
MURAKEÖZY, Éva Patrícia**Rubens, Van Dyck & Jordaens
— Flemish Painters from the Hermitage —**

The Hermitage Amsterdam has recently shown¹ a remarkable collection of 17th century Flemish art. The 75 paintings and 40 drawings brought to Amsterdam mostly came from the acquisitions of Catherine the Great. The exhibition had a special focus on Peter Paul Rubens who was represented by 17 paintings and many drawings.

Entering the exhibition hall, I was immediately facing one of the centerpieces at the exhibition: *The Union of Earth and Water* from Peter Paul Rubens and his workshop (c. 1618). This masterfully executed work is an allegoric image of the liaison between the city of Antwerp and the river Scheldt which provided the city's prosperity as trading port. On the painting, Antwerp is depicted as a young, beautiful and noble woman, while the river is personified by the river god Scaldanus².

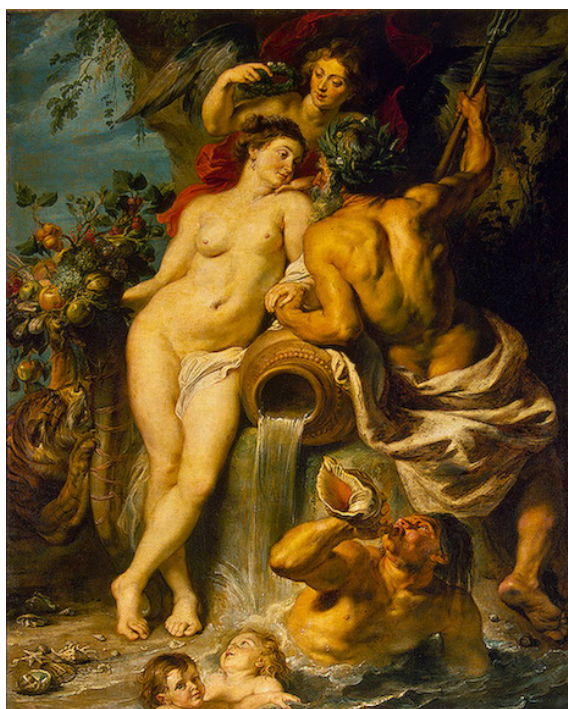


Photo 1. *Union of Earth and Water (Antwerp and the Scheldt)*. Rubens, Pieter Paul. Oil on canvas. 222.5x180.5 cm. Flanders. Circa 1618. *Image is used from www.hermitagemuseum.org, courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg, Russia.*

¹ 17 September 2011 – 15 June 2012

² Varshavskaya, 1975

The theme must have had much personal significance for Rubens. In the beginning of the 16th century, Antwerp was at the center of international economy and accounted for 40% of world trade. Arts and crafts flourished and the city attracted high caliber artists from far and wide. Rubens' father was a prominent lawyer and alderman in Antwerp. However, the Rubens family fled to Germany when fights began against the rule of Habsburg Spain. It was the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648), in which the largely Protestant Low Countries (the current Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg) fought against the Catholic kingdom of Spain for political, economic and religious independence. The city of Antwerp suffered badly in the fights, and finally, it fell back under Spanish control. All Protestant habitants had to leave the city but for the Catholic Rubens family the time of return had come.

Born in Germany, Peter Paul Rubens was ten when he first saw Antwerp. In terms of art, it was the beginning of a new era of prosperity; with much large-scale commissions for churches, as well as for aristocratic courts. A new generation of artists grew up and Antwerp became the center of counter-reformation and the *Flemish Baroque*. However, whatever much had been invested into the bride's dowry, the groom was impeded from arriving to the marriage. The Northern provinces, which the Spanish could not win back, managed to take control of the river Scheldt and closed it for shipping. Antwerp as a port never regained its former importance – despite all the diplomatic efforts of even Rubens himself.

Rubens' carrier was a surprisingly smooth and straight one. In painting, he excelled in almost every genre; portraiture, nudes, drapery, animals, landscapes, historical and biblical scenes... He reached everything a man could aim for; he was the most highly esteemed artist in Europe, he was a learned man and a passionate art collector, he was a diplomat knighted by both Philip IV, King of Spain, and Charles I, King of England, and, last but not the least, he was a loving husband and devoted father³.

At the center of the main exhibition hall, against a red background, hung Rubens' *Descent from the Cross*. The concerted effect of the background, the red carpet leading to the painting and the slightly elevated podium in front of it created the distance and high atmosphere of a church.

³ C.V. Wedgwood, 1982: *The World of Rubens, 1577-1640*. Time-Life Books Inc., 1982 (1967).



Photo 2. *Descent from the Cross*. Rubens, Pieter Paul. Oil on canvas. 297x200 cm. Flanders. Circa 1617-1618. Image is used from www.hermitagemuseum.org, courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg, Russia.

The painting caught my eyes from the distance and invited for long observation. My eyes kept wandering between Mary Magdalene's brightly colored, shining dress, her long, fair hair and the strikingly simple appearance and pale complexion of Maria. The dark clothes of Maria, the gentle movement of her arm as she reaches out for her son for the last time, her young but tried features, all confer the ideas of pureness and of resignation. Mary Magdalene, depicted in the traditional way, fallen to her knees, personifies repentance. (Her traditional presence allows the painter to add a beautiful woman and a colorful dress to the otherwise somber scene.) The dead body of Christ, gently guided by St John (on the ladder), Joseph of Arimathea (at the top), and Nicodemus, seems to slide downwards under its own weight.

What surprised me was the humanness of Christ. Christ does not appear here as the son of God, crucified for the salvation of humanity, but as the dead body of a muscular, middle-aged man. The religious mysticism pervading the art of the Flemish Primitives, the painters who worked in the Low Countries hardly a century before Rubens, is completely missing here. Rubens' paintings, even his religious paintings, talk most of all about man.

The leading spiritual movement of the time was humanism. Rubens himself received a humanist education and showed much interest in classical studies. His beloved brother, Philip Rubens, was a follower of the famous philologist and humanist⁴ Justus Lipsius. Humanism is characterized by the recognition that human beings form an essential part of creation; that humans develop and sustain the God-created world. Thereby individual human experience gains importance. Humanists promoted the study of original sources (mostly, ancient Greek and Latin classics and the Bible) in opposition with scholastic learning principles. Empiricism began to flourish and provided the foundation to modern science. In parallel with the scientific achievements a new artistic ideal emerged: that of the intellectual artist who is well versed in the classics as well as in mathematical principles.

Rubens was such an intellectual artist. And much more: he was a genius with enormous creative potential. His figures seem to burst of life. With only a few brushstrokes he could impart life to anything. However, it is the gest of the body that interested him and not the movement of the soul which stirs the body. Rubens enlivened the surface, the texture, the appearance of things and, most of all, that of the human body. He could feel and could show how a rope bites into the skin, how a piece of textile moves around the body, how the cushions of fat tremble, how the skin changes of color in cold... In all this, he is unsurpassed. However, it is in vain to seek in his figures signs of deep feelings, emotions, the understanding and the reflections of an ingenious individual - his figures are perfect but indifferent; there is no inner movement behind the faces.

I felt quite depressed for all this monumental impersonality for a great part of my visit. The painting that suddenly brought ease and actually made me laughing was the *Kitchen* of David Tenier II.

⁴ The term *humanism* first of all signifies the predominant philosophy and intellectual current of the period between 1400 and 1650



Photo 3. *Kitchen*. Teniers, David II. Oil on canvas. 171x237 cm. Flanders. 1646. *Image is used from www.hermitagemuseum.org, courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg, Russia.*

Suddenly, there was this enormous kitchen, in which the people seemed to move as midgets. There were all kinds of aliments, often in strange arrangements, scattered around the floor or hanging from the ceiling like lamps. In contrast with all this disorder, the unleashed dogs and the busy people concentrating at their job, there stood a falconer, in a majestic pose, looking straight upon us. *Kitchen* is painted with much attention to the details, and yet, with a certain humor and distance.

This painting, similarly to other works of Teniers, is conceived in the best traditions of 16th century Dutch painting. Instead of the monumental Baroque works of his contemporaries, Teniers specialized in everyday scenes. This choice was sealed when he married Anna Brueghel, granddaughter of Pieter Brueghel I and daughter of Jan Brueghel I. (Interestingly, Rubens was Anna's ward and witness at her marriage⁵, Teniers developed his own genre paintings. His peasant scenes were masterly arranged, detailed and colorful. In several paintings he seemed to be preoccupied with problems related to the temptations of the flesh. His mature works are increasingly bright, with a certain golden or silvery reflection. Teniers enjoyed considerable success and worked as the court artist of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm.

⁵ Natalya Babina, 2012



Photo 4. *Self-Portrait with parents, Brothers and Sisters*. Jordaens, Jacob. Oil on canvas. 175x137.5 cm. Flanders. Circa 1615. Image is used from www.hermitagemuseum.org, courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg, Russia.

“Jordaens is now the most important painter of Antwerp” wrote Balthasar Gerbier⁶, an Anglo-Dutch artist, diplomat and courtier, a couple of days after Rubens’ death. Although Jordaens was almost equally talented in depicting human figures, and very well recognized by his contemporaries, his compositions appear very different from those of Rubens. His paintings are overloaded with figures or filled with decorative elements in a way that they can become unpleasant.

In accordance with the increased social rank of the painter in the Spanish Netherlands (several artists got knighted in this time) we find many family portraits in which the artist depicts himself as a wealthy citizen, surrounded by his elegantly dressed family members. This beautiful example here below is from Cornelis de Vos, where especially the children’s vivacity catches the eye.

⁶ Wedgwood, 1982



Photo 5. *Self-portrait of the Artist with his wife Suzanne Cock and their Children*. Vos, Cornelis de. Oil on canvas. 185.5x221 cm. Flanders. 1630s. Image is used from www.hermitagemuseum.org, courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg, Russia.

Once again, the Hermitage Amsterdam brought together a wonderful exhibition. How much Flemish Baroque painting and Rubens' work in particular resonates with the ideas of the contemporary viewer is another concern. It is certainly much less admired now than at the time it was made. The corpulence of Rubens' women is often blamed in this context. In brackets, I have never heard any complaint about the over-emphasized muscularity of Rubens' male figures... In order to promote the engagement of the visitor, a documentary was presented in which Philip Akkerman, a contemporary Dutch painter, gave reasons for his interest in Rubens' paintings. What Akkerman emphasized was the technique, the unique ease with which Rubens handled the brush and his perfect anatomical knowledge. I could agree with him when he said that never had painting reached such a technical perfection as in Rubens' time.

The intellectual approach, which breathed new life into art in the Cinquecento and reached fullness in the 17th century Baroque art, got solidified in 18th and 19th century academism. It is only by throwing out all the intellectual achievements that art could get free from its pressure. (The current exhibition of the Hermitage Amsterdam; entitled "Impressionism: Sensation & Inspiration" shows the first steps of this revolution.) Nevertheless, this movement has reached its endpoint and actually we see more and more performers on the art scene who seek a compromise between intuitive impulsiveness and intellectual reasoning.

References:

- ✚ Natalya Babina, 2012: Teniers in the Hermitage. In: Rubens, Van Dyck & Jordaens. Flemish Painters from the Hermitage. Exhibition catalog, pp. 147-151.
- ✚ Varshavskaya, 1975, in: Rubens, Van Dyck & Jordaens. Flemish Painters from the Hermitage. Exhibition catalog, p. 38
- ✚ Wedgwood, C.V., 1982: De wereld van Rubens, 1577-1640 (English title: The World of Rubens, 1577-1640) Atrium, 1982 (1967).

