Rubens researchers of the KMSKA now at the Rubenianum

As is gradually becoming known, the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten van Antwerpen in ‘Antwerp South’ is temporarily closed, but the museum’s activities continue unabated. This means that the museum is dependent, more than ever, on cooperation with other institutions, not only for the organization of exhibitions, but also for the research that underlies such initiatives. For example, the Rubens Project, which commenced in 2007, is being carried on through intensified collaboration with the Rubenianum. This institution is close to my heart, and I’m sure that my colleagues who will be working there in the coming years feel the same way. I started out at the Rubenianum in 1973 as a Rubens researcher and worked in this capacity on the expansion of the documentation and centre of excellence. Several years later, when I gave up my position at the Rubenianum for a job at the Rubenshuis, I remained closely involved with the Rubens research, and this situation did not change when I started to work at the KMSKA fifteen years ago. I am convinced that the accommodation of the museum’s Rubens researchers in the Rubenianum and the accompanying centralization of documentation will lead to fruitful collaboration. The Rubenianum will become even more of a meeting place for all those committed to the study of Rubens and his time. I am already looking forward to the forthcoming volumes of the Corpus Rubenianum.

Dr Paul Huvenne
General Director KMSKA
Conscience, where I first experienced from internship at the Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Enchantée addressed as ‘Dear sir’, or ‘Beste Heer Staes’ does not always ring a bell: I’m constantly many readers are familiar with who I am, nor that could be needed to study the broad history, religion and folklore, with relevance known artists from all over Europe, but we members of the Centrum Rubenianum as an institution of the city joined by the extensively annotated books of Rubens House in the 1950s. In 1962 these were the handbooks gathered by the staff of the The roots of the collection are to be found in a highly specialized library collection to support scientific research. We have monographs on famous and lesser-known artists from all over Europe, but we also have a smaller collection on literature, history, religion and folklore, with relevance for art-historical research. In other words: we collect everything that could be needed to study the earliest period and the treatment the pictures have endured over the centuries, not least at the hands of well-intentioned amateurs. But why did you first become aware of Rubens’ Ceiling?

It was when I was a schoolboy; then the Banqueting Hall was officially described as the Museum of the United Services Institute. The hall was cluttered with crumbling reconstructions of battlefields and dusty models of battalions, tatty, massed military insignias—attached to the balcony—observed the view of the canvases which anyone were not properly arranged, so as to make it difficult to appreciate them. The occasion was in fact rather a non-event so far as I was concerned. Only later was I struck by how cruelly ironic it was that in January 1649, not more than a decade after Rubens’ paintings had been installed, Charles I, who had commissioned the ceiling to glorify the exemplary reign of his father, was made to walk out from beneath it to his execution on a scaffolding directly in front of the building. It was amazing to me that a place of such political and artistic significance was so unvisited and its decorations by one of the greatest works of Rubens and his contemporaries …

The Banqueting House in Whitehall is an extraordinary survival in London, and its ceiling paintings by Rubens even more so, given the history of the place in the Commonwealth period and the treatment the pictures have endured over the centuries, not least at the hands of well-intentioned amateurs. But why did you first become aware of Rubens’ Ceiling?

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But which of the Gallery’s pictures did you embark on first? Did you plunge straight into Rubens and the Peace and War?

I did start with Rubens, but not Peace and War; before that I tackled the sketch for the Allegory of the Duke of Buckingham, in which, with much help from guided tours and personal views, the Duke does the Temple of Virtue and Honour. I found a combination of sources which showed that it was not, as it had been thought, a posthumous apocalypse, made after his assassination. I was astonished that the sitter, the notorious figure of Charles I, was still alive. The Duke was as vain as he was cultivated, and was evidently not embarrassed to commission a self-celebration, which he saw as his own self-justification as well.

And your first encounter with the Rubenianum?

It was through working on the Gallery’s catalogues that I met you, with it, as Ludger Burchard, who had had a special affection for his adoptive country, had started to write on the pictures of Rubens and van Dyck, but was not embarrassed to commission a self-celebration, which he saw as his own self-justification as well.

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Sir Oliver Millar; however, as Surveyor of the Queen’s Pictures, Oliver charge other commitments and he generously surrendered the commission he had received many years previously.

And in fact one of the last things this great scholar wrote was a glowing review of your Corpus book in The Burlington Magazine...

Yes, here too he was characteristically generous. But returning to d’Hulst and the commission, his proposal changed my life. I remain very grateful to him for engineering my return to the Rubens fold as embodied in the Centrum Rubenianum.

One of the things that has always intrigued me about the Whitehall Ceiling is the extent to which Rubens was responsible for devising the iconography. I remember the excitement I felt the day (was it in 1997?) you showed me the plans which had been discovered in the British Museum of two projected layouts for the decorative scheme drawn up by someone at court. This revealed that the central theme was initially to be the Union of the Crowns of England and Scotland, a subject of some topical relevance today.

You know, it was a chance phone call to the Department of Manuscripts that alerted me to which shows how good it is to have humans at the end of a phone! An assistant keeper told me about documents that had just been found and how as yet no sense could be made of them, though they seemed relevant to the Ceiling. The two documents are in fact at present on view at Tate Britain in a display that Karen Hearn has organized.

I wanted to write to Rubens in London to put the Whitehall Ceiling into the wider context of the culture of the reign of Charles I and his court. In Britain the attitudes in the years leading up to the civil war are always illustrated by Van Dyck’s portraits. What I wanted to show is that Rubens expressed the political philosophy of the King in these magnificent canvases, which are still in situ. It is typical of English historians that they have managed largely to ignore it, choosing to study the faces of the protagonists as presented by Van Dyck rather than the allegorized concepts as depicted by Rubens. His canvases were designed to express ideas of universal and uncontroversial appeal as seen from the King’s point of view.

One of the great sources for Rubens’s stay in England which you were able to draw on is of course his own correspondence.

Yes, he was required to write detailed despatches by Olivares, his political master in Madrid. These are fascinating accounts of the British court and demonstrate the artist’s great literary ability as well as his skill as an diplomat. Indeed he was offered a permanent diplomatic post after his return to Antwerp. Luckily for us he turned it down, preferring family life and painting. Still, his young wife might have taken to the diplomatic life, her second husband was a successful courtier and man of affairs.

But now that his work in London is so well presented in both words and images, what are you planning to do for Rubens next?

Elly Miller has certainly designed a beautiful book with some amazing colour details, and unless something extraordinary happens, I think I have said my last word on the subject. But now, along with you and the rest of the team gathered for the project, I am busy with Rubens’s mythological subjects for the corpus: not long to go either before the deadline for Part II!

Yes, let’s get back to the topic of Diana and her companions.

The Rubenianum Lectures

Please note the date of our next Rubenianum Lecture on 24 June 2012, 11 am

Dr TIMOTHY DE PAEPE

‘Two sous sont vrayes!’ The unity of painting and theatre in the Grand Painters’ Hall of the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke (1664–1742). In 2011, Timothy De Paep obtained his PhD on the history of theatre in Antwerp in the 17th and 18th centuries. For his talk in the Rubenianum Lectures series, he will focus on the Grand Painters’ Hall of the Guild of Saint Luke, a location shared by painters and rhetoricians – some artists were both – where paintings formed the prestigious and symbolic backdrop of plays. This painterly decorum will be visualized in a simulation of the hanging of the guild’s collection.

The Rubenianum Lectures are organized with the support of the Inbev-Baillet Latour Fund.

Conference ‘Rubens and the Thirty Years War’, 10–11 May 2012

The Rubenianum is happy to host a conference on a fascinating aspect of Rubens, organized by the Society for Court Studies and Univenter Antwerpen with the support of the Research Fund of Flanders (FWO). Using the career of Peter Paul Rubens as an organizing thread, this conference will examine the complex relationships between diplomacy, dynastic politics and the visual arts during the early part of the Thirty Years War. Both art historians and historians from the United States, Europe and New Zealand will enlighten various aspects of this interdisciplinary topic. All information on concept and programme is to be found on the Rubenianum’s homepage. To register, please write to steven.thiry@ua.ac.be.

Saved for the Nation: The King Baudouin Foundation acquires a Notebook

At a recent auction in New York, the King Baudouin Foundation successfully acquired a notebook with Rubens’s theoretical notes on the art of drawing. Known as the De Ganay Manuscript, it is one of four known copies after the original autograph notebook, that was lost in a fire in 1720. In the course of next year the volume will receive a permanent place in the Rubens House, as a permanent loan.

The De Ganay Manuscript was made in the 17th century, shortly after Rubens’s death. It is probably a copy by someone from the immediate circle of Rubens. The book shows that Rubens was not only a great and erudite artist, but also an ambitious and original theoretician.

The book contains seventeen pages of text and forty-nine pages of drawings. Most of these are in pen and brown ink, some in black or black and red chalk, their Latin and Dutch inscriptions relating to the texts. It illustrates Rubens’s ideas on perspective, anatomy, proportion and symmetry. In the studies of human emotions, Rubens compared the art of painting with literature.

We refer our readers to TRQ 2012/1 (pp. 3–4) where Arnout Balis briefly discussed the four existing copies after the lost original. Rubens’s theoretical notebook is the subject of the upcoming volume of the Corpus Rubenianum, to be published in the beginning of 2013. This volume will be written by Arnout Balis and David Jaffé.

Rubens’s Chariot of Kallo in the spotlight

While the Antwerp Royal Museum of Fine Arts is closed for renovation, the Rockox House is playing host to a number of paintings of great significance to the old burgomaster’s residence.

Rubens’s oil sketch representing The Chariot of Kallo is the centrepiece of the small Rubeniana. The Chariot of Kallo (detail). Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp. © Lukas – Art in Flanders & kmska

Ruben, The Aethusa of Iones (and Other Studies), sketch for the Banqueting House Ceiling, Whitehall. Tate Britain.
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