Rubens: a maverick artist. The master's theoretical notebook

The Rubens House is organizing a small focus exhibition on a fascinating, hitherto little-known chapter in Rubens's career, namely his theoretical notebook. The exhibition will run from 19 October 2013 until 19 January 2014.

As early as 1672 Rubens’s first biographer, the critic Giovanni Bellori, mentioned the existence of an illustrated theoretical notebook, containing Rubens’s remarks on optics, symmetry, proportions, anatomy, architecture and a study of the human passions. Unfortunately, the original notebook was destroyed in a devastating fire at the Louvre in 1720 while in the possession of André-Charles Boulle, the famous cabinetmaker to the French king Louis XIV. It is some consolation that various fragmentary records of the book exist, from which we can partially reconstruct its content. Only a handful of original sheets survived the fire, most notably that in the Courtauld Institute in London depicting Rubens’s geometric analysis of the Farnese Hercules. In addition to these sheets, four fragmentary records of the book exist, each different, but nevertheless invaluable for reconstructive purposes, particularly when studied together. One of these was certainly made during Rubens’s lifetime: the so-called Chatsworth MS, which is probably the work of the young Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641). The ‘Bordes MS’ too, recently discovered in a private collection in Madrid, is likely to be directly derived from the original notebook. In the meantime a close study of this manuscript has shown that it contains a handful of drawings by Rubens’s hand, that were probably stolen by the copyist from the original notebook. The two other manuscripts – the so-called Johnson MS and de Ganay MS (after its twentieth-century owner) are later seventeenth-century copies. The latter notebook was acquired by the King Baudouin Foundation at an auction in New York in January 2012 and given to the Rubens House as a permanent loan.

Rubens’s theoretical notebook is not just a splendid compendium of visual motifs, it also reveals his highly idiosyncratic theory of the human form. For the first time all four manuscripts will be shown side by side. Rubens’s theoretical notebook is the subject of the upcoming volume of the Corpus Rubenianum, to be published in 2014. This volume will be written by Arnout Balis and others. | Ben van Beneden

Page from the de Ganay MS. King Baudouin Foundation, on permanent loan to the Rubens House

EDITORIAL

2013 is shaping up as a successful year for the Rubenianum Fund, as new donors from many countries have pledged their support. We have now commitments in place for an amount of 1.8 million euro, equalling three quarters of our total goal. The annual trip of our donors and benefactors was again a great success, and the fact that Her Majesty Queen Mathilde chose to let her visit to the Rubens exhibition at Louvre-Lens coincide with our Rubenianum Fund visit was especially gratifying. Her decision to invite a number of university students and young art historians to join her for a subsequent lunch discussion – which was moderated by Arnout Balis – also constituted a significant encouragement to Rubens studies.

For the Corpus Rubenianum itself, 2013 is a year of transition. It is now clear that no new volume will be published before the end of this year. However, a number of manuscripts are in their final stages, and 2014 should see various new volumes off the presses. In order to expedite and streamline the publication process and strengthen the relationship between management and the Corpus authors, we have decided to create and fund an additional position of Director of Publications for the Corpus. I am very pleased that Prof. Koenraad Jonckheere has accepted to take on this responsibility on a part-time basis. He will join the team on 1 November, and I am confident that his skills, energy and enthusiasm will give a further boost to our endeavour.

Thomas Leysen | Chairman Rubenianum Fund
Bert Watteeuw on his activities at the Rubenianum

I first came under the spell of Flemish baroque painting during classes taught by Kateline Van der Stighelen and Hans Vlieghe at the University of Louvain. Initially I resisted their siren song, but it was a temptation I could not resist, leading to the lure of Rubens, Van Dyck and their contemporaries. In a brief bout of insanity, I even intended to write a master’s thesis on the concept of the object in contemporary art. Luckily, I recovered from this youthful lapse with my health intact. When Professor Van der Stighelen subsequently confronted me with Van Dyck’s documentation, a duplicate of Jacomo de Cachopa’s, this Antwerp art collector and friend of the artist became the subject of my master’s thesis. Since then, I have never looked back. After obtaining a master’s degree in art history I completed an advanced master’s programme in social and cultural anthropology, which has given me a firm grasp of the socio-cultural context in which images function.

With my colleague Lieneke Nijkamp, who took the spotlight in an earlier issue of The Rubenianum Quarterly, I am responsible for the Rubenianum’s documentation of artists from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. It consists of many thousands of photographs, handwritten notes, excerpts from sales and exhibition catalogues, letters and so on. For brevity’s sake I’ll focus on our Rubens documentation, the core of which was assembled by Ludwig Burchard. Since the Rubenianum’s acquisition of Burchard’s files in 1963, succeeding generations of scholars have continually added to them, making for what is surely the most extensive documentation ever assembled of a single artist. These exhaustive files form the basis of the esteemed Van Dyck specialist Horst Vey, which is being reorganized and is nearly ready to be made accessible to the public. Such personal archives of art historians are the life-blood of the Rubenianum. The information they contain has been painstakingly collected throughout an entire career, and going through them gives you the wonderful sensation of looking over a scholar’s shoulder. Acquiring such archives remains important to us, and I am glad to say that Anne-Marie Logan has graciously agreed to donate her documentation of Rubens’s drawings. As a first, this archive also contains a large number of digital images. More on this in the next issue.

Besides ‘the big three’, Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens, the Rubenianum documents the work of many lesser-known Flemish painters. Every two weeks my colleagues and I peruse all incoming auction catalogues. During peak season, sales tend to come in quick succession, leading to bumper crops of Flemish paintings for me to document. Staying on top of this is at once demanding and stimulating, as it proves that the interest in Flemish painting remains strong. The same lively interest is evident from the many queries the Rubenianum receives from researchers from both the museum and the academic world, art dealers, collectors and the occasional treasure hunter. The invaluable Nelly Kepeyrd, a Rubenianum stalwart and a personal muse of mine, makes sure that every single enquiry is answered. Being able to fill in a painting’s provenance history, or to identify an obscure iconographic theme or even an artist is very gratifying indeed. If you can imagine, this also involves disappointing hopeful owners of a previously unknown ‘Rubens’.

Obviously the Rubenianum is much more than a depository of books, documentation and art. It’s the home of a dedicated team. Being able to pick the brains and see through the eyes of the likes of Arnout Balis, Hans Vlieghe, Nora De Poorter and Carl Van de Velde is incredibly enriching. With Corpus authors and other scholars of Flemish art passing through on a regular basis, we have a vibrant community. Every year Lieneke and I introduce new generations of art-history students to the resources held at the Rubenianum. Through internships and summer jobs we are able to involve students actively in training, and their work greatly adds to the success of other labour-intensive projects, as does the involvement of a group of highly motivated volunteers. Since last year we also invite PhD candidates and postdocs from foreign universities to spend a period of six months in the Rubenianum. Last year we welcomed Adam Eaker, a student from Columbia University who was introduced to our readers in a previous issue. This year a student from Princeton University and two students from the Universitat Bern will join the Rubenianum ranks. The ensuing exchange of knowledge and ideas between art historians in all stages of their careers is a reward in itself. Further aspects of my job include assisting during conferences held at the Kolumviërsch. Recently I also delivered a talk in our own series of Rubenianum Lectures. Though often pressed for time, I still present research papers at international conferences, occasionally publish and the odd article. I’m also working on a dissertation on the culture of portraiture in seventeenth-century Flanders, which I hope to defend in 2014. Another current project is a conference on Rubens and dress, organized in close collaboration with Leuven University and to be held at the Rubenianum in May 2014. I’m contributing an essay and catalogue entries to an exhibition on Rubens’s family portraits to be staged in the Rubens House Museum in 2015. Being a keen gardener, it is a great pleasure to look out of my office’s windows onto Rubens’s garden. When crossing the garden and stepping into this museum, I’m always drawn to Willem van Haecht’s Cabinet of Cornelis van der Geest. Jacomo de Cachopo, the subject of my master’s thesis, is among the art attributed to van Haecht. The painting never ceases to amaze me. It is at once an exhilarating and a humbling reminder of Antwerp’s long tradition of documenting its artistic past. Adding to that tradition, however modestly, is an honour and a privilege.

Participants in the previous, highly successful Rubenianum Fund trips, bound respectively for Madrid, London and Vienna, were in for quite a surprise when discovering that this year’s field trip to Lens and Paris, albeit well-charted territory, is to be approved as the most exquisite so far. Her Majesty Queen Mathilde honoured the Rubenianum Fund Donors by joining in our visit to the ‘L’Europe de Rubens’ show at the Louvre-Lens Museum. Guided by the curator of the exhibition, Blaise Ducos, we welcomed Adam Eaker, a student from foreign universities to spend a period of six months in the Rubenianum. Last year we welcomed Adam Eaker, a student from Columbia University who was introduced to our readers in a previous issue. This year a student from Princeton University and two students from the Universitat Bern will join the Rubenianum ranks. The ensuing exchange of knowledge and ideas between art historians in all stages of their careers is a reward in itself. Further aspects of my job include assisting during conferences held at the Kolumviërsch. Recently I also delivered a talk in our own series of Rubenianum Lectures. Though often pressed for time, I still present research papers at international conferences, occasionally publish and the odd article. I’m also working on a dissertation on the culture of portraiture in seventeenth-century Flanders, which I hope to defend in 2014. Another current project is a conference on Rubens and dress, organized in close collaboration with Leuven University and to be held at the Rubenianum in May 2014. I’m contributing an essay and catalogue entries to an exhibition on Rubens’s family portraits to be staged in the Rubens House Museum in 2015. Being a keen gardener, it is a great pleasure to look out of my office’s windows onto Rubens’s garden. When crossing the garden and stepping into this museum, I’m always drawn to Willem van Haecht’s Cabinet of Cornelis van der Geest. Jacomo de Cachopo, the subject of my master’s thesis, is among the art attributed to van Haecht. The painting never ceases to amaze me. It is at once an exhilarating and a humbling reminder of Antwerp’s long tradition of documenting its artistic past. Adding to that tradition, however modestly, is an honour and a privilege.

In the hall of the Louvre-Lens Museum, Thomas Leysen and Her Majesty Queen Mathilde with Catherine Ferrer and Xavier Dectot, general manager and director of the museum respectively.

Blaise Ducos and Her Majesty the Queen admiring Rubens’s Borghese Entombment. In the background Thomas Leysen and Mrs Paula d’Hulst.

Michel Ceuterick

Walking with Royalty

The Rubenianum Fund Trip to Lens and Paris

Blaise Ducos, one of our Corpus Rubenianum authors, and provided with further insightful comments by Annot Bals and Ben van Beneden, director of the Rubens House and a lender to the exhibition, all those present were given the rare opportunity to sample the ongoing lively debate on attribution between Rubens scholars. Her Majesty Queen Mathilde, keen to support the arts in all their facets, had expressed the wish to meet with young students on this day. Thus the Fund invited one art-history student from each of the Belgian universities to join the patrons and lunch with Her Majesty at the table of honour in the ‘Atelier de Marc Meunir’. The chef with two Michelin stars treated us all to a scrumptious meal with ‘Le saint pierre en aïl de bous de noir, guacamole, émulsion asio, melba à l’olive noire’.

After a smooth transfer to Paris, we were welcomed at the enchanting Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, located in the Marais, for a nocturnal visit, cocktails.
in this private Foundation’s garden, and ensuing dinner in its club rooms. The two endearing panel paintings representing Diana and her nymphs amid the hunting dogs of the kennel of Archduchess Isabella, executed jointly by Rubens and Jan Brueghel, form undeniably the highlights of that interesting collection.

The following morning we were welcomed at the Fondation Custodia by its director Ger Luijten and curator Hans Buijs, who gave an insight into the ongoing activities of the Foundation and introduced us to the breathtaking collection at the Louvre in the company of curator Blaise Ducos to the Galerie Médicis with Rubens's largest extant collection at the Louvre in 2013. So far, she has organized four other exhibitions, including the Rubens Exhibition at Wildenstein's in London in 1950. Born in Liège in 1912, she studied art history at the Université de Liège and took her doctoral degree in 1953 with a dissertation on La fleur dans la peinture flamande du XVIe siècle, under the supervision of Professor Leo van Puyvelde. She continued to work at the university until her retirement in 1994, first as assistant professor and later as head of research and lectures.

The Rubenianum acquired her documentation through her close friend Pierre de Séjournet (whose library and archival documentation were donated to the Rubenianum in 2011). The archive is divided into books, articles, lectures, studies, correspondence, notebooks and miscellaneous documentation. Hains's archive sheds light on an active female academic and well-organized scholar. She dedicated her life to the study of Flemish painters, with a special focus on flowers. Her correspondence testifies to her authority in flower painting, as she received queries from all over the world and issued countless certificates of authenticity.

The documentation now organized and accessible covers the research she did for her publications, ranging from handwritten notes and exquisite hand-traced drawings of paintings to photographs and the drafts of her books. Articles and lectures reflecting her professional life at Liège University, some of them possibly never published, are also included.

6–7 December 2013: Rubenianum Fiftieth Anniversary

On 23 November 1963, the late Dr Ludwig Burchard's vast documentation, library and archive, which had been donated to the City of Antwerp, crossed a stormy North Sea to arrive safely in the port of Antwerp. With the long-awaited arrival of its key collection, the even longer wished-for centre of expertise on Rubens and his arts of time became reality at Antwerp. The sessions will be chaired by Arnout Balis, supported by the Inbev-Baillet Latour Fund. The final lecture in our programme for 2013, once more prominently features a close collaboration of various Antwerp heritage partners, in this case the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, the Rockoxhuis and the Rubenianum. Based on her extensive research on the topic, Valérie Herremans will clarify the deeper meaning and function of two iconic Rubens paintings, ordered by Nicolaas Rockox for the now-lost Franciscan church: the Incredulity of Thomas and the Coup de Lance, both in the Royal Museum. Her story offers a fascinating insight into what appears to have been a grand collaborative project for Rockox and his wife Adriana Perez.

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