Rubens

Peter Paul Rubens is considered one of the most important Flemish painters of the 17th century. His style became an international definition of the animated, exuberantly sensuous aspects of baroque painting. Combining the bold brushwork, luminous color, and shimmering light of the Venetian school with the fervent vigor of Michelangelo's art and the formal dynamism of Hellenistic sculpture, Rubens created a vibrant art, its pulsating energies emanating from tensions between the intellectual and emotional, the classical and the romantic. For 200 years the vitality and eloquence of his work influenced such artists as Antoine Watteau, in the early 18th century, and Eugne Delacroix and Pierre Auguste Renoir, in the 19th century. Rubens's father, Jan Rubens, was a prominent lawyer and Antwerp alderman. Having converted from Catholicism to Calvinism, Jan Rubens in 1568 fled Flanders with his family because of persecutions against Protestants. In 1577 Peter Paul was born in exile at Siegen, Westphalia (now in Germany), also the birthplace of his brother Philip and his sister Baldina. There, their father had become the adviser and lover of Princess Anna of Saxony, wife of Prince William I of Orange (William the Silent). On the death of Jan Rubens in 1587, his widow returned the family to Antwerp, where they again became Catholics. After studying the classics in a Latin school and serving as a court page, Peter Paul decided to become a painter. He apprenticed in turn with Tobias Verhaecht, Adam van Noort, and Otto van Veen, called Vaenius, three minor Flemish painters influenced by 16th-century Mannerist artists of the Florentine-Roman school. The young Rubens was as precocious a painter as he had earlier been a scholar of modern European languages and of classical antiquity. In 1598, at the age of 21, he was accorded the rank of master painter of the

Antwerp Guild of St. Luke. Following the example of many northern European artists of the period, Rubens felt drawn by necessity to travel to Italy, the center of European art for the previous two centuries. In 1600 he arrived in Venice, where he was particularly inspired by the paintings of Titian, Paolo Veronese, and Tintoretto. Later, while resident in Rome, he was influenced by the works of Michelangelo and Raphael, as well as by ancient Greco-Roman sculpture. Vincenzo Gonzaga (reigned 1587-1612), the duke of Mantua, employed Rubens for about nine years. Besides executing original works, Rubens copied Renaissance paintings for the ducal collection, and in 1605 he served as the duke's emissary to King Philip III of Spain. During his years in Italy, Rubens saw the early baroque works of the contemporary Italian painters Annibale Carracci and Caravaggio, and he associated with some of the leading humanist intellectuals of the day. When Rubens left Italy, he was no longer a bourgeois but a gentleman, and he was not a local artist but one of international style and reputation. His mother's death in 1608 brought Rubens back to Antwerp, where he married Isabella Brant in 1609. Having formulated one of the first innovative expressions of the baroque style while in Italy, Rubens on his return was recognized as the foremost painter of Flanders and, therefore,

was immediately employed by the burgomaster of Antwerp. His success was further confirmed in 1609, when he was engaged as court painter to the Austrian archduke Albert and his wife, the Spanish infanta Isabella, who together ruled the Low Countries as viceroys for the king of Spain. The number of pictures requested from Rubens was so large that he established an enormous workshop in which the master did the initial sketch and final touches, while his apprentices completed all the intermediary steps. Besides

court commissions from Brussels and abroad, the highly devout Rubens was much in demand by the militant Counter Reformation church of Flanders, which regarded his dramatic, emotionally charged interpretations of religious events-such as the Triptych of the Raising of the Cross (1610-11, Antwerp Cathedral)-as images for spiritual recruitment and renewal. Prosperity allowed Rubens to build an Italianate residence in Antwerp, where he housed his extensive collection of art and antiquities. Between 1622 and 1630 Rubens's value as a diplomat was equal to his importance as a painter.

In 1622 he visited Paris, where the French queen Marie de Mdicis commissioned him, for the Luxembourg Palace, to depict her life in a series of allegorical paintings (completed 1625). Despite the keen loss Rubens felt after the death of his wife in 1626, he continued to be highly productive. In 1628 he was sent by the Flemish viceroys to Spain. While in Madrid he received several commissions from King Philip IV of Spain, who made him secretary of his Privy Council. Rubens also served as a mentor to the young Spanish painter Diego Velzquez. After a delicate diplomatic mission to London in 1629, he was knighted by a grateful King Charles I of England, for whom he executed several paintings. For Charles, Rubens also made the preliminary sketches (finished in Antwerp, 1636) for the ceiling mural in the Whitehall Palace Banqueting Hall. From 1630, when he married Hlne Fourment, until his death on May 30, 1640, Rubens
remained in Antwerp, living primarily at Castle Steen, his country residence. During this final decade he continued executing commissions for the Habsburg monarchs of Austria and Spain. More and more, he also painted pictures of personal interest, especially of his wife and child and of the

Flemish countryside. The concerns of Rubens's late style, and indeed of his whole career, are summarized in The Judgment of Paris (circa 1635-37, National Gallery, London). In this painting voluptuous goddesses are posed against a verdant landscape, goddesses and landscape both symbolizing the richness of creation. Color is luxuriant, light and shade glow, and the brushwork is sensuous. All these elements further the meaning of the narrative, which is Paris's selection of what is most beautiful-the lifelong concern of Rubens in his art.