

Rubens

Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577 - 1640) was a Flemish Baroque painter. A proponent of an extravagant Baroque style that emphasised movement, colour, and sensuality, Rubens is well known for his Counter-Reformation altarpieces, portraits, landscapes, and history paintings of mythological and allegorical subjects.

In addition to running a large studio in Antwerp that produced paintings popular with nobility and art collectors throughout Europe, Rubens was a classically educated humanist scholar and diplomat who was knighted by both Philip IV of Spain and Charles I of England.

In Antwerp, Rubens received a humanist education, studying Latin and classical literature. By fourteen he began his artistic apprenticeship. Much of his earliest training involved copying earlier artists' works, such as woodcuts by Hans Holbein the Younger and Marcantonio Raimondi's engravings after Raphael. Rubens completed his education in 1598, at which time he entered the Guild of St. Luke as an independent master.



Self Portrait 1623

Italy (1600–1608)

In 1600 Rubens travelled to Italy. He stopped first in Venice, where he saw paintings by Titian, Veronese, and Tintoretto, before settling in Mantua at the court of Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga. The colouring and compositions of Veronese and Tintoretto had an immediate effect on Rubens's painting, and his later, mature style was profoundly influenced by Titian.

He travelled to Florence and Rome. There, he studied classical Greek and Roman art and copied works of the Italian masters. The Hellenistic sculpture Laocoön and his Sons was especially influential on him, as was the art of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci. He was also influenced by the recent, highly naturalistic paintings by Caravaggio.

Rubens travelled to Spain on a diplomatic mission in 1603, delivering gifts from the

Gonzagas to the court of Philip III. While there, he studied the extensive collections of Raphael and Titian that had been collected by Philip II. He also painted an equestrian portrait of the Duke of Lerma during his stay (Prado, Madrid) that demonstrates the influence of works like Titian's Charles V at Mühlberg (1548; Prado, Madrid). This journey marked the first of many during his career that combined art and diplomacy.

He returned to Italy in 1604, where he remained for the next four years, first in Mantua and then in Genoa and Rome. Upon hearing of his mother's illness in 1608, he planned his departure from Italy for Antwerp. However, she died before he arrived home.



Rubens and Isabella Brandt, The Honeysuckle Bower c1609

His return coincided with a period of renewed prosperity in the city with the signing of the Treaty of Antwerp in April 1609, which initiated the Twelve Years' Truce. In September 1609 Rubens was appointed as court painter by Albert VII, Archduke of Austria, and Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia of Spain, sovereigns of the Low Countries.

In 1609 he married Isabella Brandt (1591 – 1626), a Flemish artists' model, who was his first wife.

Altarpieces



Descent From the Cross 1614



Central Panel

Altarpieces such as *The Raising of the Cross* (1610) and *The Descent from the Cross* (1611–1614) for the Cathedral of Our Lady were particularly important in establishing Rubens as Flanders' leading painter shortly after his return from Italy.



***Assumption of the Virgin* 1626**

In Rubens' depiction of the Assumption of Mary, a choir of angels lifts her in a spiralling motion toward a burst of divine light. Around her tomb are gathered the 12 apostles — some with their arms raised in awe; others reaching to touch her discarded shroud. The women in the painting are thought to be Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary's two sisters. A kneeling woman holds a flower, referring to the lilies that miraculously filled the empty coffin.

The Antwerp Cathedral of Our Lady opened a competition for an Assumption altar in 1611. Rubens submitted models to the clergy on February 16, 1611. In September 1626, 15 years later, he completed the piece.

The Marie de' Medici Cycle and diplomatic missions (1621–1630)

In 1621, the Queen Mother of France, Marie de' Medici, commissioned Rubens to paint two large allegorical cycles celebrating her life and the life of her late husband, Henry IV, for the Luxembourg Palace in Paris. The Marie de' Medici cycle (now in the Louvre) was installed in 1625, and although he began work on the second series it was never completed.



***The Disembarkation at Marseilles* 1622-25**

Having never been a particularly graceful event for anyone, disembarking a ship does not pose a problem for Rubens in his depiction of Marie de' Medici arriving in Marseilles after having been married to Henry IV by proxy in Florence. Rubens has again, turned something ordinary into something of unprecedented magnificence. He depicts her leaving the ship down a gangplank (she actually walked up, not down, but was illustrated this way by Rubens to create a diagonal element). She was accompanied by the Grand Duchess of Tuscany and her sister, the Duchess of Mantua, into the welcoming, allegorical open arms of a personified France, wearing a helmet and the royal blue mantle with the golden fleur-de-lis. Her sister and aunt flank Marie while two trumpets are blown simultaneously by an ethereal Fame, announcing her arrival to the people of France. Below, Poseidon, three Nereids, a sea-god and Triton rise from the sea, after having escorted the future Queen on the long voyage to procure her safe arrival in Marseilles. To the left, the arms of the Medici can be seen above an arched structure, where a Knight of Malta stands in all of his regalia. It is melody and song as Rubens combines heaven and Earth, history and allegory into a symphony for the eyes of the viewer.

"He [Rubens] surrounded her [Marie de' Medici] with such a wealth of appurtenances that at every moment she was very nearly pushed into the background. Consider, for example, the Disembarkation at Marseilles, where everyone has eyes only for the voluptuous Naiads, to the disadvantage of the queen who is being received with open arms by France"

Diplomacy and Ennoblement

After the end of the Twelve Years' Truce in 1621, the Spanish Habsburg rulers entrusted Rubens with a number of diplomatic missions. While in Paris in 1622 to discuss the Marie de' Medici cycle, Rubens engaged in clandestine information gathering activities, which at the time was an important task of diplomats. He relied on his friendship with Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peirescto get information on political developments in France. Between 1627 and 1630, Rubens' diplomatic career was

particularly active, and he moved between the courts of Spain and England in an attempt to bring peace between the Spanish Netherlands and the United Provinces. He also made several trips to the northern Netherlands as both an artist and a diplomat.



***Portrait of King Philip IV
of Spain*** 1628-29



***Portrait of Susanna
Lundsden*** 1622-25

At the courts he sometimes encountered the attitude that courtiers should not use their hands in any art or trade, but he was also received as a gentleman by many. Rubens was raised by Philip IV of Spain to the nobility in 1624 and knighted by Charles I of England in 1630. Philip IV confirmed Rubens' status as a knight a few months later. Rubens was awarded an honorary Master of Arts degree from Cambridge University in 1629.

Last decade (1630–1640)

Rubens's last decade was spent in and around Antwerp. Major works for foreign patrons still occupied him, such as the ceiling paintings for the Banqueting House at Inigo Jones's Palace of Whitehall, but he also explored more personal artistic directions.



***Hélène Fourment
in a Wedding Dress*** 1630



***Portrait of Hélène Fourment
(Het Pelsken)***, c1638

In 1630, four years after the death of his first wife Isabella, the 53-year-old painter married his first wife's niece, the 16-year-old H el ene Fourment. H el ene inspired the voluptuous figures in many of his paintings from the 1630s, including *The Feast of Venus* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), *The Three Graces* and *The Judgment of Paris* (both Prado, Madrid).

In the later painting, which was made for the Spanish court, the artist's young wife was recognised by viewers in the figure of Venus. In an intimate portrait of her, *H el ene Fourment in a Fur Wrap*, also known as *Het Pelsken*, Rubens' wife is even partially modelled after classical sculptures of the *Venus Pudica*, such as the *Medici Venus*.

Landscapes



***Landscape with Milkmaids and Cattle* c1618**

This magnificent landscape almost certainly came from Rubens's own collection. It was described in an inventory drawn up between 1634 and 1649 as a 'view of Laken' (a village near Brussels often spelt 'Laeken'), which is how it acquired its present subtitle. The church in the background with an avenue of trees does resemble (in a generic way) the now destroyed church of Our Lady at Laken (recorded in old photographs), which in the seventeenth century housed a famous relic - a girdle of the Virgin - and was a popular place of pilgrimage, especially for women wishing to conceive. The Archdukes attended processions to the church every year and Albert commissioned a new window for the church following its restoration in 1601. Rubens seems to have included the church in the same way that Brueghel does in his *Village Festival* (Royal Collection) to suggest that all good things take place with the blessing of the Church and perhaps, in view of the identification of the Archdukes with this particular shrine, under their watchful eye.

Rubens also tries to express these 'good things' through a depiction of autumn, when fruits and vegetables are being harvested (the ploughing for next year's grain crop is just visible on the hillside to the centre left). The figure group here derives from a Rubens *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Mus e des Beaux-Arts, Marseilles), commissioned in 1616 for the church of St John in Mechelen and delivered in 1619.

This echo provides a date for The Farm at Laken, but also strengthens the impression that the figures here are used almost as personifications: the central woman is without shoes (indicating idealisation rather than poverty); she resembles a caryatid, bearing a basket of produce on her head, and reads like an allegory of Plenty. In another context one might assume that the kneeling figure was offering a libation at an altar of Pan or some god of the woodlands. The flock of doves dramatically flying out of the picture towards us also conveys the familiar Rubensian idea of Peace, mother of Plenty.

This is one of Rubens's earliest landscapes; his other essays in the genre at this date were hunts, violent scenes of danger set in wild woodlands - like the Boar Hunt of 1616-18 (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden). It is possible to imagine a pairing of The Farm at Laken and a hunt scene (possibly in Rubens's dining room) to express the contrast between the activities and terrain, which bring meat and vegetarian fare to the table. If so, this painting becomes a sort of allegory of vegetarian fertility and anticipates Rubens's depiction of Pythagoras urging his followers to eat vegetables (Royal Collection), also created for his own house.

Like most Rubens landscapes, this one has grown in the making, gaining 15 cm to the right, 7 to the left and 13 at the top. It is possible to pick out the original painted area with the naked eye: the top-left corner would just have included the bright cumulus cloud formation, the bottom-right corner the wheelbarrow.



Landscape With Rainbow



The Chateau Het Steen with Hunter c1635-8

In 1635, Rubens bought an estate outside Antwerp, the Steen, where he spent much of his time. Landscapes, such as his Château de Steen with Hunter (National Gallery, London) and Farmers Returning from the Fields (Pitti Gallery, Florence), reflect the more personal nature of many of his later works. He also drew upon the Netherlandish traditions of Pieter Bruegel the Elder for inspiration in later works like Flemish Kermis (c. 1630; Louvre, Paris).

Landscape With Rainbow

The painting shows a late summer afternoon on Rubens's country estate. In the foreground cows are being driven home and ducks bathe in the stream. Peasants are gathering in the harvest and a milkmaid returns from her labours, carrying a shiny pitcher on her head. The activity takes place in front of a dark wood and a beautiful

shimmering blue landscape dotted with houses and windmills.

The scene is crowned by a rainbow which extends from some way in the distance on the left and reaches towards us and behind the trees on the right. The beautiful yellow glow of the hay and the shining leaves of the sides of the trees are tempered by the darkness and shadows to the right, with the rainbow uniting the two sides. The rainbow is a reference to God's covenant after the flood.

The human and animal activity is concentrated into the foreground of the picture, giving the sense that people are drawing in and returning from the rural scene to their homes, soon to disappear along the road to the left and off the side of the painting.

Rubens created this work towards the end of his life and it is an imaginary artistic reconstruction of his own estate, called Het Steen, which he bought for himself and his young second wife, Helene Fourment. The estate, between Brussels and Antwerp, included a castle, draw-bridge, tower, moats, a lake and a farm and gave him the right to be known as Lord of Het Steen. It must have been an idyllic place for him to spend the last years of his life.

Allegory and Myth



Hero and Leander 1605



Venus at the Mirror 1615



The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus 1618



Allegory of War and Peace 1629



Ermit and Sleeping Angelica 1628



Bacchus 1638-40

The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus depicts the mortal Castor and the immortal Pollux abducting Phoebe and Hilaeira, daughters of Leucippus. Castor the horse-tamer is recognisable from his armour, whilst Pollux the boxer is shown with a bare and free upper body. They are also distinguished by their horses - Castor's is well-behaved and supported by a putto, whereas Pollux's is rearing. The putto's black wing shows the twins' ultimate fate. Phoebe and Hilaeira do not have distinguishing attributes and so which sister is which is unclear.



The Three Graces 1635

According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, there were three Graces: Aglaia, which means radiance; Euphrosine, which means joy; and Thalia, which means flowering. Born of one of Zeus's affairs, the three Graces were pure virgins who lived with the gods, served at the banquets and fostered joie de vivre. They served Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and were never bored. Rubens depicts them beside a fountain, under a garland of flowers in a landscape. The figures are based on classical sculpture, which is visible in the artist's effort to reproduce the coldness of marble in their flesh. The circular rhythm and elegant undulation are customary characteristics of this artist, along with the grandiloquent shapes and warm colors he brought into his painting in his final years. The figure on the left is directly inspired by his second wife, H el ene Forment. Painted shortly after his marriage, it bears witness to the happiness of the artist's life, which emerges in the sensuality of his paintings from that moment. This work belonged to the artist until his death in 1640 and was then acquired by

Felipe IV and taken to Spain.



Venus and Adonis 1635

The story of Venus and Adonis, which has attracted not only artists but poets, including Shakespeare, tells that Adonis was the offspring of the incestuous union of King Cinyras of Paphos, in Cyprus, with his daughter Myrrha. His beauty was a byword. Venus conceived a helpless passion for him as a result of a chance graze she received from Cupid's arrow (Ovid: *Metamorphoses*). One day while out hunting Adonis was slain by a wild boar, an accident Venus had always dreaded. Hearing his dying groans as she flew overhead in her chariot, she came down to aid him but was too late. In the place where the earth was stained with Adonis' blood, anemones sprouted.

Rubens depicts the scene when Adonis, spear in hand and with hunting dogs straining at the leash, is impatient to be off, while Venus imploringly tries to hold him back. But she pleads in vain. The painting is a variation on a picture painted by the master Rubens most revered: Titian. In Rubens' painting, Venus became the goddess by whom he himself now steered, Helena Fourment, while the fate of Adonis is implicit in the painting's elegiac tone. The nude Venus, gracefully seated, begs Adonis to remain, gently coaxing the garment from his shoulder. She casts a beseeching glance at him, her anxiety translated in the disorder of her blonde tresses. The tanned and muscular Adonis is clothed in a dazzling red tunic prefiguring the flower that he is to become; he is the incarnation of a Greek statue, his body standing out against the luminous sky that Venus has abandoned for love of him. At his feet, a little Cupid pleadingly clasps one of his thighs; the presence of the god of love and his quiver evokes the first cause of this tragic encounter. But for the duration of the moment, it is love rather than tragedy that prevails. Thus Rubens transforms the *Metamorphoses* themselves into a symbol of marital love.

Rubens was a devout Roman Catholic, yet his paintings while religious in theme were not influenced by the dogma of his era. He interjected a lusty exuberance into his work rather than staying strictly to his academic, traditional forms. This painting was completed near the end of his life at a time when he struggled with arthritis almost daily.

The Judgement of Paris

The Judgement of Paris refers to any of the several paintings of the Judgement of Paris produced by Peter Paul Rubens, though he did not match the 22 depictions of the subject attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder. The large versions of 1636 and 1638 are among the best known. These both show Rubens' version of idealised feminine beauty, with the goddesses Venus, Minerva and Juno on one side and Paris accompanied by Mercury on the other (the 1636 version has a putto at the far left and Alecto above the goddesses, whilst the 1638 version adds a putto between Minerva and Venus).



The Judgement of Paris 1632-35 *The Judgement of Paris* c1636

The 1636 version follows the story as narrated in Lucian's 'Judgement of the Goddesses'. It shows the award of the golden apple, though alterations show Rubens first painted an earlier point in the story, when the goddesses are ordered to undress by Mercury.[1] It was bought for the National Gallery in London in 1844.



The Judgement of Paris 1638-39

Painted in 1638 or 1639, this version is now in the Prado and was completed shortly before his death while he was ill with gout. It was commissioned by Philip IV of Spain's brother Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand of Austria and on Ferdinand's death moved to the Spanish royal collection. In 1788 Charles III of Spain decided it was immodest and ordered it to be burned, but he died before that order could be carried out.

Banqueting House 1636



The Union of the Crowns, The Apotheosis of James I and The Peaceful Reign of James I.

Inside the building is a single two-storey, double-cube room. The double-cube, in which the length of the room is twice its equal width and height, is another Palladianism, where all proportions are mathematically related.

The ceiling of the Banqueting House is a masterpiece and the only surviving in-situ ceiling painting by Sir Peter Paul Rubens. It is also one of the most famous from a golden age of painting. It composed of two canvasses measure 28x20ft (9x6m) and two others 40x10ft (13x3m).

The ceiling was one of Charles I's last sights before he lost his head. The King was executed on a scaffold outside in 1649.

The canvases were installed in the hall in 1636. The three main canvasses depict ***The Union of the Crowns, The Apotheosis of James I and The Peaceful Reign of James I.***

An ambitious artwork

'I confess that I am, by natural instinct, better fitted to execute very large works than small curiosities.' Rubens in a 1621 letter to James I's agent was not deterred by the large scale of the commission.

When the canvases were first unrolled on the floor, Inigo Jones and Rubens' assistants realised with mounting horror that they wouldn't fit in the ceiling. The problem had occurred because although both Belgium and England measured in feet and inches, each country used a different length for a foot. Drastic moderations had to be made on site to make them fit.

Rubens died from heart failure, which was a result of his chronic gout on 30 May 1640.

