was added a statue of the demigod Hercules, the paragon of virtue, which was installed in the garden pavilion. Rubens’s contemporaries proclaimed that his house was dedicated to art and virtue. As a whole and in its individual parts, the complex formed a virtuous and highly significant example of the theatrical inventions that the painter had seen and studied in various places in Italy, especially Rome. Rubens’ splendid townhouse with its modern Roman forms and decorations based on ancient models was considered an exemplar of the new classical architecture, which was unlike anything else in the Netherlands. Rubens’s architectural masterpiece was greatly admired throughout the 17th century.

Palazzo Rubens. The Master as Architect
(05 September–20 December 2010) is the first-ever exhibition to explore the architecture of Rubens House and the models, ancient and modern, from which Rubens took his inspiration.

Ben van Beneden

Rubeniana

The Rubeniana acquires the rich Pierre de Sjéournet collection

Thanks to the generous support of the Cultural Heritage Fund of the King Baudouin Foundation, the Rubeniana has recently acquired Pierre de Sjéournet’s art-historical documentation. This collection, with its thousands of photographs and its specialized reference library, is a particularly rich source of information on Flemish and Dutch painting of the 16th to 18th centuries. It is complementary to the holdings of the Rubeniana since it contains detailed information not only on the great masters but especially on lesser-known artists.

Pierre de Sjéournet (1933–2011) was a specialist on Rubens and his circle, and had been an expert in attributing and reattributing paintings that originated in the shadow of the ‘great names’ in art history.

Throughout his years of study, Pierre de Sjéournet published many articles and books in the Rubenianum’s reading room for documentary research. Every staff member who had the privilege to meet him or assist him in any way, has fond memories of this passionate and ever-ingenious man.

Pierre de Sjéournet’s documentation comprises no fewer than 3,600 artists’ files, precious documents in the field. His library contains more than seventy metres of books, including catalogues of museums, exhibitions and auctions, as well as monographs and reference works.

Incorporating the thousands of files, photographs, books and catalogues into our system will take quite some time. The Rubeniana is preparing an online inventory of this collection, and will report on its progress in the bimonthly acquisition newsletter. In the years to come, our readers and researchers will, both here in our institution and all over the world, be able to consult the carefully mounted and annotated photographs bearing the familiar stamp Documentation P. de Sjéournet.

Véronique Van de Kerckhof, Curator of the Rubeniana

The Rubenianum Lectures

We warmly invite you to a lecture by

BEN VAN BENEDEN
Curator of the Rubenius

Maggie Wilmot, Rubens and Architecture

In this lecture Ben van Beneden will focus on Rubens’s interpretation of architecture and on the examples, antique and modern, that inspired him for the decoration of his house in Antwerp.

Admission is free; please notify your attendance to rubeniana@stad.antwerpen.be

We look forward to meeting you on 09 September!

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