

# Peter paul rubens the man behind the artist history essay



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Apart from his paintings-which includes altarpieces, history and mythological scenes, portraits and landscaped, he designed tapestries, book illustrations and pageant decorations, as well as his own house and small items of sculpture and metalwork. His affinity with 16th century Italian traditions is also demonstrated in his wide correspondence, by his art collection and by the organization of his studio. He had an immense amount of work, often a composition would be executed by assistants from drawing or sketch by Rubens, who then added the finishing touches to the work. His numerous pupils and assistants included Anthony van Dyck, and frequent collaboration with other established artists was necessary for him to complete his huge workload. Time magazine published in its international edition 40 years after his death, saying that " Rubens, whose supremely successful studio was located in the Flemish merchant center of Antwerp, was the presiding genius of this world. He was an artist of much wider reputation than his peers, and a man so sure of his position that he could claim, " No undertaking, however vast in size or diversified in subject, has ever surpassed my courage.""

Rubens's style was overwhelming and few contemporary artists withstood its influence. Later generations of often very diverse artists derived much from his art and, indeed, a whole style of painting came to bear his name.

Rubens' father and mother fled Antwerp for Cologne to escape religious persecution in 1568, as there were increased religious turmoil and execution of Protestants. Two years after his father's death, Rubens moved with his mother to Antwerp, where he was raised as a Catholic. This has much to do with the fact that religion figures prominently in much of his work and Rubens later became one of the leading voices of the Catholic Counter

Reformation style of painting. In Antwerp, Rubens received a humanist education, studying Latin and classical literature. By fourteen he began his apprenticeship with Tobias Verhaeght. Subsequently, he studied under two of the city's leading painters of the time, the later Mannerist artists Adam van Noort and Otto van Veen. Much of his early training involved copying earlier artists' works such as woodcuts by Hans Holbein the Younger and Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving after Raphael. Rubens completed his education in 1598, at which time he entered the Guild of St. Luke as an independent master.

In 1600, Rubens travelled to Italy. He stopped first in Venice and was inspired by the coloring and compositions of Veronese and Tintoretto. His style was profoundly influenced by Titian. With financial support from the Duke, Rubens travelled to Rome in 1601. There he made full use of his opportunity to study classical Greek and Roman art, the famous works by Michelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci. At the same time Rubens's humanistic and artistic education was enriched and deepened by the study of Classical sculpture. He drew numerous copies of both categories, for instance a copy in red chalk (London, BM) of one of Michelangelo's Ignudi on the Sistine ceiling and another in black chalk (Antwerp, Rubenshuis) after the Belvedere Torso (Rome, Vatican, Mus. Pio-Clementine).

When Rubens worked in Rome, he was chosen in preference to contemporary Italian artists, to paint an altarpiece for the high altar of the Oratorian church of Santa Maria in Vallicella, a commission of great importance in the context of the growing Counter-Reformation movement.

Rubens's *Virgin and Child adored by St Gregory and other Saints* was painted  
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between the end of 1606 and the middle of 1607; however, it reflected the light unduly and was replaced by a new version by Rubens of the same subject this time a triptych on three slate panels. Also for the Oratorians, Rubens painted an Adoration of the Shepherds for their church at Fermo in May-June of 1608. These last two altar pieces of Ruben's later Italian years show a strong affinity with the work of Correggio—a painter who decisively influenced the development of the early Baroque sense of form, especially in Rome. The composition and the emotional expression and movement in the Adoration of the Shepherds and in a painted modello for the high Altar piece for Santa Maria in Vallicella are clearly inspired by related altarpieces by Correggio. However, in the first finished version of the St Gregory altarpiece, the construction is more severe and classical, reflecting the stronger influence of Raphael, Rubens's eclectic merging of Venetian, Correggesque and Raphaellesque elements corresponded to the artistic theory of his Italian contemporary Annibale Carracci, although there is no direct evidence of Carracci's stylistic influence on Rubens at this time. The same may be said for Caravaggio, the other great innovator of the period, only much later did Rubens show an interest in certain aspects of his work.

On Ruben's return to Antwerp, he continued at first to work in the same fashion he had pursued in Italy. Between the end of 1608 and c. 1612 his style is marked by vivid contrasts of lights and shade that derive partly, though not exclusively, from Caravaggio, while the action is sustained by Michelangesque figures occupying the fore ground in dramatic attitudes and asymmetrical groups; their musculature is so emphasized by the harsh lighting that they seem on the point of springing out of the canvas. Typical

examples of this style are the Samson and Delilah owned by Rockox and the Raising of the Cross financed by van der Geest.

Rubens soon discovered he had to re-adapt to a local Flemish tradition that he must have founded old-fashion after his years in Italy. He was required, for instance, to execute panelled triptychs and memorial paintings, and post-Tridentine regulations required that religious themes should be depicted clearly and in an elevated style, using an iconography that, to some extent at least, harked back to late medieval prototypes.

From c. 1615 Rubens's composition again took on a more lively character, while retaining a sense of balance in the composition, the highly sculpted figures and a cool color range. The relief-like structure, on the other hand, gave way to a strong impression of spatial depth, enhancing the dynamic effect. These are the years of the great hunting and battle scenes, such as the Boar Hunt (c. 1615-20; Dresden, Gemaldegal. Alte Meister) and the Battle of the Amazons, the Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus (c. 1617; Munich, Alte Pin) by van der Geest. Despite the complication and variety of the action in some of these paintings, both of them are conceived as a unified, organic whole. Most of the altarpieces of these years, for instance the Miracles of St Ignatius Loyola and the Miracles of St Francis Xavier (Vienna, Ksthist, Mus.), are distinguished by a dynamic composition with diagonals linking the different planes.

By the early 1620s Rubens was fully capable of treating all religious and profane subjects, whether of a static nature or animated and complicated. He painted the ceiling (1620) for the former Jesuit church (now St Carlo

Borromeo) in Antwerp. These consisted of about 40 large compositions with scenes from the Old and New Testaments and the lives of saints; unfortunately, less than a century after its completion, the brilliant ensemble was destroyed by fire. Stylistically, the paintings were no less innovative than the architecture of the building, the first Baroque church in Antwerp to be constructed entirely on the Roman model. Those who commissioned the work certainly hope that the paintings would be an equally powerful example of the triumphalism of the High Baroque; and the work was indeed stylistically on a par with contemporary Roman ceiling frescoes. The latter make similar use of di sotto in su perspective, foreshortening and illusionistic architecture, and of figures whose countenances and gestures express ecstasy in a highly rhetorical and even sensual manner. The ceiling decoration for the Antwerp Jesuits did much to establish Rubens's fame at home and, above all, abroad. From then onwards he constantly received commissions for similar large ensembles: the History of Constantine tapestry series, the Marie de' Medici series, the Henry IV series and the Triumph of the Eucharist tapestry series. Moreover, these tremendous cycles were commissioned by kings and princes, in particular the French court in Paris and the Habsburg Archdukes in Brussels.

In his late religious compositions Rubens attempted to appeal to the viewer above all through the senses. In the Martyrdom of St Livinus, the emphasis is on the horrors of the torture and not on the martyr's heroism. Rubens's later landscapes are more sober and realistic in conception; the viewpoint is lower, and the paintings appear to be casual impressions of nature, with an emphasis on the momentary effects of atmosphere and light. This

corresponds to a general trend in the landscape painting of the Netherlands, both north and south. Rubens's late landscapes, generally in the mellow golden light of an early summer's evening, have an especially atmospheric and elegiac effect (e. g. Landscape with a Rainbow). Sister Wendy Beckett, who is a South African-born British art expert, thinks that Landscape with a Rainbow symbolized hope, with light glinting on the rich meadows, the benign cattle and their colorful surroundings. Although dark element can still be found-the sunless woods which are not far away. She thinks Rubens chose to emphasize the good things.

In his last ten years of activity, Rubens painted his most attractive portraits, for instance the many portraits of his wife Helene Fourment-alone, with her husband and with one or more of their children. As in the rest of his later work, Rubens's fluent handling lends a simplicity and directness to these intimate family portraits. Moreover, their construction and iconography is an expression of harmony and love between the spouses and their children. One symbolic allusion was to the Garden of Love, the garden symbolizes love and fertility.

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