When and where was Rubens born? The question is in itself not very important, but as long as it remains unanswered, it can give rise to misunderstandings among the general public, which has always been interested in trivial questions. Therefore, the Centrum Rubenianum has reconsidered the available sources. This article presents an overview of the arguments. Detailed results will be published shortly.

In the caption to an etching showing Rubens’s portrait that was published in Antwerp in 1649 by Jan Meyssens (1612–1670), he is said to have been born in Antwerp on the 28th of June 1577. The likeness is based upon Paul Pontius’s engraving of 1630, but shows the artist without hat. The print is part of a series of 100 numbers, entitled Images de divers hommes d’esprit sublime. The etchings owe their notoriety no doubt to the fact that they were reproduced, with their captions, in Cornelis de Bie’s Gulden Cabinet van de Edel-Vry Schilderconst (Antwerp 1661), a collection of lives of mostly Flemish artists. We do not know where Meyssens collected this information. He cannot have taken it from an official record. Births and deaths were not registered in Western Europe until after the French Revolution. Churches kept registers of baptisms, marriages and funerals, but the name of Rubens has not been found in any such records in the different cities that claim to have been his birthplace. Meyssens presumably just picked up this date in Antwerp. Having arrived there in 1640 only, he cannot have known Rubens personally, but he was certainly well acquainted with his artistic surroundings.

A similar solution was proposed in the Vita Petri Pauli Rubenij that was written between 1668 and 1676 by the artist’s nephew Philip Rubens the Younger. He also indicated 1577 as the year of Rubens’s birth, not in Antwerp however but in Cologne. The Latin text of the Vita was not printed until 1837, but its contents have been known from the late seventeenth century onwards through Roger de Piles’ Vie de Rubens (Paris 1677), of which the Vita is the main source. De Piles repeated that Rubens was born in Cologne in 1577. The result was that all later authors have agreed on 1577, but situated Rubens’s birth either in Antwerp or in Cologne, depending on whether the author followed De Bie or De Piles. It is important to note that Meyssens and Philip Rubens are independent sources. The fact that they disagree on the city of birth is proof enough of that. These opinions were seriously challenged in 1853, when R.C. Bakhuizen van den Brink revealed that Jan Rubens, the father of the artist, had passed several years in captivity in Germany. Charged with an adulterous relation with Anna of Saxony, William the Silent’s wife, he had at first been held prisoner at Dillenburg. His wife Maria Pijpelinckx succeeded, by paying a large sum of ransom money, in obtaining a softening of regime, allowing the couple to live in a fixed residence in Siegen from 1573 to 1578.

Rubens and beyond

It would be as idiotic to deny that Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens are the dominating masters of seventeenth-century Flemish art as it would be to deny that numerous other artists of considerable talent were active in their time who are worthy of our admiration. The Rubenianum plays a fundamental part in the research on the greatest names in Flemish art, but it is also central to the study of artists who may be less famous, but whose contributions to Flemish art helped define its course. It is they who made our sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a true Golden Age: not a period in which artistic excellence was the domain of a few exceptional personalities, but an age in which it seems to have flourished like never before.

In my own field of speciality, works on paper, the facilities of the Rubenianum may be even more important than in the more completely researched field of painting. If gifted artists like Jan Cossiers, Cornelis Schut or Lodewijk de Vadder are by now reasonably well defined as painters in the art-historical literature, as draughtsmen they are still harder to grasp. A trip (in my case, unfortunately, a transatlantic one) to the Rubenianum is always a sure way to gain an insight, however fragmented, into the graphic style of such artists.

This may seem irrelevant to all but the smallest circle of experts. But it is research of this kind which enables scholars to sharpen, refocus and renew their vision of Flemish art, and which informs courses and seminars at universities, and programmes and acquisitions at museums worldwide. It is this research that helps collectors and art dealers to better understand what is in their possession. And it is thanks to this research that the interest in Flemish art can be kept alive among a broad and international public.

Stijn Alsteens
Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Jan Rubens was then permitted to return to Cologne, where they had lived in the first years of their emigration from Antwerp. Maria Pijlpeelckens and her children settled back in Antwerp after Jan Rubens had died in 1688. The conclusion was evident. If Peter Paul Rubens had not perished in 1640, it could only have been in Siegen.

Neither Cologne nor Antwerp were willing to abandon their claim to Rubens’s birthplace. Whereas in the archives of Antwerp, Cologne and Siegen revealed a number of interesting documents, it was the local archivist L. Ennen, but has proved afterwards not to have strong arguments. Arguments could count upon several supporters (da Moerbeke, Rombaut) and, in the later edition of 1756. Both the nineteenth-century theory and that of Rombaut and Tijs rely in part upon the same arguments, which makes it unnecessary to deal with the old arguments here again. This was done efficiently by Max Rooses in 1903. In his authoritative monograph on Rubens, having evaluated all the arguments brought forward by the different camps, he concluded that Peter Paul Rubens was born in Siegen on 28 June 1577.

This conclusion can be supported today. Looking at the whole of Meyssens’s series of prints, we realize that he was very much concerned about the information provided in his captions. He usually sticks to years of birth and death and only gives precise dates in very limited number of cases, seven out of one hundred: Rubens (15 July 1577), Van Dyck (22 March 1641), Jordaens (19 July 1593), and Erasmus Quellinus (7 November 1607). Hendrik de Keizer (14 May 1565), Jacob Matham (9 October 1577) and his brother (Jode 11 November 1606). Wherever his dates can be checked (e.g. for Van Dyck, Jordans, Quellinus) they are correct. The only exception that shows the weakness of his theory is that Jordaens was not born in 1593 but in 1594. Since the day of his baptism was in the 15th of May, we may attribute this to a misprint. We must conclude, with Rosse, that Meyssens is a reliable witness. He may have been wrong, but he never neglected to give regard to the city where Rubens was born, but there is no reason to imagine that he would have deliberately told anything which he did not think was the truth.

The second-seventeenth-century source, Philip Rubens’s Vita Petri Pauli Rubenii, relates a lot of episodes from his uncle’s life and career and none of these has proved to be unbelievable. It is true that he voices the family point of view of the past, in which Jan Rubens is represented as having lived peacefully in Cologne ever since he had left Antwerp. The episode of the adultery, the imprisonment and the arrest in Siegen were left out of the dark. This had been the family’s attitude ever since Maria Pijlpeelckens had returned to Antwerp, not only because it was not exactly the most glorious page of the family history, but also for two compelling reasons. The first is that the princes of Orange had throughout the affair insisted that no execution of scandal should be avoided. Even the narrative of Antwerp was granted liberty to leave Siegen, it was absolutely forbidden for him to set foot in the Low Countries. Second, by maintaining that Jan Rubens had lived an undisturbed life in Cologne, it allowed the family to retain the status it had enjoyed in Antwerp previously. This helps to refute an allegation made in the nineteenth century, most forcefully by Van den Branden, that by leaving Antwerp in the 1580s, Jan Rubens had forfeited his rights of citizenship of Antwerp and that his children had to regain them. Peter Paul Rubens, according to this theory, could only have enjoyed Antwerp citizenship by having been born there. The invalidity of that theory is proven, and not only because of Philip’s manifest integrity. Neither Philip’s status of fully authorized inhabitant of Brabant nor his citizenship of Antwerp was challenged by the evidence used in the debate. It is certain that he had been born in Cologne, as his father had lived there peacefully and continuously ever since. The evidence for his death. This was confirmed by the States of Brabant in 1607, and again by the Archdukes Albert and Isabella in 1609. This official recognition at the end of Philip’s life, that Rubens should assume the charge of secretary to the city of Antwerp, more precisely to prevent anybody from challenging his nomination. Peter Paul Rubens need not such explicit confirmation to be recognized as an Antwerp citizen. Who would have denied him that right when he claimed it?

The supporters of the theory that Rubens was born in Antwerp had to prove that his mother could have been in Antwerp at the right time to give birth to Peter Paul. For...
documents were signed in Siegen. Rombaut
all his possessions and making her curator
to his wife for the ransom money she had paid
by signing, on 31 May 1576, a debt recognition
Rubens knew about its existence. When he
of this testament, wrongly given by Rombaut
mother, already a widower with a child. In
have been necessitated by the partition of
September and December 1576 is said to
in Antwerp during that period.
her supposed travel to Antwerp between
1577, while Rombaut and Tijs want to see her
attested in February, April and June 1577
in his homeland, or at least closer to it. The
grandfather Hendrik Pijpelinckx. If Maria had
not allotted to him but to the children of his
father and her uncle and Jan’s brother Philip
procuration, in Cologne this time, appointing
Maria Pijpelinckx implores her husband for,
herself and especially for her five unhappy
children (comparative parvi i nuclei infelicii). Even if we assume that
the document could have been finished some time before it
was presented to the prince, or that parts
were written earlier, it is still an argument
in favour of dating the birth of Peter Paul
Rubens, the sixth child of Maria Pijpelinckx,
later that the request, in that is in 1577.
There is consequently no reason to doubt
the inclusion of the letters to Mary Ross in 1903.
Peter Paul Rubens was born in Siegen
on the 28th of June 1577.

The author wishes to thank C. Eyndt, C. van Havre,
J. de Casebeer and F. Rubens for their precious help.

Rubeniana

Introducing our new feature: ‘Authors in residence’

Our Quarterly is very much alive and thus new columns are added. Corpus authors are
the next victims: whenever they show up for Rubeniana on their research for volume, they
will be harassed from all sides to write down their impressions, encounters, adventures,
compositions etc. and address them to our readers. One: first comes Prof. Reinhold Baumstark
former Keeper of the famous Liechtenstein Collection in Schloss Vaduz and former General
Director of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen in Munich.

Rubeniana

A ‘Room with a View’

For a scholar in seventeenth-century Flemish
painting, the invitation to contribute a
volume to the Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig
Burchard probably will be his most exciting
challenge, offering the chance to enter the
royal path of Rubens research. Naturally
one pursues one’s studies wherever excellent
libraries present the opportunity to explore the vast amount of past research or wherever
Rubens work can be studied in the original
in museums and collections. However, we
are in the fortunate possession of a centre
that embraces all Rubens knowledge, indeed
constitutes the focus of Rubens research: the
Centrum Rubenianum in Antwerp. Here
one finds an excellent library and photo
collection but also an archiving and logistics
bureau. If Maria
Burchard, the eminent Rubens scholar,
with its thousands of references arranged
in orderly fashion in boxes and his annotations
penned in the volumes of his personal
library. To be able to delve into the Burchard
material, to consult his notes, comparing
them with one’s own knowledge, not only
enriches one’s work but inspires it.
When the Rubens scholar comes to
Antwerp for several days in order to work in
the Centrum, he or she is welcomed into a
world of extraordinary privilege: cared for
by the omnipresent, always helpful assistants
Van Dieyck, and above all David Teniers II,
taking up the
as Frans Francken II, both Jan I and Jan II
Brueghel, Sebastiaen van Amst, among
which are strongly embedded in the
artistic heritage of Pieter Bruegel the Elder.
Teniers developed, at an early age, into the
standard-bearer of the genre. Together with his
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David Teniers the Younger, The Monkey Painter (detail) © Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

The Rubenianum Lectures

We proudly present a Rubenianum lecture by our Centrum Rubenianum colleague
BERT SCHEPERS.

Monkey Madness in Seventeenth-Century Antwerp

Comical scenes with monkeys in human
attire are part of a pictorial genre that
was fully developed in seventeenth-century
Flemish painting, and which was practised by
a selecton of Antwerp masters in particular.
Around 1574, the engraver Peeter van der
Borch introduced it as a theme in its own right
in a composite series of widely disseminated
prints, which are strongly embedded in the
artistic heritage of Pieter Bruegel the Elder.
Thereafter, highly inventive painters such as
Frans Francken II, both Jan I and Jan II
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Monkey Madness in Seventeenth-Century Antwerp: Genre and dissemination of a pictorial genre
15 September 2012, at 20.00h

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