Peter Paul Rubens: The Power of Transformation

Mythological dramas and biblical miracles, intimate portraits and vast landscapes – Peter Paul Rubens’s creative power knew no limits. His ingenuity seems inexhaustible, his imagination boundless. The special exhibition ‘Kraft der Verwandlung’ (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, 17 October 2017–21 January 2018) sets out to explore this spirit of innovation, taking an in-depth look at the sources on which the Flemish master drew and how he made them his own.

Rubens had an unrivalled ability to apply his examples freely and creatively. Ignoring the boundaries of genre, he studied the small-scale art of printmaking as well as monumental oil paintings. The artist’s extensive library provided a further source of inspiration, as did antique coins. He took three-dimensional sculptures – bronze statuettes, casts from nature and marble statues – and brought them to life in his paintings.

Rubens drew, copied and interpreted as he saw fit throughout his life. Existing sources were transformed by his hand into something entirely new. The same dynamic process of continuous development fed into his own compositions too. It was not unusual for him to enlarge his paintings, physically extending them to accommodate his overflowing creativity. The Vienna Stormy Landscape with Philemon and Baucis, which has been thoroughly researched and restored with the assistance of the Getty Panel Paintings Initiative, is a particularly imposing example of this dynamism. Rubens twice increased the size of the central support, altering not only the painting’s format but also its content. X-radiography reveals that having enlarged the work for a final time, he added a group of horsemen on the right edge, before subsequently overpainting them. It was only at the last stage that he decided to embellish the landscape with the mythological theme.

Rubens drew on a wide variety of sources, the residue of which can be traced in each of the paintings on display. The exhibition invites visitors to follow the works back to their origin and to experience their visual creation in a unique way.

Gerlinde Gruber, Curator Flemish Baroque Painting, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien

Rubens, Stormy Landscape with Philemon and Baucis. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Drawn to drawings: a new collaborative project

Although the Rubenianum seldom seeks the public spotlight for its scholarship, specialists and institutions in the field know very well where to turn to for broad, grounded and reliable art-historical expertise. Earlier this year, the Flemish Government approached us with a view to a possible assignment concerning 17th-century drawings. Given that another of the Rubenianum’s unmistakable trademarks is its open and generous attitude to collaboration, this task was indeed assigned to us thanks to a thoroughly prepared partnership with the Royal Library of Belgium. We are proud, therefore, to announce that from this autumn, and together with colleagues at the Royal Library’s Prints Department, we will be conducting a critical and complete survey of the heritage of 17th-century draughtsmanship on Flemish territory.

The framework for this task is the legislative instrument by which the Flemish government in 2003 laid down specific and stringent criteria for the selection and protection of works of exceptional importance in all fields of heritage – the so-called Topstukkendecreet. In 2004 our institution compiled a long-list of 17th-century paintings as the basis for the final selection of heritage masterpieces. Now the time has come for a long-list of 17th-century drawings. This is a significant challenge: there are many collections rich with drawings, but they are generally not as easily accessed. Furthermore, besides museums and public collections there are less visible drawings in archives, church treasuries and private hands. Thankfully, those working on the project will be able to draw upon the Rubenianum’s reference library, documentation and connections, as well as on the profound understanding of the technical and material aspects of draughtsmanship and the research collections of the Royal Library’s Prints Department.

We look forward to a mutually enriching collaboration with our colleagues in Brussels, with the two enthusiastic project assistants, and not least with a project steering committee that brings matchless experience to the table. Above all, we are happy to be able to contribute to the better understanding and protection of our magnificent 17th-century heritage.

Véronique Van de Kerckhof

Rubens, Stormy Landscape with Philemon and Baucis. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
Adriaen de Bie meets Caravaggio: The Saint Eligius Altarpiece, Lieur

Upon entering the Sint-Gummaruskerk in Lieur, one is confronted by a large triptych in bold colours (fig. 1). The central panel depicts the titular bishop preaching from a pulpit, surrounded by an eager congregation assembled within a lofty gothic nave, plausibly representing the church itself. Signed and dated 1628, it was painted by Adriaen de Bie, father of Cornelis de Bie, author of History of the Dutch Cabinet (1662). Here it is praised as a paradigm of Adriaen’s fulfilling art, which ‘with reason preserved his fame and name’.

The altarpiece does not interest me for its aesthetic properties, but rather its relationship to another, highly resonant work that used to hang in nearby Antwerp: Caravaggio’s Madonna of the Rosary, today in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Comparing the two, de Bie’s magpie borrowings are immediately apparent. In the foreground kneels a mother and son, cut and pasted from the fervent pilgrims clamouring to fondle the rosary beads offered by Saint Dominicus in Caravaggio’s altarpiece. Behind her, on the composition’s right-hand edge, stand three men. Two are conversing, while the other, dressed in black with an aristocratic ruff, looks out at us directly. Seems familiar? I was alerted to the Antwerp connection by Bert Schepers of the Rubenianum, where I had been based for the previous two months in full funding and research at the University of York. My thesis, entitled ‘Rubens and the Dominican Church in Antwerp’, looks at three major additions to the Saint-Paulskerk’s interior scheme, namely the Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary cycle, Rubens’s Worthy of Christ altarpiece today in Lyon, and Caravaggio’s Madonna of the Rosary. This, the subject of my first year’s research, was begun by one of the divine liefhebbers in Amsterdam in 1617, namely Jan Brueghel I, Hendrick van Balen and the merchants Jan Coeymans. It was a site specifically intended ‘between the 15 mysteries’ before having a spectacular marble altar commissioned for it to hang over in 1650. Part of my chapter deals with artistic transfer precipitated by its physical integration within Antwerp’s sacred topography.

Did Adriaen de Bie pay the Antwerp Dominicans a visit and sketch the Caravaggio on the spot? Lieur was of course only a short distance away, within the same diocese. In 1627, Cornelis van de Geest commissioned the restoration of an altarpiece in the same church, with new panels added by Frans Pourbus II, who first saw it in 1607 in Naples in the possession of Louis Finson and Abraham Vinck, was to judge by his letters, evidently smitten, and later reworked the entire composition in an altarpiece (Saint Nicolas-des-Champs, Paris). Rubens himself paraphrased it in The Proclamation of the Regency for the Medici cycle (Louvre, Paris), to witty effect. Here the enthroned Marie de’ Medici is surrounded by courtiers, who kneel and prostrate in adoration, the dirty feet of Caravaggio’s pilgrims replaced by silk stockings and swords. Evidently not of the same calibre, despite his son’s dutiful hyperbole, de Bie’s opportunistic quotation is nevertheless indicative of the Romanduc roset’s widespread popularity and fame.

Thus concludes my musings on the Lieur altarpiece, possibly the first in print since Hans Vliegh’s album amicorum contribution from 1753. An entire section of my thesis will be devoted to Caravaggio’s altarpieces. The first chapter concerns its status as a ‘sacred commodity’, rejected by Roman Dominicans and accumulating in value as it travelled across Europe to Amsterdam, where it was purchased for 1,800 golden. The second chapter concerns the four (so far)liehebbers who procured it, namely their working friendships and participation in elite Antwerp circles, including the Romanists confraternity and Visiteren chamber of rhetoric. After an analysis of the print and its dedication to Triest, the section will conclude with a discussion of spectatorship, admired by, amongst others, Archduke Leopold Willem and Queen Christina of Sweden. Based at the Rubenianum with full access to its unparalleled art-historical resources, I made frequent trips to state archives around Belgium and consulted many artworks in question. Thanks to the library’s superb new scanning machine, I had instant access to a plethora of local literature. In short, two months productively spent! — Adam Sammut

The Rubenianum Fund Field Trip to Princely Rome, October 2017
Michel Ceuterick

12 October, 7pm, Palazzo Eitch-Borromini, Piazza Navona: exhilarated Rubenianum Fund members gathered at our Roman field trip HQ for an eye-opening introductory talk by Ben van Beneden on the manifold inspirations the young Rubens drew from his early years in the Eternal City. The 54 Fund members, possibly the first in print since Hans Vliegh’s album amicorum contribution from 1753. An entire section of my thesis will be devoted to Caravaggio’s altarpieces. The first chapter concerns its status as a ‘sacred commodity’, rejected by Roman Dominicans and accumulating in value as it travelled across Europe to Amsterdam, where it was purchased for 1,800 golden. The second chapter concerns the four (so far)liehebbers who procured it, namely their working friendships and participation in elite Antwerp circles, including the Romanists confraternity and Visiteren chamber of rhetoric. After an analysis of the print and its dedication to Triest, the section will conclude with a discussion of spectatorship, admired by, amongst others, Archduke Leopold Willem and Queen Christina of Sweden. Based at the Rubenianum with full access to its unparalleled art-historical resources, I made frequent trips to state archives around Belgium and consulted many artworks in question. Thanks to the library’s superb new scanning machine, I had instant access to a plethora of local literature. In short, two months productively spent! — Adam Sammut

The parish church to Rubens and to many of the northern artists that resided in Rome, we took special interest in the Caravaggio paintings for the Cerasi chapel. The Conversion of Saint Paul, seen the previous day at the private residence of Principessa Odescalchi, had been the first version of a commission to Caravaggio for this chapel. The comparison with Caravaggio’s second version of this subject, still present in the chapel, impressed us all.

We concluded the day with dinner at the prestigious Circolo delle Caccia al Palazzo Borghese, where we were welcomed by Count Jacques de Liedekerke and his charming wife. The glorious autumn sunshine that had accompanied us throughout our stay in Rome made our visit on Sunday morning to the Villa Medici and its gardens a most memorable one. We continued our walk from there to the Casino dell’Aurora Ludovisi, residence of the Principi Boncompagni Ludovisi, with its magnificent frescoes by Guercino, Domenichino, Dughet, Brill and the only murals Caravaggio ever painted. His Excellency Count Jean Carnet d’Elizius and his lovely wife were perfect hosts and the Embassy to the Holy See with its soothing gardens and great dining hall was the best location to conclude these three days of wonder.

Our sincerest thanks go to Lieve Vandeputte and Martine Menten who managed once again to organize an outstanding Rubenianum Fund field trip.
Snijders & Rockox House
New museum in the heart of Antwerp

Nicolaes Rockox and Frans Snijders were key figures in Antwerp during the Baroque era. They both made their mark on the city’s cultural and social life. Rockox as burgomaster and Snijders as a brilliant painter of animals and still lifes. They were also next-door neighbours in Antwerp’s Keizerstraat for twenty years. Rockox bought his house in 1603, the year in which he was appointed burgomaster for the first time. Snijders purchased his patrician dwelling in 1620 after his first successes portraying the economic revival during the Twelve Years’ Truce through opulent still lifes and market scenes.

Their original homes, now carefully restored, both belong to KBC, which opened the Rockox House as a museum some years ago and is now doing the same with the Snijders House. The everyday world of 17th-century citizens will be evoked through items from the museum’s own collection, supplemented by loans from museums and private collections in Belgium and abroad.

We will be able to view Rockox and Snijders’s domestic environment through their own eyes, along with the making and promotion of art, its collecting and display, markets and richly set tables, nature and gardens, as well as the humanist and the average citizen in the turbulent era in which they lived.

The Rubenianum Lectures
Sunday, 11 December 2017, 11 am

Mathias Depoorter
Vlaamse Kunstcollectie

The Beauty of the Bird:
Birds in the Arts

Writer and art historian Depoorter will take us on a journey through this fascinating world of ornithology, with a focus on painted birds in the arts. Special attention will be paid to paintings from museum collections in Antwerp.

The Archivists in Dutch and take place at the Rubenianum.

Rubenianum

Study Day on Research Archives Rubenianum, 18 December 2017

Whether affiliated to a university or working autonomously, researchers leave behind a vast body of research material, digital or on paper. Although their focus is on the results of their research rather than on the research data, these collections are valuable for future research and should therefore be preserved with care, as has been done increasingly over the past decades. The Rubenianum invites representatives of heritage and research institutes to present their ideas and case studies on various aspects of this specific type of collection.
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