Launch of the next Corpus volume: The Constantine series by Koenraad Brosens

In 1622, Rubens designed his second tapestry series, the Story of Constantine, for which he executed twelve oil sketches, all of which are currently preserved in public and private collections in America and Europe. Tapestries produced after the lost cartoons, which were in turn painted after the oil sketches, were woven in the tapestry factories in the faubourgs of Saint-Marcel and Saint-Germain in Paris.

Based on new archival research and a critical examination of the literature on the Constantine series, this book firmly embeds the genesis, and iconographical and stylistic features of the set in its specific artistic, manufactural, and commercial matrix, and thus develops the first truly inclusive approach to Rubens’s Story of Constantine. Analysis of the entrepreneurial strategy of Marc Comans and François de la Planche, directors of the factory in the faubourg of Saint-Marcel, the correspondence between Rubens and Peiresc, the provenance of the twelve oil sketches, and the iconographical programme reveals that the series was not commissioned by the French king Louis XIII, as has long been believed, but by Comans and La Planche. A close reading of Rubens’s primary literary source, Caesar Baronius’s Annales Ecclesiastici, shows that the artist must have intended the twelve scenes to hang in a sequence different from the generally accepted one, though seventeenth-century buyers and viewers could have seen and interpreted the Constantine series quite differently, as their view was distorted by the jumble of Constantinian legends and motifs that had lodged in the cultural memory of Latin Christianity. Finally, the book explores the area of tension between the set’s austere monumentality and highly sophisticated aesthetic, which was rooted in Rubens’s profound knowledge of classical and Renaissance art and in his earlier forays into the free and creative application of these sources, contemporary French and Brussels tapestry sets, and the pictorial and decorative qualities, possibilities and challenges inherent in the medium itself.

This book will be presented on 30 January at the most suitable location of the Mobilier national in Paris.

Rubens, The Entry into Rome (detail). Indianapolis Museum of Art

Signing off, looking forward

Looking back on 2011, the united Rubens partners in Antwerp can be proud of last year’s results. Every event, from the book presentation in February to our very first research workshop on animal painting last December, could welcome an enthusiastic response. The ‘Rubenianum Lectures’ have become an established tradition. The exhibition Palazzo Rubens turned the attention to a lesser-known aspect of the master. A major highlight was obviously the launch of the final volumes of Jeremy Wood’s Corpus part on Rubens’s copies after Italian Masters, in early July in London.

For the Rubenianum, one recent event rose above the others in terms of scale and impact. From 1 to 3 December, we organized, along with the Department of Design Sciences of Antwerp University College, the colloquium ‘The Notion of the Painter-Architect in Italy and the Southern Netherlands’. 178 participants registered, among them a remarkable number of young scholars and students. The programme included seventeen lectures, two exclusive evening visits and an architectural city tour to a number of magnificent historic locations, some difficult to access. We may expect the proceedings by 2013 in the series ‘Architectura Moderna’ (Brepols Publishers). This publication will substantiate the colloquium’s findings and thus hopefully add to the research done for the Corpus part on Rubens’s architecture and architectural sculpture. For now, we particularly remember the agreeable and stimulating atmosphere during the event: the Kolveniershof, the stunning House Delbeke, the homes of Rockox and Rubens – all served as inspiring settings for learning and exchange of ideas.

Let there be no doubt: the Rubenianum is a vibrant place full of plans. For 2012 we look forward to some major collaboration projects on which you will read more in this newsletter. The launch of a next Corpus part in January will immediately mark 2012 as another Rubens year.

From The Rubenianum Quarterly to all our friends and colleagues: our warmest wishes for a happy New Year!

Véronique Van de Kerckhof
Curator of the Rubenianum
Rubens's Letters

Carl Van de Velde

Rubens was not the most successful painter of his age, he was also a prominent participant in political and literary life. This is most apparent in his extensive correspondence. It has been estimated that he wrote about 250 letters, but mere recent calculations suggest a figure somewhere between 3000 and 5000, which is also far from discovery. It would be useful to prepare an updated edition using new transcriptions and incorporating codicological research, a method which was only in its infancy in the early twentieth century. A few years ago, I was fortunate to have the writing paper for possible watermarks. Since most of the letters have a precise date, this should be feasible as an academic achievement. The new edition will probably be as helpful to the historian as it is for the reader who wants to know more closely. I will never forget our conversations on this subject.

For obvious reasons, Rubens's letters have never been published, but sometimes only copies, translations or summaries have come to us. The letters of Rubens to his wife, of correspondents in the Low Countries, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and England. Two hundred letters are at the Rubens Institute, fifteen in Dutch and in one letter. No letters in English, German or Spanish are known.

The choice of Italian was to be expected as it was the lingua franca of the European intelligentsia. The Italian used by Rubens was not the Tuscan variant that was the usual choice in seventeenth-century Italian literature, but apparently the Genoese variety. In a lively correspondence in the late sixteenth century with a man of letters he could have had an eye for the Genoese handwriting his letters in, for example, when in reply to 25 December 1668 to Diego de Bie (fig. 1), in which he declines the latter's request to accept a young man as a pupil in his studio. After he had finished and signed the letter, he added a postscript in which he said that he would like to send him a painting because it had been bought by a person so influential that he could not refuse to send it. This was generally accepted that the painting in question is that Rubens had sent to a member of that family by making himself an eye-witness.

If we take Sperling's account at face value, we must believe that at least on that occasion Rubens dictated a letter, and we could even suppose that this was his usual practice. This, however, is contradicted by the facts. As far as we can assess, Rubens wrote and signed his own letters. Many of the extant examples contain his insertions and corrections, as is well illustrated by his letter of 5 May 1661 to the engraver Jacob de Bie (fig. 2), in which he declines the latter's request to accept a young man as a pupil in his studio. After he had finished and signed the letter, he added a postscript in which he said that he wished to send him a painting because it had been bought by a person so influential that he could not refuse to send it. This was generally accepted that the painting in question is that Rubens had sent to a member of that family by making himself an eye-witness as early as this.

Rubens sometimes refers to his own handwriting in his letters, for example when in reply to 25 December 1668 to Diego de Bie (fig. 1), in which he declines the latter's request to accept a young man as a pupil in his studio. After he had finished and signed the letter, he added a postscript in which he said that he wished to send him a painting because it had been bought by a person so influential that he could not refuse to send it. This was generally accepted that the painting in question is that Rubens had sent to a member of that family by making himself an eye-witness as early as this.
Rubeniana

Jesusits or Carmelites?

In 1685 the Rubens House proudly announced the acquisition of an oil sketch by Peter Paul Rubens. It had been exhibited twice before and on both occasions was presented as a model for the upper part of the high altar of the Antwerp Jesuits (c. 1619–21). It was suggested that the sketch was the work Rubens had started in the possession of the Antwerp Jesuits’. Frans Baudouin accepted this identification and dated it to about 1617. Jules Held, in turn, recognized the early style of Rubens in the painting and—albeit with reservation—also associated it with the Jesuit altar, which confirmed Baudouin in his belief. 

But was the sketch really a model? We have not been able to bring this suggestion to a resolve, but it remains impossible to determine whether or not it was identical with the sketch discussed here. As Held correctly stated, its association with the Jesuit church is only based upon an early dating on stylistic grounds. Held also pointed at similarities with Rubens’s modello for the high altar of the Antwerp Calced Carmelites (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which was executed in 1617–38 by Hans van Mildert (lost). Subsequently, Ulrich Becker raised strong arguments against an early dating of the sketch, among which his reconstruction of the ‘Carmelites’ high altar.

Formal analysis of seventeenth-century art proves that it is not possible to deduce from the elevation of the Carmelite high altar shows unique features not shared by the Jesuit altar. This due to the highly original motives: the two stretched volutes serving as pedestals for the sarophagus and the entablature of the portico, which has taken on a central role as if it was pushed upwards by the altarpiece below. If these elements are already exceptional in themselves, their combination is found only in the Rubens House and Metropolitan sketch discussed here. As Held confirmed Baudouin in his belief.

In spite of the kinship between these three works, however, there are some striking differences between them. The Rubens House sketch and both the Carmelite and the Jesuit altar (which encouraged both Held and Baudouin to consider the latter a ‘preliminary’ design) share the same techniques. One of the most notable differences is the depiction in the Rubens sketch of the antique artists. This, however, is exactly the opposite of what Rubens wanted, who instead insists that more attention be paid to the scultura remains of ancient Roman painting, even if these were rather disappointing. In one of his letters to Peiresc, the artist complained that the ancient sculptures were not as well preserved as he had expected. The same applies to the Roman workshop, where he worked in Rome. In this respect they are comparable to the artist’s self-portraits in that they were intended to convey a certain image of himself to his correspondent. In this respect they are also comparable to the artist’s self-portraits in that they were intended to convey a certain image of himself to his correspondent. In this respect they are also comparable to the artist’s self-portraits in that they were intended to convey a certain image of himself.

In the Rubens sketch, Rubens has depicted himself in a coat with a pocket and a hat, holding a book and a feather in his hand. The book is open to a page with Latin text, and the feather is used as a pointer. The artist appears to be in deep thought, his head resting on his hand. His expression is serious, perhaps even melancholic, as if he were contemplating a difficult problem or a profound idea. The background is a simple, unadorned setting, which focuses attention on the artist and his thoughts. The use of light and shadow adds depth and a sense of dimension to the composition.

Rubeniana Lectures 2012

In 2012 we continue our lecture series with a varied and interesting programme. Three newly scheduled lectures will present the public with new discoveries on the field of seventeenth-century Flemish art.

25 March 2012, 11 am Prof. Dr Koerenaar Bosmans The Constantinuses. Rubens and the art of tapestry


All lectures take place in the Rubenianum and are in Dutch. We look forward to meeting you on one of these occasions!
PATRON

HSH Prince Hans-Adam II von und zu Liechtenstein

**Rubenianum Fund**

**BOARD**

Thomas Leysen (Chairman), Dominique Allard, Arnout Balis, Michel Ceuterick, Gregory Martin, Ben van Beneden

**BENEFACCTORS**

Fonds InBev-Baillet Latour  
Fonds Courtin-Bouché

Allaert-d’Hulst family  
Annette Bühler  
Michel Ceuterick  
Herman De Bode  
Georges De Jonckheere  
Antoine Friling

Bob Haboldt  
Jules-André Hayen  
Steven Heinz  
Baroness Paul Janssen  
David Koetsier  
David Kowitz

Thomas and Nancy Leysen  
Otto Naumann  
Natan Saban  
Johnny Van Haeften  
Eric Verbeeck  
Juan Miguel Villar Mir  
Mark Weiss

**DONORS**

Ingrid Ceusters  
Jean-Marie De Coster  
Baron Bernard de Giey  
Joseph de Gruyter  
Jean De Maere  
Michel Demoortel  
François de Visscher  
Eric Dorhout Mees  
Count Ghislain d’Urse  
Jacqueline Gillion

Dov Gottesman  
Stéphane Holvoet  
Baron Daniel Janssen  
Baron Paul-Emmanuel Janssen  
Jean-Louis and Martine Julliard-Reynaers  
Gijs Keij  
Eric Le Jeune  
Christian Levett  
Christian and Brigitte Leysen  
Anne-Marie Logan

Pierre Macharis  
Patrick Maselis  
Baron Jean-Albert Moorkens  
Philip Mould  
Cliff Schorer  
Eric Turquin  
Rafael Valls  
Philippe Van de Vyvere  
Matthew Weatherbie  
Morris Zukerman

**CORPORATE BENEFACCTORS**

Sotheby’s  
Telenet NV

Lazard Frères  
Christie’s  
Lhoist SA  
Pierre Bergé & Associés  
Groupe Bruxelles Lambert SA  
Dorotheum  
Noortman Master Paintings  
Sibelco – SCR NV

The Michael Marks Charitable Trust  
KBC Group NV  
Crop’s NV  
Rosy Blue NV  
Dexia Bank

*and a number of benefactors and donors who wish to remain anonymous*