

RUBENS WAS ARTIST, SCHOLAR, DIPLOMAT--AND A LOVER OF LIFE

An exhibit at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts shows that this Flemish genius truly lived in the right place at the right time

by Henry Adams
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Of all the great European Old Masters, Rubens has always been the most difficult and puzzling for Americans. Thomas Eakins, the famed American portraitist, once wrote that Rubens' paintings should be burned. Somewhat less viciously, Ernest Hemingway made fun of his fleshy nudes—which have given rise to the adjective "Rubenesque"—in a passage of his novel *A Farewell to Arms*. Here, two lovers attempt to cross from Italy into Switzerland in the guise of connoisseurs of art. While preparing for their assumed role, they engage in the following exchange:

"Do you know anything about art?"

"Rubens," said Catherine.

"Large and fat," I said."

Part of the difficulty, it is clear, lies in the American temperament. Historically, we have preferred restraint to exuberance, been uncomfortable with nudes, and admired women who are skinny and twiglike rather than abundant and mature. Moreover, we Americans like art to express private, intensely personal messages, albeit sometimes strange ones, whereas Rubens orchestrated grand public statements, supervised a large workshop and absorbed the efforts of teams of helpers into his own expression. In short, Rubens can appear too excessive, too boisterous and too commercial.

In addition, real barriers of culture and background block appreciation. Rubens filled his paintings with references to classical literature and Catholic dogma. Most modern viewers don't understand these references, let alone the complex ways in which Rubens employed symbolism and allegory, creating a fascinating tension between the realism and individuality of his figures and the abstract qualities they personify. Given the complexity and elaborate artifice of Rubens' artistic language, some wonder if he was truly sincere.



At the age of 53, a newly married Rubens celebrated by painting the joyous, nine-foot-wide *Garden of Love*. (Prado Museum, Madrid)

Considering these barriers to understanding, it isn't surprising that Rubens' paintings have been little seen in this country. Nevertheless, it is surprising that "The Age of Rubens," which just opened in Boston, is the first international loan exhibition in the United States to survey 17th-century Flemish painting.

More than 30 works by Rubens himself form the core of the show. Some of them—including his later masterpiece *The Garden of Love* (above), sent by the Prado in Madrid—are in the United States for the first time. The exhibition also contains masterworks by more than 40 artists who surrounded or collaborated with him, such as Anthony van Dyck, Jacob Jordaens and Jan Bruegel the Elder.

How will the public respond to the exhibition? My guess is that, in America, Rubens will probably remain somewhat difficult. But even those who dislike his painting may find themselves fascinated by his life. Successful in everything he attempted, Rubens was an outstanding linguist, an astute businessman, a happy family man, one of the greatest collectors in history, a renowned scholar, an esteemed courtier who was showered with knighthoods and titles by the rulers of three countries, and a skillful diplomat who labored tirelessly in the cause of peace. Neither pushy nor overly ambitious, he inspired little jealousy. All who knew him were impressed with his grace.



The Descent from the Cross (1611-14), with an earlier triptych, *The Raising of the Cross*, marks Rubens' move into mature style. Key figures were influenced by the Laocoon, a Hellenistic sculpture depicting suffering. (Antwerp Cathedral)

Rubens' father, Jan Rubens, an Antwerp lawyer and adviser to princes, shared his son's charm but not his sound judgment. Serving in Siegen, Germany, as councillor to the wife of the Prince of Orange, Jan got her pregnant and was thrown in prison. In Germany the punishment for adultery was death, but his wife, Maria, came to his defense. Through her efforts, Jan's life was spared, and while under a kind of house arrest, the reunited couple conceived two children—Philip, born in 1573, who became a distinguished classicist, and Peter Paul, born in 1577.

When Jan Rubens died ten years later, the family moved back to Antwerp, where Peter Paul attended a Latin school, served briefly as a court page and studied art. The main glimpse we get of him is from schoolmate Balthasar Moretus, who later became head of a famous printing firm in Antwerp. In a letter to Philip Rubens, Moretus wrote, "I loved this young man who had the kindest and most perfect character."

Venice and a noble introduction

In 1600, at the age of 22, Rubens headed for Italy to complete his training in art. He went first to Venice to study the work of Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese. According to his nephew, a chance meeting established the course of Rubens' future. Staying at an inn, he met a noble from the court of the Duke of Mantua. Impressed by Rubens and his copies of Italian pictures, the noble introduced him to the duke, who hired him immediately.

He could have found no better spot for an artistic education; the Duke of Mantua had one of the greatest art collections in Europe. Rubens served him not only as painter, but as courtier, diplomat and art adviser. He traveled extensively. Sent to Florence to attend a wedding, he made studies of reliefs by Michelangelo, often drawing at

night by candlelight when his work for the duke was over; and in Milan he copied Leonardo Da Vinci. Rubens did the same in Rome, in Spain—everywhere that he went.

During the final part of his stay in Italy, from 1605 to 1608, the duke allowed him to live in Rome with his brother Philip, who was studying classical literature and serving as librarian to a wealthy cardinal. Together the two brothers roamed the city, examining classical antiquities. With the help of influential friends in the Vatican, Rubens obtained a major commission, to paint a large altarpiece of Saint Gregory and three other saints for the church of Santa Maria in Vallicella—an altarpiece he had to completely redesign on slate because the glare in the church made the first version difficult to see.

By the time Rubens returned to Antwerp in 1608, his knowledge of Italian painting and classical antiquities was unsurpassed. Reunited with Philip, who had returned home before him, he now had time to consider his options. Could he support himself in Antwerp or should he return to Italy? His decision to stay was fixed when Archduke Albert, in an extraordinary gesture, gave Rubens the title of court painter, with an annual pension but no responsibilities. Shortly after receiving this honor, Rubens cemented his decision to settle down by marrying Isabella Brant, the daughter of one of the four Secretaries of the City. The happy marriage inspired one of his most delightful paintings, in which he showed himself and his wife seated in a honeysuckle bower, holding hands (right).



The situation was ideal in Antwerp for an ambitious young painter. In the late 16th century, due both to Protestant iconoclasm and to Spanish violence, many of the altarpieces in the main churches of the city had been destroyed.

Moreover, the rulers of the Spanish Netherlands, which in Rubens' time included Flanders, Brabant and Luxembourg, were committed to the Catholic religion and Catholic imagery as a badge of national identity. They wanted to distinguish the country from the United Provinces of the Netherlands, the Protestant country to the north. Even when altarpieces already existed, patrons were eager to commission new paintings whose imagery was more explicitly and emphatically Catholic, and which appealed more strongly to the emotions of the spectator.



In stepping into this situation, Rubens had two advantages over other Flemish painters. One was his artistic skill; next to his work, that of other Flemish painters looked stiff and old-fashioned. The other was his social contacts and his ability to use them. His brother Philip, now one of the Secretaries of the City, belonged to the ruling elite. Almost instantly, Rubens won the energetic support of Antwerp's leading art patrons.

The works that Rubens painted in Italy, while beautiful, are often a little stiff. They do not flow together gracefully, and each figure occupies his or her own psychological space, without relationship to others. Within a few years after his return to Antwerp, however, Rubens had learned how to group a large number of figures together into a flowing rhythm, and how to engage each figure psychologically in the main action of the picture. A major turning point in his development was the large altarpiece *The Raising of the Cross* (1610-11) (left), a 15-foot-by-11-foot masterpiece that contains more than a dozen muscular figures. The following year he produced an even more powerful painting, *The Descent from the Cross*, in which the figures meld together seamlessly.

These paintings overwhelm the spectator with their size, their magnificent handling of textures and varying qualities of light, and their theatrical storytelling. Rubens created a new sense of movement in deep space. The light

does not fall evenly but in irregular patterns, with dramatic contrasts of light and dark. Everything has been caught up in action, change and movement; beside a Rubens, the work of earlier painters seems static.

In the ten years following his return to Antwerp, Rubens produced about 60 large altarpieces, and by the end of that time he was receiving commissions from Catholic rulers all over Europe. He capped off the decade with a tour de force of decoration—39 large ceiling paintings and three altarpieces for the Jesuit church in Antwerp. Not content with painting alone, he also designed ornaments, sculpture and decoration for the facade of the church. (Sadly, much of this work was destroyed by fire in 1718.)

Rubens also branched out into other subjects: scenes of the classical world, such as a series of 12 oil sketches for tapestries based on the life of the Roman emperor Constantine; hunting scenes—often filled with lions, tigers, hippopotamuses, crocodiles and other exotic animals—which appealed to aristocrats all over Europe; and erotic paintings of nudes, depicting stories from classical mythology, which appealed to a special kind of wealthy patron, like the profligate Duke of Buckingham. Supremely confident, Rubens matter-of-factly explained his gusto for huge enterprises when he wrote, "I am, by natural instinct, better fitted to execute very large works than small curiosities. Everyone according to his gifts; my talent is such that no undertaking, however vast in size or diversified in subject, has ever surpassed my courage."

Despite Rubens' great ability, the scale of his production could not have been achieved without assistance. Soon after his arrival in Antwerp, he assembled a large team of artists to help him realize his grandiose projects. In the past, Flemish artists had often collaborated with each other, working in "double harness," for example, with one painter executing figures and the other, landscape. Rubens expanded this process. Often he would make the initial design and have assistants enlarge it to full scale. He would then go over the painting, making significant changes in poses and facial expressions to bring it up to his standard.



Hercules as Heroic Virtue Overcoming Discord (1632) is a sketch for the ceiling of Whitehall Palace in London. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



For *The Crowning of Diana*, a six-foot-wide oil on canvas, Rubens collaborated with Frans Snyders, an Antwerp colleague who specialized in the painting of animals. Goddess of the hunt and the moon, Diana exudes the strong but sensual image of woman as Rubens saw her. (Stiftung Schlosser und Garten, Potsdam Sanssouci Bildergalerie)

Grand spectacles for public consumption

Today this setup seems anti-artistic to those who are accustomed to the idea of the solitary artist in a garret, struggling to record his or her own vision. Rubens' approach was more similar to the modern movie industry, in which dozens, if not hundreds, of people work together under one director to create a spectacle for public consumption. Personal expression matters less than the scale and quality of the product.

Rubens was in his element in the bustling studio, amazing visitors by his ability to perform many tasks at once. Thus, when a young Danish doctor, Otto Sperling, stopped in, he found Rubens painting while having a passage from Tacitus read aloud to him, as he also dictated a letter. He kept on with all these activities as he talked with Sperling.

With his sparkling eyes and laughing air, Rubens drew people to him. Joachim von Sandrart, who served as his guide during a trip to Holland in 1627, expressed this best. "Quick and industrious in his work, he was courteous and kind to everybody," wrote Sandrart, "and since all found him pleasant, he was very popular." Rubens returned the

feelings: "I regard the whole world as my country," he once wrote, "and I believe that I should be very welcome everywhere."

Rubens served as his own business manager and advertising agent. He was a hard bargainer who refused to bend under pressure. In one of his largest transactions, Rubens traded six of his own paintings for 134 classical marbles that belonged to the English diplomat Sir Dudley Carleton. In a letter to Carleton, Rubens made it sound as though he had done the collector a great favor, declaring that he had given sufficient paintings "to adorn an entire palace" in exchange for "marbles to furnish one room."

It wasn't long before Rubens prospered. Sir Thomas Roe, an Englishman who knew Rubens in Antwerp, noted enviously, "He had grown so rich by his profession that he appeared everywhere, not like a painter but a great cavalier with a very stately train of servants, horses, coaches, liveries, and so forth." He lived in a large house, which he remodeled at great expense to serve as home, workshop, library and salesroom, and as advertisement for his classical learning and good taste. Using the palaces he had seen in Genoa as a model, he left the street facade unadorned, and decorated the courtyard with classical columns, sculpture and paintings that recreated famous masterpieces of antiquity. At various times he sold off portions of his collection for large gain; after he sold some "pictures, antique marbles, agates and other jewels" to the Duke of Buckingham he was able to buy seven large houses with the resulting cash. In the garden he installed an Italian fountain, a small replica of a Roman triumphal arch, garden statues, expensive imported flowers and orange trees in tubs. His paintings show iridescent peacocks roaming the grounds.

Rubens had the first important collection of Italian painting in northern Europe (he was particularly fond of the Venetian school); its crowning glory: 11 paintings by Titian, including the famous late self-portrait now in the Prado. One of the most notable destinations in Antwerp, his estate was visited by a number of his royal patrons, such as Sigismund, Prince of Poland, the Infanta Isabella, the Marquis Spinola and Marie de' Medici.

Rubens' personal success, however, was not shared by his city. While he prospered, Antwerp declined. Before the religious wars of the late 16th century, it had been the busiest seaport and most prosperous city in Northern Europe. But Antwerp decayed after the 1587 partition between the Spanish Netherlands and the United Provinces, since the latter closed off the entrance to the Scheldt River, blocking all maritime trade into the city. A truce signed just as Rubens returned revived the city only moderately.

English visitors to Antwerp in the 17th century commented on the emptiness of the streets and the dearth of goods being sold; and despite his own good fortune, Rubens was deeply pained by the sad state of his countrymen. "This city," he wrote in 1627, "languishes like a consumptive body, declining little by little."



Oil sketch of *The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek*, done in about 1626, was a modello for a tapestry series in which Old Testament stories were tied to New Testament scenes. Here, Abraham's reception by the priest-king of Jerusalem is seen to prefigure the Eucharist. (National Gallery of Art)



Among the copies Rubens made of earlier artists' work was one of Jan Vermeyen's *Portrait of Mulay Ahmad*. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

Every day sees a decrease in the number of inhabitants, for these unhappy people have no means of supporting themselves either by industrial skill or trade."

"I am a peace-loving man "

Two specific misfortunes encouraged Rubens to turn his attention from art to political affairs. One was the death in 1621 of Archduke Albert, ruler of the Spanish Netherlands, which left his widow, Archduchess Isabella, in need of a councillor and adviser. As it happened, the truce between Spain and the United Provinces came to an end in the same year as the archduke's death, raising the threat that war would break out between the two countries. Rubens, who had always been friendly with the couple, stepped in both to help Isabella and to work for peace. "I am a peace-loving man," Rubens wrote to one of his closest friends. "I am sorry that all kings and princes are not of this humor."

A second misfortune five years later was the death of his beloved wife, Isabella Brant. For Rubens she had been an "excellent companion" who was "all goodness and honesty." Despondent over the loss, Rubens found the sight of familiar places painful to him and sought release in travel.

Rubens had begun his diplomatic activities in 1621. At first his role was rather casual, but as his ability became apparent, he was entrusted with ever greater duties. In 1625 Archduchess Isabella began sending Rubens on secret missions. In 1628 she sent him to Spain on the pretext that he had been asked to paint a portrait of her nephew, King Philip IV. Amazingly, Rubens won the trust and admiration both of the pleasure-loving king and of his chief minister, the Count-Duke of Olivares, a somber personality who liked to lie in a coffin.

The king changed his tune

A year before, when Philip had first heard that his aunt was employing Rubens on diplomatic missions, he had sent her a vigorous note of protest. "I am displeased at your mixing up a painter in affairs of such importance," he wrote. "Our prestige must necessarily be lessened if we make so mean a person the representative with whom foreign envoys are to discuss affairs of such great importance." But after dealing with Rubens in person, Philip changed his tune. When an envoy was needed for a secret mission to London, he wrote to Archduchess Isabella recommending Rubens in the strongest terms: "Rubens is highly regarded at the court of England, and very capable of negotiating all sorts of affairs.... In such matters one needs a minister of proven intelligence with whom one is satisfied."

The following spring Rubens sailed for England to negotiate a truce between Spain and England, and to arrange for the two countries to exchange ambassadors. The mission could not have been more difficult because the two countries had been intermittently at war for about 50 years—since the days of the Armada. The English court was a hornet's nest of rival cliques. One faction wanted to join with France in a war against Spain; another wanted war with France and peace with Spain; another wanted peace with all. The French ambassador wanted to sabotage any friendship between England and the Spanish Netherlands; the Dutch ambassador was even more violently hostile; the Venetian ambassador did his best to stir up trouble.

Sir Francis Cottington, the British chancellor of the exchequer, noted admiringly of Rubens that he was "not only very clever and adroit in negotiating matters, but also knows how to win the esteem of everyone and especially the king." After months of intrigues, delays and uncertainties, Rubens finally achieved his goal, arranging for a truce between England and Spain and for ambassadors to be exchanged. On the eve of his departure, in March 1630, Charles I summoned Rubens to Whitehall and knighted him.

Over the next few years Rubens was showered with further honors and titles, but he was growing tired of diplomacy and court intrigues. "Best of all, I should like to go home and remain there all my life," he wrote a friend from England. Finally, in 1635, with considerable effort, he persuaded the archduchess to allow him to abandon politics altogether. "I made the decision to force myself to cut this golden knot of ambition, in order to recover my liberty," he wrote. He begged her to give him, "as the sole reward for so many efforts, exemption from such assignments and permission to serve her in my own home. This favor I obtained with more difficulty than any other she ever granted me."

Rubens had another reason to shake himself loose from politics. In December 1630, a few months after his return from his mission in England, Rubens married his second wife. His friends had urged him to wed a court lady and improve his social status, but Rubens pursued a different course, marrying Helene Fourment, the daughter of a prosperous Antwerp tapestry merchant. "I chose one who would not blush to see me take my brushes in hand," he wrote.

Rubens argued that his choice of wife had been motivated by prudence, but nonetheless it must have raised eyebrows, since Rubens was 53 and his bride was 16. He seems to have been deeply in love with her. During the ten years of their marriage, despite his failing health, Helene bore him five children—the last one born eight months after his death.

He painted Helene in every conceivable guise and stage of dress or undress: as a grand lady about to step into her carriage, as a penitent saint, as Hagar expelled into the wilderness, as Venus being judged by Paris, as a farm girl being kissed by a lecherous peasant and as a nymph being abducted by a satyr. Rubens had always excelled at painting flesh, but in these late paintings skin takes on an almost spiritual luminosity and transparency. Perhaps one reason for this was that Rubens' right hand was growing crippled from gout, making every touch of the brush a painful one and encouraging him to paint with ever greater delicacy and thinness.

Five years after his marriage, Rubens purchased a country estate, the Castle of Steen, acquiring the appellation "Lord of Steen," which became the favorite of his titles and the one that is featured most prominently on his tombstone. The place contained a manor house surrounded by a moat, a drawbridge, a crenellated defense tower, barns, outbuildings, a pond, a working farm and picturesque groves of trees. He loved its flat fields, quiet ponds and bramble patches, celebrating its beauties in a number of passionate landscapes.



Ecstatic with his devoted young second wife, Helene Fourment, Rubens painted her as Venus in *The Fur*. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)



Rubens in 1639, just after painting *The Fur*; he saw himself as "one who lives by the work of his hands." (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

Although Rubens could easily have sold these magnificent landscapes as well as the sensual portraits of his wife, he kept many of them for himself, hanging them in his gallery in Antwerp alongside his Raphael and his Titians, thus becoming the first known painter in history to seriously collect his own work.

These late nudes and landscapes exude pure pleasure, but in fact Rubens was often in excruciating pain due to his gout, which finally ended his life on May 30, 1640. In death as in life, Rubens proved well organized. His will was detailed and specific, even including a gift of a copy of one of his paintings to a man who had once helped him buy a horse.

Rubens lived in a tragic time of religious intolerance and economic hardship and of wars that devastated Europe. But he managed to serve humankind while still finding inner happiness through retreat into the pleasures of family life and the practice of his art. He truly lived his life according to a passage from Juvenal's *Satires* that he inscribed at the entrance to his studio: "One must pray for a sane spirit in a healthy body, for a courageous soul, which is not afraid of death, which is free of wrath and desires nothing." Rubens seems to have achieved his goal—and more besides. As his first biographer, a 17th-century French critic, wrote, "Rubens led the happiest life in the world."

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