

The Rubenianum Quarterly

2022
4

Fallow land

With remarkable swiftness the majestic courtyard of the Rubens House has been transformed into a mundane construction yard. Building materials are piled up on both sides of the central path as a small digger noisily manoeuvres its way in and out of the site. The rusticated Doric columns of the portico and their more slender unrusticated companions have all been encased in sturdy protective wooden structures whose humble materiality and practical purpose contrast strongly with the architectural treasure they temporarily obscure.

Whereas the portico opened up onto a verdant garden until October, it now gives access to barren terrain. A monumental yew tree stands as a lone evergreen sentinel over an otherwise deserted garden, bar a few leafless lime trees. Tree trunks have been wrapped in protective layers of coiled tubing and the root zone of the yew is demarcated by the unsightly orange barrier fencing mesh that is omnipresent on building sites the world over. With the parterres and planting gone, spread over other sites throughout the city, the garden looks much larger. Without visitors, the emptiness is complete. A beautifully curved large stone bench, normally a magnet for visitors, sits empty and looks rather lost and bereft.

I'll admit that the view from the offices in Kolveniersstraat has been unsettling for my colleagues and me. In August, we received more than three thousand visitors in the garden in a single night, welcoming our guests with a cocktail based on ingredients from Rubens's garden, including his favourite fruit, the fig. We all fondly remember such events. They showed the garden to best advantage: buzzing with colour and activity. This garden has been worked very hard for a very long time. This brief winter feels like a rare period of rest. The quiet that descends on this special blank plot after hours is in a sense magical. It befits the time of year, a lull in the tide. The barren terrain doesn't just speak of things past; it also speaks of things to come, of potential, of future growth. My colleagues and I hope that the holiday season has offered you and yours a stretch of fallow land, a place to reminisce about what has been, and to look forward to what is to come. | Bert Watteuw

Dear Friends of the Rubenianum,

As you read this, the doors of the Rubens House will have closed for the long-anticipated renovation of the building's technical facilities. It is a bittersweet moment. While it is absolutely necessary to make these fundamental interventions to guarantee twenty-first-century museum standards, it is sad at the same time to have to wait until 2027 before we can walk again through those atmospheric rooms, whose displays in recent years have gained so much in charm and richness and variety.

Luckily, the recently published Corpus volume on Rubens's House allows us to delve in the meantime into the history of the house, the written and pictorial sources about its original appearance and the sources of inspiration for Rubens's design. It offers once again top-notch scholarship, and is a great read at the same time.

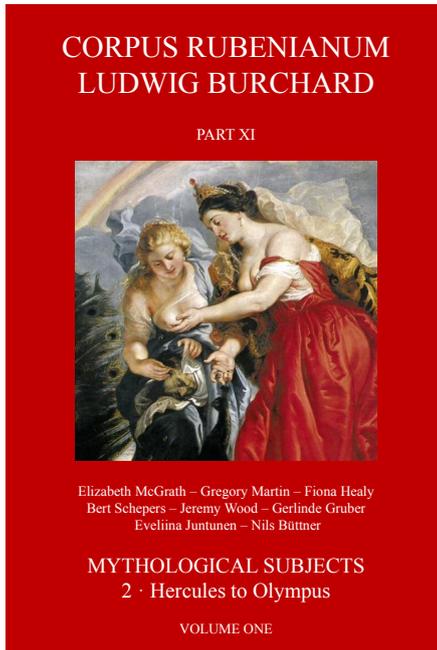
The new Rubenianum building on Hopland is also starting to emerge. While one remains apprehensive of the visual impact on the garden of its massive rear façade, which harks back to a nearly brutalist architectural idiom, it is undoubtedly good news that visitor facilities will be enhanced and that the Centrum Rubenianum will be housed in a modern and functional space. It also offers the prospect of the present, ungainly Rubenianum building being demolished and replaced with a tree-lined open space in front of the Kolveniershof. Something to look forward to as well!

Thomas Leysen
Chairman
Rubenianum Fund



Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, Part XI.2

Mythological Subjects: Hercules to Olympus by Elizabeth McGrath et al.



Volume One of Part XI: *Mythological Subjects* ranged from A to G, Achilles to the Graces. The present Volume Two continues, with themes from H to O, Hercules to the Olympian gods – the latter as seen assembled on Olympus in the ambitious early painting made in Mantua (Prague, Castle Picture Gallery). This new volume (or rather pair of volumes) features stories of, among others, Jupiter, Juno, Medea, Meleager, Medusa, the Centaur Nessus and Nymphs. Volume Three, to appear shortly, will start from Paris and his momentous Judgement and conclude with the many illustrations of Venus, goddess of love.

No fewer than eight authors have combined forces to produce *Hercules to Olympus*. Three of us were needed to deal with Hercules alone, since Rubens's treatment of that substantial hero is so extensive and varied. Rubens's fascination with Hercules goes back to the artist's youth, and the muscular ancient statue in the Farnese collection in Rome which he knew from prints before he saw and copied the original. Rubens was intrigued by the character as well as the physique of Hercules. Proverbially strong, the hero was often seen as the very exemplar of *Virtus*, the monsters he conquered interpreted as symbols of evil. But he could succumb disastrously to the temptations of wine or women. Hercules' subjection to his lover Omphale is manifested in an astonishing picture in the Louvre which captures the paradoxical predicament of this so human of demi-gods, humiliated in a game of cross-dressing (or rather undressing) and the swapping of gender roles. *Hercules and*

Omphale was painted while Rubens was still in Italy and is inspired by ancient imagery as well as ancient texts; it also includes witty allusions to the art of the Renaissance. Hercules was to be the subject of the very last of Rubens's paintings, for the Alcázar in Madrid, the palace of the Spanish king Philip IV. The artist laboured on these through the pain of increasingly frequent and crippling episodes of gout – and the burden of the commissions may have hastened his death. They included a whole series on the deeds of the hero which was lost when the palace went up in flames in 1734 and can be reimagined only partially through surviving designs and copies. But, happily, despite other losses, such as a *Leda and the Swan*, mentioned briefly in documents, there is still a great deal of Rubens's mythological output that has survived relatively unscathed.

The works in this volume range widely in date, size and character. They differ, too, in the extent of studio participation in their execution. At times it is difficult to decide whether the best extant version of a composition really is the prime version, the *principaal*. One such case is the *Death of Leander*, a composition which Rubens appears to have painted in Italy but revised back home in Antwerp. The painting in Yale, usually regarded as the primary version, is here argued to be a studio copy of the first stage of the design, while the version in Dresden is presented as a copy of the final version. A contrasting example is that of the extraordinary *Head of Medusa*, an early work of collaboration between Rubens and Frans Snyders showing the monstrous Gorgon oozing serpents out onto the Libyan desert. The analysis of the little-known version of the composition in Brno proves that the more famous painting in Vienna, generally celebrated as the original, is a secondary production. It was almost certainly the Brno painting that in the early 1630s frightened visitors at the house of the merchant Nicholas Sohier in Amsterdam.

The paintings assembled here differ also in the manner of their preparation. Some were planned in preliminary drawings and/or oil sketches; others were evidently worked out, or at least modified and enlarged, in the process of execution. One such is Rubens's *Juno and Argus* (Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum), a sumptuous illustration of how the goddess Juno sets the hundred eyes of her dead watchman, Argus, in the tails of her peacocks – a showpiece of learning and artistry on the theme of colour and sight. Astonishingly, Rubens seems to have painted this large and ambitious work without a commission.

The same was probably true of the *Deception of Ixion by Juno* (showing the king of the Lapiths making love to a cloud in the shape of Juno while the goddess escapes) – a work recorded in the estate of a gilt-leather merchant in Amsterdam in 1640. Nor, surely, was the celebrated *Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus* (Munich, Alte Pinakothek) painted by Rubens to order. That picture, so often held up as a model Baroque composition, can be seen almost as an art-theoretical manifesto. At the same time, it is inspired by the ancient poet Ovid, who, in his *Art of Love*, particularly commends the example of the forcible seizure of the Leucippus by the Dioscuri as a model for hesitant lovers.

Many more of the themes in this book derive from Ovid's poetry, especially his *Metamorphoses*, such as the wonderful illustration of Mercury piping to sleep the hundred-eyed Argus (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie), a pastoral scene the calm of which will evidently soon be shattered, as the god is silently drawing the sword which will sever Argus's head from his neck and free Io – who is nearby in the form of a cow. Rubens often found ingenious ways to represent in visual terms an atmosphere which Ovid had captured in words. The same is true of Ovid's poignant psychological details. For example, the nymph Callisto's wary look, stiffening posture and chastely crossed legs in *Jupiter and Callisto* (Kassel, Gemäldegalerie) reveal her growing sense that she is approached not by her beloved goddess, Diana, but by a threatening imposter – Jupiter in disguise.

Nymphs abound in this volume in more relaxed situations. The chaste followers of Diana spend more time – in Rubens's art at least – resting or sleeping after the hunt, than they do in hunting. In these situations, they can be spied on by satyrs. But with the nymphs of the fields, those free spirits of woodland and water whom Rubens loved to illustrate, we find happy scenes of collaboration with satyrs. In these, good-humoured Rubensian satyrs help the nymphs collect the fruits of the Earth for the cornucopia – so as to keep filled to eternal overflow that symbol of well-being and fecundity in the natural world, a topic to which Rubens was constantly drawn. The magnificent *Nymphs and Satyrs Gathering Fruit* (Madrid, Prado), which the artist kept for himself and expanded and reworked in the last decade of his life, is surely the most joyous of Rubens's celebrations of earthly fertility. It seems to express joy in its very making, the intense pleasure that Rubens found in creating the masterpieces collected in our volumes. | Elizabeth McGrath

Heads up! A newly discovered head study by Rubens

Ben van Beneden

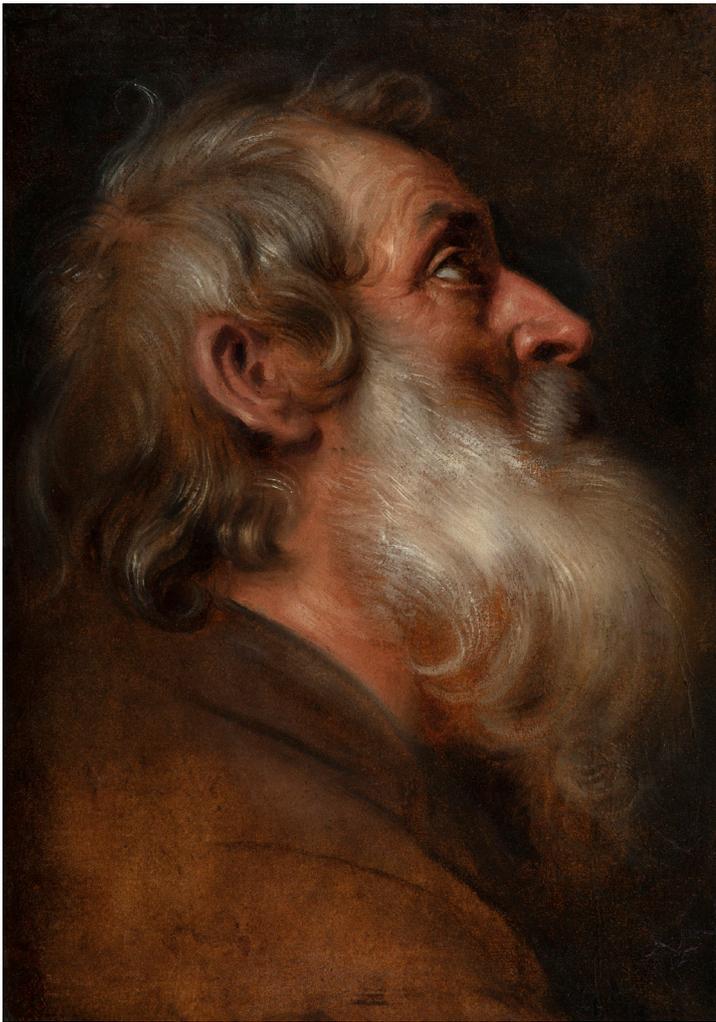


Fig. 1 Rubens, *Head of a Bearded Man, Facing Right and Gazing Upwards*, c. 1604. Oil on paper, mounted on panel (tinted lime wood?),¹ 39.6 × 28.3 cm.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Rubens's varied studio practice is his systematic use of head studies. The nearly sixty surviving ones have recently been catalogued by Nico Van Hout,² but there must have been many more, for now and then another one surfaces.

Painted with unhesitating verve, this previously unpublished study of a man's head in full profile, until recently in a private European collection, is an important addition to the existing corpus of Rubens's head studies. With furrowed brow, raised eyebrows, straggly hair and an overgrown grey-white beard, the man raises his head and gazes upwards. Strong light illuminates the subject from above, casting his right eye socket in deep shadow. Although the head of the figure seems quite finished,

his shirt is described with just a few swift brushstrokes.

Head of a Bearded Man, Facing Right and Gazing Upwards is among the earliest examples of the spontaneous, rapid studies painted by the artist *ad vivum* from a model in the studio, to record a particular face for use in larger, multi-figure compositions. Some of these studies were made with a specific commission in mind, while others simply captured the features of an engaging sitter and were intended for later use. Although an inscription in Italian on an old label on the back of the panel wrongly connects this study to 'King David' by Rubens and Jan Boeckhorst in Frankfurt am Main,³ there can be little doubt about its authorship. The quality of the execution, as evidenced by the astoundingly vivid and lifelike portrayal of the sitter, the variety and fluidity of the strokes that define the different features of the head, and the masterful rendition of light and volume clearly support an attribution to Rubens.



Fig. 2 Rubens, *Transfiguration*, 1604–05 (detail). Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nancy.



Fig. 3 Rubens, *St Gregory the Great Surrounded by Other Saints*, 1607 (detail). Musée de Grenoble.

This powerful sketch was most likely made in preparation for the head of the upward-looking apostle standing on the extreme left in Rubens's *Transfiguration* (fig. 2),⁴ one of three giant *teleri* – each more than 4 metres high and almost 7 metres wide – that formed part of his first important Gonzaga commission: the decoration of the *cappella maggiore* of the Santissima Trinità, the Jesuit church in Mantua, which played a central role in civic life. This monumental project, completed in 1605, finally offered Rubens the chance to demonstrate what he was capable of and to show his profound admiration for his Italian sources by paying homage not only to ancient sculpture but also to Michelangelo, Raphael and Tintoretto, while at the same time displaying brilliantly confident brushwork. Over the high altar, the central canvas represented the *Gonzaga Family in Adoration of the Trinity*, flanked on the side walls by the *Baptism of Christ* and the *Transfiguration*.

The *Adoration of the Trinity*, now in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua, is only partially preserved; the *Baptism of Christ* is in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp.⁵

Although the style of Rubens's *Transfiguration* seems an overt response to the energy and approach of Tintoretto, the composition as a whole faithfully follows Raphael's famous portrayal of the subject,⁶ the most monumental altarpiece he ever painted, in which the Transfiguration is ingeniously combined with the very next episode from the Gospels, with Christ healing a possessed boy after the apostles fail to do so.⁷ One major consequence of this highly innovative conception is that the nine usually submissive apostles appear prominently in the left foreground of the composition, with the boy's family and their companions over to the right. The bewildered apostles are clearly unable to cure the boy. The vehemence of their gestures and facial expressions, and the fact that two of them gaze upwards and one of them points to the Transfiguration taking place on top of Mount Tabor, make it obvious to the viewer that something miraculous is happening. Among much else, both masterpieces reveal a striking capacity to treat the apostles as individuals, not only in their responses to the drama unfolding before them but also in the distribution of light and shade across their features.

Like Raphael, by whom there exist no fewer than six stunning black chalk drawings for the heads of seven of the remaining nine apostles,⁸ Rubens, too, must have carefully prepared the many expressive heads of the foreground figures of his *Transfiguration* in drawn or painted studies.⁹ Unfortunately, however, none seem to have survived.¹⁰ The only head study by Rubens that, until now, could be securely connected to the *Transfiguration* is the Caravaggesque head of a young man gazing upwards,¹¹ which was originally painted as the model for the head of the youth who tries to shield Christ from his tormentors in *The Mocking of Christ* of 1601–02, made for Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome.¹² Rubens must have been particularly pleased with this head because he also used it, in reverse, for the head of the kneeling apostle in the centre front of the *Transfiguration* (see fig. 2, bottom right), as well as in several other paintings. Interestingly, this head study was also painted on paper and later mounted on panel.

It seems reasonable to assume, however, that Rubens made more head studies for the *Transfiguration*.

He probably even made a prototype for each of the figures in this ambitious history painting. Documentary references survive to a number of now-lost head studies by Rubens, including this listing in an inventory drawn up on 10 November 1665: 'Nel camerino nel detto corridoio della Guardarobba in Palazzo Ducale [in Mantua] sono registrati' ... 'Duoi quadretti di bozzatura di due teste, di mano de Rubens'.¹³ Perhaps they were left in his Mantuan studio upon his return to Antwerp in 1608.¹⁴ Although the fate of these sketches is unknown, it is tempting to believe that the present head study may be one of them.

Head of a Bearded Man, Facing Right and Gazing Upwards was not only used in the *Transfiguration* but may also have served as the source for the head of St Gregory in *St Gregory the Great Surrounded by Other Saints* (Musée de Grenoble, 1607), which was destined for the high altar of the so-called Chiesa Nuova or Santa Maria in Vallicella, the Oratorians' church in Rome (fig. 3).¹⁵ At the time of the commission, this was the most famous and the most popular church in the Eternal City. When executing the altarpiece, however, Rubens made some minor alterations to the model's face and the position of his head. The saint is seen in three-quarter profile in front of an ancient arch, looking up at the Holy Ghost, which appears to him in the form of a dove.

Making head studies from a live model had its roots in early Netherlandish and ultimately Italian practice. In sixteenth-century Antwerp, history painters such as Frans Floris (1519/20–70) used painted head studies as an essential part of their working method, and the procedure was later embraced by such artists as Rubens, Jordaens and Van Dyck. Although Rubens must have been familiar with Floris's sketches, his own head studies are more directly related to examples by nearly contemporaneous Italian artists including Federico Barocci (c. 1535–1612) and Annibale Carracci (1560–1609).¹⁶ Both artists also made head studies in oil on paper in preparation for paintings – a practice that Rubens adopted,¹⁷ as seen in the present sketch. When he was living in Italy, he generally painted his head studies on paper, and after his return to Antwerp, he also made use of that medium (as did his best-known assistants and colleagues, Jordaens and Van Dyck). Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the recently rediscovered study for the self-portrait Rubens is said to have included in the *Adoration of the Trinity* or *Pala della Trinità* – the principle

painting of the decoration of the *cappella maggiore* of the Santissima Trinità – was also painted on paper and later laid down on canvas.¹⁸ At some point the present sheet was laid down on a tinted wooden support, possibly lime wood. An old label, fixed to the back of the panel with a wax seal, bears the number '43' in elegant eighteenth-century handwriting. Most likely this is an old inventory number.

Head of a Bearded Man, Facing Right and Gazing Upwards is an important addition to Rubens's corpus of *ad vivum* studies, not only on account of its outstanding quality but also because it is one of only a handful of head studies to have survived from the artist's Italian period. The fact that the facial features of the model appear in two of Rubens's most important early commissions makes this discovery all the more exciting.

1 Although technical research has not yet been carried out on the sketch, it was examined out of its frame by the present author.

2 Nico Van Hout, *Study Heads. Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard XX (2)*, 2 vols, London and Turnhout, 2020.

3 'P. P. [R]ubens / v. Le Roi David – Istituto d'Arte / di Francoforte sul Meno –'. Rubens, reworked by Jan Boeckhorst (1604–68), *Head Study of a Bearded Old Man, Looking Up in Profile to the Left ('King David')*, 1616, oil on panel, 84 × 68 cm, with later additions by Jan Boeckhorst, c. 1645, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main. See Van Hout 2020, pp. 210–15, no. 82.

4 Oil on canvas, 407 × 670 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nancy.

5 Oil on canvas, 411 × 675 cm.

6 Michael Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy*, London 1977, p. 26.

7 The *Transfiguration* (oil on panel, 410 × 279 cm, Musei Vaticani, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City), which was not quite finished at the time of Raphael's death on 6 April 1520, was commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici – the future Pope Clement VII – for Narbonne Cathedral, but was presented instead by the patron in 1523 to the church of S. Pietro in Montorio in Rome, where it served as the high altarpiece.

8 Achim Gnann (ed.), *Raphael*, exh. cat. Vienna (Albertina Museum), Munich 2017, pp. 422–32, nos. 143–46.

9 Cf. Van Hout 2020, p. 24.

10 Cf. Van Hout 2020, p. 25.

11 *Head Study of a Youth, Turned to the Left*, c. 1602, oil on paper, mounted on panel, 34.9 × 23.4 cm, The University of Texas at Austin, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX. See Van Hout 2020, pp. 75–77, no. 1.

12 Oil on panel, 224 × 180 cm, Cathédrale Notre-Dame-du-Puy, Grasse. See Hans Vlieghe, *Saints. Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard VIII*, 2 vols., Brussels 1972–73, II, pp. 62–4, no. 111, fig. 34.

13 Giancarlo Schizzerotto, *Rubens a Mantova: fra Gesuiti, principi e pittori, con spigolature sul suo soggiorno italiano (1600–1608)*, Mantua 1979, p. 125, n. 3. Cited in Van Hout 2020, p. 25, n. 39.

14 Van Hout 2020, p. 25.

15 Oil on canvas, 477 × 288 cm. See Vlieghe, *Saints*, II, pp. 43–50, no. 109, fig. 23.

16 Van Hout 2020, pp. 23–24.

17 On the supports of Rubens's head studies, see Van Hout 2020, pp. 25–27.

18 Ben van Beneden, 'After the Plague', *The Rubenianum Quarterly* 2020/1; id., "In atto d'ammirar tutto il quadro". Ein frühes Selbstbildnis von Rubens', in Nils Büttner and Sandra-Kristin Diefenthaler (eds), *Becoming Famous: Peter Paul Rubens*, exh. cat. Stuttgart (Staatsgalerie), 2021–22.

Alive in books: Arnout Balis's library incorporated

Ute Staes

While we were mourning the sudden passing of our beloved colleague Arnout Balis in September 2021, the preservation of the inspiring Rubens scholar's intellectual legacy was of primary and immediate concern. His home in Brussels, filled to the brim with books and notes, contained a crucial part of his legacy. In close collaboration with his family, we made a selection of books from his collection to add to the Rubenianum library.

The complementarity of Arnout's library with ours was very striking. He clearly did not find it necessary to add art books he could find in Antwerp to his own collection, once the Rubenianum had become a permanent workplace for him from the early 1980s onwards. His library reflected his immense erudition and the variety of subjects he was interested in.

The amount of books on European history was as extensive as his collection on art. He read an imposing amount of thought-provoking literature on psychology and philosophy and kept reprints of various religious writings and mystical theories. Animals, nature, colour, book history, a truly impressive quantity of multilingual dictionaries, and so on ... the list of subjects that drew Arnout's interest seems almost endless. From chic exhibition catalogues to cheap paperbacks: his hunger for new perspectives was insatiable and he did not care what format knowledge came in. Almost all of his books bear the marks of being read: the bent book spines and a variety of personal mementoes – museum entrance passes, train and bus tickets, postcards – used as improvised bookmarks clearly indicated that all his books at least

at one particular point in time aroused his encyclopaedic interest. He hardly ever annotated the books themselves but had the habit of jotting down his summaries, thoughts and critical remarks on notepads with the blue Bic biro he always carried in his front pocket.

During the past year we have worked tirelessly to add over 880 new titles from the Arnout Balis collection – an estimated 25 metres of shelves – to our catalogue. Some of these books are alternative translations or editions of titles that were already available in our library; others are additions steering the Rubenianum collection and, we hope, the study of Rubens and the Old Masters in new directions. For an overview of these titles, please contact us via rubenianum@antwerpen.be.

MFA Boston's Center for Netherlandish Art visiting Antwerp

Abigail Newman

From 17–19 October 2022 the Rubens House and Rubenianum welcomed a delegation from the recently founded Center for Netherlandish Art (CNA), Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston. Thanks to the generous support of the Flemish Government, not only were we able to bring to Antwerp Christopher Atkins, Van Otterloo-Weatherbie Director of the CNA; Antien Knaap, MFA Assistant Curator of Paintings, Art of Europe; and Jeffrey Muller, Brown University Professor and CNA Adviser, but we organized an extensive programme to introduce them to Belgian colleagues. More than fifty participants from Belgian museums, universities, research centres and other relevant organizations attended the programme – including those hailing from Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Ghent, Leuven, Louvain-la-Neuve and Mechelen. Also in Antwerp for the programme were two of the three inaugural CNA fellows, the doctoral students Emily Hirsch of Brown University and Braden Lee Scott of McGill University.

After tours of the Rubens House and Rubenianum, the official programme began, featuring introductory presentations about the CNA and the Rubens House and Rubenianum, followed by round tables. Spread across three days, the round tables focused on museum directions, transatlantic academic exchange, interdisciplinary research, art-historical institutions and funding opportunities. They offered a chance for participants to



introduce themselves, their institutions and their current projects to their colleagues from across the pond, and they also provided a forum for dialogues about the challenges and opportunities we all face, not to mention a context for sketching our ambitions for collaboration in the future.

Two lectures deepened the programme: one by Koen Bulckens, Curator of Old Masters, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp (KMSKA), on Rubens's workshop as a centre of knowledge production and sharing, and the other by Bert Watteuw, Director of the Rubens House and Rubenianum, on the historical landscape surrounding Rubens's country manor, Het Steen. A special treat for the delegation was a trip, immediately following the latter lecture, to see Het Steen and walk in the

landscape on a glorious autumn day. Visits to a private collection and a special tour of the newly reopened KMSKA with Nico Van Hout, Head of Collections, as well as Bulckens, were also highlights of the visit.

During the round tables, over coffee, and during the lunches, the visit offered a chance for the CNA delegation to exchange ideas with colleagues in Belgium. And since one of the delegates we had planned to bring to Antwerp, Marije Spek, CNA Program Manager, unfortunately could not attend due to illness, her visit has been postponed and will offer an appropriate coda to the programme when she comes to Antwerp in March 2023. We look forward to welcoming her then and further strengthening the bonds between the CNA and the Rubens House and Rubenianum.

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