

# The Rubenianum Quarterly

2017  
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## In Memoriam Eric Le Jeune 1934–2017

The Rubenianum is sad to report the passing of Mr Eric Le Jeune on 31 March of this year. With Mr Le Jeune, we have lost an exceptionally dedicated patron.

In February 2010, Mr Le Jeune was one of the invitees to the splendid launch event of the Rubenianum Fund in the Rubens House, co-organized by his daughter Catherine. Thus, he became a donor of the first hour. But well before that memorable evening, Mr Le Jeune was acquainted with the Rubenianum. As a committed *liefhebber* – and collector – of old master paintings, he was a regular visitor of our reading room, through which he discovered and appreciated the wealth of our scholarly resources. Many years later, he would enrich our holdings by donating a collection of auction catalogues that enabled us to fill some lacunae in our documentation.

In 2011 and 2012, when the Corpus team was becoming fully operational and the overall activity of the institute had increased, every now and then Mr Le Jeune sought personal contact with the Rubenianum. On the occasion of lunch meetings or behind-the-scenes tours he showed a vivid and genuine interest in what we did and how we did it. His enquiries betrayed an insatiable will to know and understand, as well as an unrelenting commitment to our goals. In every conversation – spoken in a very distinguished Oxford English that he retained from his student years – he expressed his wish to take up an active role in the operations. Eventually this led to an intense and privileged collaboration in 2015 and 2016, when a two-phased project on Flemish landscape painting around 1600 took off. Two generous donations, matched by the city of Antwerp, allowed us to hire a project associate who registered our documentation on Flemish landscape painters in *RKDiImages* and elaborated on the case studies of Marten Ryckaert and Gillis II van Coninxloo.

Eric Le Jeune was the opposite of a distant or anonymous Maecenas. He closely followed the project, encouraging its progress along the way, enjoying the results as they appeared online. One reason for his personal involvement was that his professional base once had been Jan Breughel the Elder's house and workshop in Arenbergstraat, which had led to a lasting interest in landscape art. Moreover, it was very important to him that his gesture enabled a talented young art historian, Elise Boutsen, to gain professional experience and develop an expertise that has since been recognized by colleagues in Belgium and abroad.

In his eagerness to learn, many times a sense of impatience shimmered through, as if he feared that there would not be enough time to explore his many interests. It is further testimony of his heartfelt passion for art history that when, in 2016, he received the news that time indeed was beginning to run out, he consolidated his patronage by making additional donations to both the Corpus Rubenianum and our institute. The vivid and positive spirit of Eric Le Jeune's support will continue to inspire us, and prevail in our grateful memories.

Véronique Van de Kerckhof



*Dear Friends of the Rubenianum,*

*With the passing of Eric Le Jeune, the Rubenianum community lost a good and very loyal friend. He was charming, unfailingly courteous and truly erudite, as well as generous. We will miss a true gentleman in our midst.*

*It is thanks to people like him that our great project is now gradually nearing completion, for it is on people who combine an eye for art, an appreciation for scholarship and a capacity for generosity that the Rubenianum Fund is built. We have now reached some one hundred donors and benefactors, and this means that we will attain our ultimate goals.*

*The critical acclaim for recently published Corpus volumes is impressive. Our thanks for that go, of course, in the first instance to our authors and the dedicated and highly professional editorial team in Antwerp. But none of this would be possible without the far-sightedness and the public-spiritedness of a growing number of art lovers of which Eric Le Jeune was such an outstanding representative.*

*Thomas Leysen  
Chairman Rubenianum Fund*

## Rubens's *Return from Egypt* returns home

In 2011 the Rubenianum was contacted by the board of trustees of the church of St Charles Borromeo for provenance data on a painting that was coming up for auction. It turned out to be the original work produced by Rubens around 1620–24 for the St Joseph chapel. With some good fortune, the church was able to acquire it.

At a first investigation of the painting in the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage opinions were divided on the quality of the work. This was primarily due to the work's condition at the time: thick layers of discoloured varnish, heavy overpainting and a considerable amount of dirt made an assessment almost impossible. Meticulous preliminary research provided the basis for the treatment that was later carried out. The work was carefully studied and documented photographically (under normal and ultraviolet light, X-radiography, infra-red reflectography). Source research was broadened to chart the material history of the work. Yet it was only in the final treatment that the painting began to reveal some of its secrets. The restoration enables us to reconstruct large parts of the painting's journey and reach a better understanding of its state, with major losses and wear in the paint layer.

An initial dramatic event that determined the work's later condition was the fire in the church in 1718, a little under a century after the painting had been installed. Contemporary sources focus on the lost ceilings by Rubens and his studio, but remain silent about the condition of the present painting. Yet we see clear signs of excessive cleaning and possible remnants of soot particles. The abrasive nature of this cleaning might explain the damage in the dark areas and the sky. Overpainting linked to this damage can be clearly discerned, particularly in the sky, and should be seen as the effort of a local painter to improve the work's legibility.

When the Society of Jesus was suppressed in 1773, the contents of the church were sold. The main altars, including Rubens's, were shipped to Austria, where they can still be seen in the collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Whenever a work changes hands there is a chance that it will be restored. There are traces of at least two local interventions, primarily limited to real areas of damage. We know for certain that the *Return from Egypt* remained in Belgium until 1830, after which it spent a brief time in an English private collection.

In 1870 the painting was bought by the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The Rubens was their biggest new acquisition; so big that they had to break down a

wall to get it into the gallery. With some exaggeration, one newspaper wrote:

'The Return from Egypt' by Rubens, engraved by Bolswert, a picture all the more precious in that it is the only Rubens saved from the burning of the Church of the Jesuits, is a large picture, the figures of life size, of great beauty and in perfect condition...'

The New York press also reported on the restoration work that was carried out in subsequent years. Between 1883 and 1906 there were three interventions, the first of which markedly changed the work's appearance.

There were, at the time, considerable problems with the paint layer, most notably recurrent tenting – perhaps triggered by an unreliable heating system and the sea journeys that the painting had made – that the restorers were powerless to deal with. In keeping with common practice (and the knowledge of the time) they decided to transfer the paint layer to a new support. The original wooden panel was completely removed using planes and chisels; a delicate operation that was not without risk. Some of the damage, particularly around Jesus and Joseph, can be linked to this intervention. Today only the vertical lines in the composition show that it was originally a panel painting: they are remnants of old joints between the planks. To hide the damage done a large part of the original was overpainted, perhaps on the basis of the engraving after the painting. The plants that can be seen in the foreground of the print were added, although never having been part of the painting's original composition.

After this intervention the painting was restored twice more within a span of under a decade, each time with considerable press attention. The first restoration was received well. According to the *New York Sun* it brought the true Rubens out. Despite these positive comments, in 1906 the painting was again subjected to cleaning. This time the reaction was roundly negative. Dr Charles M. Kurtz, director of the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, inspired a polemic that led to a minor controversy. His criticism was that



the restorer went too far in his cleaning. This criticism can now, however, be laid to rest: the amount of overpainting found in the current restoration means that the restorers of 1906 cannot possibly have got down to the original paint layer.

At some point – it is not clear exactly when – the museum put the painting in storage. Certainly from the 1940s onwards it was no longer accessible to researchers and art historians, which explains why so little is known about the work. By 1980 nobody in the museum was convinced it was a real Rubens and the painting was de-accessioned. After having been part of a private collection, it was offered for sale five years ago and bought by the Church of St Charles Borromeo.

The restoration took almost three years to complete. The complexity of the successive layers that had to be removed necessitated work in stages. The project was monitored by a committee of Rubens specialists, including some from the Rubenianum.

Despite all the damage, the painting continues to testify to the tremendous quality of the work of Rubens and his studio, which the restoration has managed to bring to light again. The most exceptional thing is that today we are able to return the painting to the altar for which it was painted, in a location that has kept its original function. For the Church of St Charles Borromeo, and for Antwerp, this is the return of a forgotten familiar, and a new Rubens. | Karen Bonne, Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels



# The Ministry of Christ Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard XIII/2

Koen Bulckens

This volume of the Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard describes forty-eight works by Rubens's workshop that depict the 'Ministry of Christ', an odd term for the events of Christ's life between the Baptism and the Passion. The images thus show Christ mature and alive and well, spreading his teachings and performing miracles. Paintings that represent the passion of John the Baptist are also included, as John's death is recounted after the baptism in the gospels of Mark and Matthew.

The demarcation of this book, based solely on biblical chronology, would probably not have made much sense to Rubens. Nothing indicates that the artist somehow distinguished between the present category of images and his other religious compositions or history paintings. The brief overview that follows is therefore restricted to a few observations on the group of works as a whole. Additionally, it will single out some noteworthy cases that are indicative of Rubens's broader practices, or issues in Rubens research.

The vast majority of the works discussed in the book was made during the 1610s. (There are but two earlier drawings, and six late works from the 1630s.) In the winter of 1608, Rubens returned to Antwerp from an eight-year sojourn in Italy. He set up a workshop, and within a few years' time became the leading painter North of the Alps. The Low Countries had declined because of the religious wars of the sixteenth century, but 1609 marked the beginning of the Twelve Years Truce, which triggered an economic and cultural revival in Antwerp. The decoration of the city's churches had been destroyed during the iconoclastic furies, and the Truce provided the occasion to redecorate them. New churches were erected too. Antwerp became a display for the Catholic splendour of the Counter-Reformation. Rubens's workshop, painting a great amount of large altarpieces, played an important part in this process. The painter had returned at the right moment.

However, while all works in this book have a biblical subject matter, only a few were painted for a religious context. One of these rare examples is the triptych with the *Miraculous Draught of Fishes* (1618–19) in the church of Our-Lady-Across-the-Dijle in Mechelen (Malines). The centre part shows Peter kneeling before Christ on a mooring boat, while fishermen pull in heavily filled nets. The altarpiece was commissioned by the Mechelen Guild of Fishmongers, which explains the choice of subject. Still, it is important to note that the story is about more than just fish. Peter had followed Christ's command



Rubens, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, 1618–19. Church of Our-Lady-Across-the-Dijle, Mechelen

to go out fishing at a time when chances of catching something were negligible. However, he showed faith in Christ and obedience to the word of God, which was generously rewarded in the end. The theme of obedience and reward also recurs in the wings and predella of the triptych.

Most of Rubens's altarpieces, however, show scenes of the Nativity and the Passion, reflecting the two most prominent Christian feasts, or the lives and deaths of saints. The majority of Rubens's depictions of the Ministry of Christ were meant to hang in private galleries, where they, unlike altarpieces, did not have a liturgical or devotional function. Rather, the biblical scenes in such contexts were valued for their moral connotations and visual appeal.

Some works that figured in profane contexts were commissioned. The *Feast of Herod* (National Gallery, Edinburgh), for example, was probably painted for Gaspar de Roemer (before 1606–1674), a Flemish merchant living in Naples. De Roemer had a liking for paintings with a gruesome subject matter, and Rubens's depiction of Salome delivering John the Baptist's head at Herod's dining table would have suited his taste. Contemporary literary sources show that the story of John's death was understood as a warning against female machinations. They relate that Herod was tricked into beheading John by Herodias and Salome, his new wife and stepdaughter.

Rubens also produced works at his own initiative, which were kept in the workshop awaiting potential buyers. A famous letter written by the artist to Sir Dudley Carleton (1573–1632), the English ambassador in The Hague, attests to this practice.

Rubens wished to barter some of his works for a set of antique marbles Carleton had acquired in Italy, and therefore sent on a list of twelve paintings, 'the flower of his stock'. One of the works on this list, *The Tribute Money* (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin), is discussed in this volume. The composition resembles that on the left wing of the Mechelen Fishmongers' triptych. The Dublin picture has a landscape format and shows more figures. The chronology of the two paintings cannot be positively determined: Rubens was working on the Mechelen altarpiece at the time of his correspondence with Carleton. The fact that both works were in the studio simultaneously is, in this particular case, more intriguing than their respective chronology. One could consider them two variations on the same theme, rather than seeing one as derivative from or inferior to the other.



Rubens, *The Tribute Money*. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin





Rubens, *Feast in the House of Simon the Pharisee*. Oil sketch. Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna



Rubens, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*. Oil sketch. The National Gallery, London.

For the undocumented works constituting the larger part of this volume it is often impossible to decide whether they were commissioned or painted for the open market. Paintings like the *Feast of Herod* and the *Dublin Tribute Money* are essentially of a similar type: their sizes roughly correspond and there are no meaningful fluctuations in technique. The origin of many of the works discussed thus remains intangible. This said, Rubens's workshop also produced variants and copies of conspicuously low quality. These 'second rate' works were given due attention in this volume wherever possible, in an effort to better account for the full scope of the workshop's production.

The question of studio collaboration inevitably presents itself when researching paintings from Rubens's workshop. While attributing paintings or parts of them to specific collaborators is most of the time impossible, there are exceptions. For example, three paintings discussed in this book have long been considered the work of Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641). They are the triptych with the *Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, the *Feast in the House of Simon the Pharisee* (Hermitage, St Petersburg), and the *Raising of Lazarus* (formerly in Berlin, now destroyed). Van Dyck was presumably in Rubens's studio between 1617 and 1622, after completing his initial training with Hendrick van Balen (1575–1632). He displayed an exceptional talent at a young age, which Rubens recognized and put to his advantage. It is possible to pinpoint some of Van Dyck's contributions in Rubens paintings because his presence in the Rubens workshop is historically documented, and because we know contemporary works he painted under his own name. This solid basis has allowed for a continuing refinement by way of stylistic analysis.

The execution of a painting was but the final step in a long creative process. As the *Corpus Rubenianum* also includes preliminary studies, it offers a glimpse of the way in which new compositions were developed. About half of the works discussed in this volume are studies. They

were done in a variety of media: sketches in pen and ink, chalk drawings of individual figures, painted head studies, and oil sketches. Some of these were never worked out because Rubens either discarded the subject altogether or found a radically different solution. The remaining studies are treated in relation to the final works.

The preparatory process for the Hermitage *Feast in the House of Simon the Pharisee* is especially intriguing. There is an oil sketch for the composition (Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna), which differs from the final painting in a number of ways: a servant was added in the background, one of the dogs was left out, and the heads of the three apostles to Christ's right were changed. In the Vienna modello, these three faces are depicted rather coarsely. Interestingly, their counterparts in the Hermitage painting are based on head studies that have all been attributed to Van Dyck. The outline of one of these studies was added to the Vienna sketch in thin red chalk lines, keeping a visual record of the change of course in the preparatory stage. The apparent procedure here challenges traditional views of the workings of Rubens's shop. The general rule is that Rubens was responsible for all of the aspects of the design phase; however, in this case there is visual evidence of a dialogue of combined efforts. Earlier authors have suggested that the gifted Van Dyck had greater responsibilities in the workshop than other pupils. It may be hoped that Van Dyck's input becomes more clearly articulated through the study of specific examples. In turn, we must also remain open to re-evaluation of the input of other pupils in the design phase.

Although primarily known as a painter, Rubens also produced tapestries, sculptures and prints. His ventures into printmaking figure in this book on several occasions. In 1619, Rubens contacted Pieter van Veen (before 1563–1629), a lawyer in The Hague and brother of his teacher Otto van Veen, to secure the copyright of his engravings in the Northern Netherlands.

Rubens sent on a list of subjects to assure his correspondent that they did not touch upon sensitive religious or political matters. This list mentions an engraving after the Dublin version of *The Tribute Money*. Rubens wrote to Van Veen that he had 'a young man' working in his service as an engraver, who has been identified as Lucas Vorsterman (1595–1675). Through his laborious engraving technique, Vorsterman was able to capture the play of light in Rubens's paintings in print. Rubens had already contacted printmakers to reproduce his works shortly after his return from Italy, but the collaboration with Vorsterman heralded a new chapter in his graphic oeuvre.

Sometimes Rubens returned to early compositions later in his career, as he did with the *Miraculous Draught of Fishes*. He published a print with the subject in the 1630s, based on the Mechelen Fishmongers' altarpiece of 1618–19. The preparatory study for the engraving survives (National Gallery, London). In Rubens's workshop, such studies were usually done in pen and ink, sometimes with highlights in bodycolour, but the London sketch was done in oils. The Mechelen composition was substantially altered. In the engraving, Rubens shows the scene in a more spacious setting in a landscape format, and Christ's pose was changed to be more dynamic. Infra-red reflectograms show that the London sketch originally showed a faithful copy after the centre part of the Mechelen triptych. This initial drawing was probably done by an assistant. Rubens then began to revise the composition, gradually covering up the underdrawing with oil paint. Again, the preliminary process is most interesting: it is here that we can discern how ideas are formed.

I am especially grateful to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Antwerp and the Rubenianum Fund, as their support allowed me to study a substantial number of works 'in the flesh' while writing the manuscript. Such up-close observations, along with research in conservation files, have allowed me better to articulate the complex creative processes underlying the works in question.





Author Koen Bulckens (third from the left) surrounded by some of his CRLB colleagues at the launch of his newly published Corpus volume on *The Ministry of Christ* in Antwerp's St Charles Borromeo Church (23 June 2017).

## Collection of Marguerite Casteels

*Progress report*

It is our pleasure to inform our readers that the research archive of art historian Marguerite Casteels has finally been fully inventoried and is now available in our online database.

Casteels devoted her life to the study of Flemish sculpture from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Her files contain information on more than twenty artistic families, including Van den Eynde, Floris, Van Mildert, De Nole,

Van Ommen, Quellinus and Verbruggen. Especially worthy of mention is her vast photographic collection holding more than two thousand items, a detailed inventory of which is available.

While cataloguing her legacy, it became clear that Casteels must have been a busy bee: it is not hard to imagine her working hours and hours in archives, meticulously transcribing dozens and dozens of original records. The collection that she left behind must therefore offer a large amount of unused data for new scholars to explore.



## The Rubenianum Lectures

Sunday, 17 September 2017, 11 am

**KAREN BONNE**

Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage,  
Brussels

*An old acquaintance and a new Rubens. The turbulent adventures of Rubens's Return from Egypt and its reinstallation in St Charles Borromeo, Antwerp.*

*The lecture is in Dutch and takes place at the Rubenianum.*

## Rubens's Crypt at St James's

*200-year-old questions addressed in 2018*

When in 2018 spotlights in Antwerp will be turned to Rubens, this will also be true in a literal sense. An interdisciplinary team, coordinated by the city of Antwerp, is preparing to set up an archaeological survey of Rubens's crypt, situated below his memorial chapel in the central apse chapel of St James's Church – his parish church and still today one of the richest and best-preserved churches in Antwerp. Built for Rubens after his death in 1640, the chapel became, between 1644 and 1791, the final resting-place of Rubens, his second wife Helena Fourment, as well as some forty relatives and descendants. While the archaeological investigation is likely to bring up a variety of new data, the ambition is also to include the most advanced techniques in DNA and chemical analysis, conducted by outstanding forensic specialists from Leuven University among other places. The hopes are that the results will address the questions and legends that have surrounded Rubens's tomb since the 19th century, such as whether or not the master's remains are identifiable.



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