

The Rubenianum Quarterly

2020
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After the Plague

After what seems an agonizingly long period of closure in response to the coronavirus, the Rubenshuis, like all museums, is looking forward to reopening to the public. We are especially eager because we intend to surprise our visitors with a new display of the permanent collection and a number of new long-term loans, including outstanding works by Titian, Otto van Veen and Rubens. The most imposing of these acquisitions, certainly in terms of scale, is *The Capture of Rome*, a rediscovered masterpiece by Rubens's last teacher, Otto van Veen. From the same collection comes Titian's *Portrait of a Venetian Admiral*. This portrait, almost certainly painted during the last decade of the artist's life, was copied by Van Dyck in a lively pen-and-wash drawing in his Italian sketchbook (1621–27).

Most of the new acquisitions, however, are by Rubens. The unfinished, half-length *Portrait of a Young Woman, Holding a Chain* surfaced only a decade ago. A beautifully preserved early work, it was painted in Italy, most likely in Genoa, and is thus datable to 1605–06. We will also present two oval bust portraits of the Roman emperors *Vitellius* and *Vespasian*, the latter of which was formerly owned by Ludwig Burchard. They probably belonged to a series of twelve panels that Rubens possibly painted for his *elegantissimo museo*, his domed sculpture gallery (see Koenraad Jonckheere, *CRLB*, xix). The most spectacular temporary acquisition, however, is a rediscovered *Self-Portrait* by Rubens in oil on paper. As suggested by Liz McGrath back in 1981, this rare work is most likely a study for the self-portrait that Rubens included in the principal scene of his most important Gonzaga commission, a painted frieze for the *cappella maggiore* of the Jesuit church in Mantua, which showed the whole Gonzaga family in *Adoration of the Trinity*. Standing modestly in the background, peering out among the peripheral witnesses of the religious drama, Rubens observes the viewers observing his painting. As the participants in our Mantua trip in October 2019 will undoubtedly remember, the

Adoration of the Trinity (now in the Palazzo Ducale) is only partially preserved. Large parts, including the self-portrait, are lost. Luckily the study recently resurfaced.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all Lenders for their support of our beloved Rubenshuis. We are determined to reopen, safely and responsibly, as soon as we can. In the meantime, please continue to look after yourselves and each other.

Ben van Beneden



Peter Paul Rubens, *Self-Portrait as a Young Man*. Oil on paper. Private collection, on loan to the Rubenshuis, Antwerp

Cultural Victims

Prompted by the return of two masterpieces by Titian and Tintoretto to their native Venice, the Rubenshuis, in collaboration with the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia, recently organized 'From Titian to Rubens: Masterpieces from Antwerp and other Flemish Collections' (Venice, Palazzo Ducale, until 1 March 2020). The exhibition featured exceptional loans from the leading Flemish museums, as well as an outstanding selection of works from private collections, most of which had never before been shown to the public. 'From Titian to Rubens' enjoyed an immense success. The exhibition attracted 180,000 visitors, despite unprecedented misfortunes: last November Venice suffered its worst flooding since the annus horribilis of 1966, and the exhibition was forced to close more than a week earlier than planned due to the corona crisis. We were the lucky ones, however. Other institutions have been less fortunate. Among the first real 'cultural victims' of Covid-19 were 'Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution' at the MSK Ghent and 'Caravaggio-Bernini' at the Rijksmuseum, two major exhibitions that had to close in mid-flight. At the Scuderie in Rome, 'Raffaello 1483–1520' – the largest-ever Raphael exhibition, insured for the improbable sum of four billion euros – was open for a mere three days. Now it is only a ghost exhibition. Other shows, such as 'Artemisia Gentileschi' at the National Gallery in London, were postponed at the last minute. Not only have these institutions been dealt a serious financial blow, but many curators have been deprived of the grand finale to years of dedicated and passionate work. Our sympathy goes out to all the colleagues affected by the ramifications of this tragic pandemic.

Ben van Beneden

Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, part XVII

Genre Scenes by Nils Büttner

The latest volume of the *Corpus Rubenianum* is dedicated to Rubens's genre pieces. It has often been noted that Rubens was not a genre painter in the accepted meaning of the term. Considering the fact that the present volume contains no more than fourteen pictures by Rubens – a tiny number in view of the thousand images the artist invented – it would indeed be odd to present Rubens as a genre painter. In the same way, close inspection of the paintings and drawings featured here shows them to be anything but straightforward depictions of everyday life. They do not correspond to the usual definitions of genre painting, as showing scenes of ordinary people engaged in common activities, a subject classification introduced relatively late in the history of art. *The Garden of Love*, for example, with its fluttering amoretto, could be more accurately described as an allegory. To include the ahistorical term 'genre' in the title of a volume forming part of a catalogue raisonné of Rubens's complete oeuvre may therefore appear problematic.

Nevertheless, no history of genre painting can fail to mention Rubens. His pictures occupy a firm place in the relevant section of any *musée imaginaire* of European art, no matter how many guides to that museum stress that he was not a genre painter as such. Artists who did specialize in the field chose to copy and vary many of his pictorial inventions, and that provides indirect justification for the title of the present volume: Rubens made a major contribution to the history of genre painting, whether he intended to do so or not. For Rubens genre painting represented just one of many modes of artistic expression linked inextricably to emotional stimulation, to instruction and pleasure. These were the functional categories, borrowed from rhetorical theory, in which Rubens and his contemporaries described and assessed the form and content – and the aesthetic qualities – of images. His aim would have been to appeal directly to the viewer's feelings as a means of encouraging allegorical interpretations of single moments from larger narratives. This we must bear in mind when analysing the paintings in historical terms.

The 'Genre' volume therefore does not aim to define Rubens's place in the history of genre painting. Its main analytical coordinates are determined

instead by the referential framework, visual and intellectual, which the artist shared with his principal audience. This referential framework includes works of art nowadays classified as genre paintings. Nonetheless, these make up only a tiny part of the pictorial cosmos within which Rubens's pictures must be placed if they are to be understood in a historically informed manner. With the exception of *The Garden of Love*, Rubens did not sell most of the paintings featured in this volume, which suggests that those works should be viewed as a personal legacy. Besides their character as personal artistic statements, all these works addressed a wider audience. Exceptions are those items that formed part of the store of images in Rubens's workshop, including the studies for *The Garden of Love*, the designs for the woodcut of the same subject, or the oil sketch now in Milan and the drawing of the young woman churning butter.

The justification for presenting the paintings in a separate volume and as a distinct category comes from the fact that they share certain characteristics. They all depict human beings, but are not portraits: the people represented are anonymous. The pictures often tell stories, but their narratives come neither from the Christian religion, nor from classical mythology or from history. Instead, they feature episodes in which everyday figures appear less as individuals than as typical representatives of their age group, their sex or their social

class. Although no umbrella term existed for such images in Rubens's day, they clearly have a conceptual common denominator that reached back to classical antiquity.

The Garden of Love is among Rubens's most frequently copied and imitated pictorial inventions. It continues the tradition of the Gardens of Love that decorated palaces throughout Europe in the late Middle Ages. In ancient Rome, gardens had been dedicated to Venus, the goddess of love, and they retained amorous associations in post-antiquity. Rubens's painting is susceptible to a broad spectrum of metaphorical readings, and a picture such as *The Garden of Love* was doubtless meant to be understood allegorically, with its figures prompting, for instance, a discussion of the relations between the sexes. As the image was exceptionally popular, it was copied many times. Given that it is the ambitious goal of the *Corpus Rubenianum* to discuss not only the original works, but also all known copies thereof, this volume discusses far more than only fourteen paintings. Sometimes we know of only one copy, sometimes of only two or three, but often there are more than one hundred copies, as for example of *The Garden of Love* in the Prado Museum.

The present publication features the paintings that Ludwig Burchard (1886–1960) gathered under the heading 'Genre' in the course of working on his planned catalogue

(continued on page 5)



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Garden of Love*, c. 1630–35. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

'Solar Eclipse in Mantua', 1605, by Peter Paul Rubens: Chronology of a Hypothesis

Roger Van der Linden

At 10:38 a.m. on 20 March 2015, a partial, 81% solar eclipse was observed from Antwerp. The event attracted a great deal of attention, during which it was noted that Rubens had faithfully represented the same natural phenomenon in his magnificent *Raising of the Cross* in Antwerp Cathedral (fig. 1). The account of the Crucifixion in Luke 23:44-45 states, after all: 'It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining.'

The most striking aspect is the naturalistic way in which Rubens depicted the eclipse, compared to the more symbolic treatment we find in earlier art. In terms of astronomical correctness, however, he slipped up in three respects. Firstly, the moon is shown in front of the clouds, which is obviously not possible outside of René Magritte's 1956 Surrealist painting *16th September*. What's more, it is moving left to right. A solar eclipse lasts roughly three hours, but totality – the point at which the moon covers the sun entirely – is just two minutes long and coincides in the Gospel with the moment Jesus died and gave up his human essence in exchange for the divine. Since the moon always crosses the sun from right to left in a solar eclipse and since Christ is still plainly alive during the raising of the cross, the moon ought properly to be to the right of the sun. Lastly, the lunar disc is shown in its entirety, while it is normally only possible to see the part covering the sun. Despite these mistakes, the painted detail shows that Rubens understood the process of a solar eclipse very well. He was, after all, an artist rather than a trained astronomer. A brief investigation in Antwerp swiftly turned up three similar images: the *Coup de Lance* and *Christ on the Cross* at the KMSKA in Antwerp and a modello featuring Christ on the Cross with Mary, Mary Magdalene and St John at the Snyders&Rockox House. The latter work – which Rubens painted and Van Dyck worked out further for St Michael's Church in Ghent – is especially convincing. It was becoming increasingly clear, therefore, that the artist must have witnessed a solar eclipse at first hand.

Astronomical records reveal that a 90% solar eclipse visible from the west coast of Italy and from Mantua, where Rubens was staying at the time, did indeed occur in the afternoon of 12 October 1605. It lasted almost three hours (as Luke's Gospel states). Unlike their lunar equivalents, solar eclipses are only 100% visible from a narrow strip along the Earth's surface. While the one viewed from Mantua was not total, a certain darkening of the surroundings is very likely to have been observed. The minor errors Rubens made in the *Raising of the Cross* will therefore have been due to the fact that he painted it in 1610, five years after witnessing an eclipse at first hand. These findings were published in 2015 in *Antwerpsche Tijdinghen*, the Antwerp City Guides' magazine.¹ The article also mentioned Rubens's painting *The Friends from Mantua* (fig. 5), suggesting that it might include a portrait of Galileo Galilei.

The topic was revisited in 2019, during the preparation of a lecture on 'Astronomy in Art' for the Rubenianum. Study of astronomy/astrology in the sixteenth century has made very clear just how important this subject was in that period. The court astrologer to Emperor Rudolf II in Prague was Johannes Kepler, whose three laws of planetary motion are still crucial to lunar and Mars missions to this day. When a solar eclipse was forecast for 1605, Kepler wrote to colleagues all over Europe asking them to carefully record the exact timing and to send the data to him. He correctly theorized that he could use their measurements to calculate precise distances and hence the circumference of

the Earth. His correspondents included Michiel Coignet (brother of the painter Gillis Coignet) who was court astronomer and mathematician to Archduke Albert and the Infanta Isabella, governors of the Southern Netherlands. Coignet duly made and dispatched the requested observations.² In the end, Kepler was unable to achieve his goal, as some of the data he received proved inaccurate.

Rubens's contemporaries were immensely interested in celestial phenomena, several of which were described and discussed at length in the literature at the time, including a supernova in 1604 and the comet of 1618 (hence the gilded comet decorating the roof of the Rubens House; fig. 2). Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, who became a correspondent and friend of Peter Paul Rubens, got hold of one of the first telescopes and is credited with the discovery of the Orion Nebula. Even the Vatican got in on the act, building the Gregorian Tower in 1580 to make astronomical observations. The papal astronomers later transferred to Castel Gandolfo and even today there is a Vatican Observatory in Tucson, Arizona. The Jesuits in particular numbered several prominent astronomers within their order, which was likewise an important patron of Rubens.

Three other paintings suggest that Rubens himself was interested in astronomy too. The 1617 *Allegory of Sight*, painted in collaboration with Jan Brueghel, features several perfectly rendered astronomical instruments: quadrants, an armillary sphere, an astrolabe and a magnificent telescope. In other words, Rubens painted this top-of-the-range optical device barely eight years after it had first occurred to Galileo to turn a small Dutch telescope towards the stars in 1609. Jan Brueghel and Rubens will have seen these instruments at the home

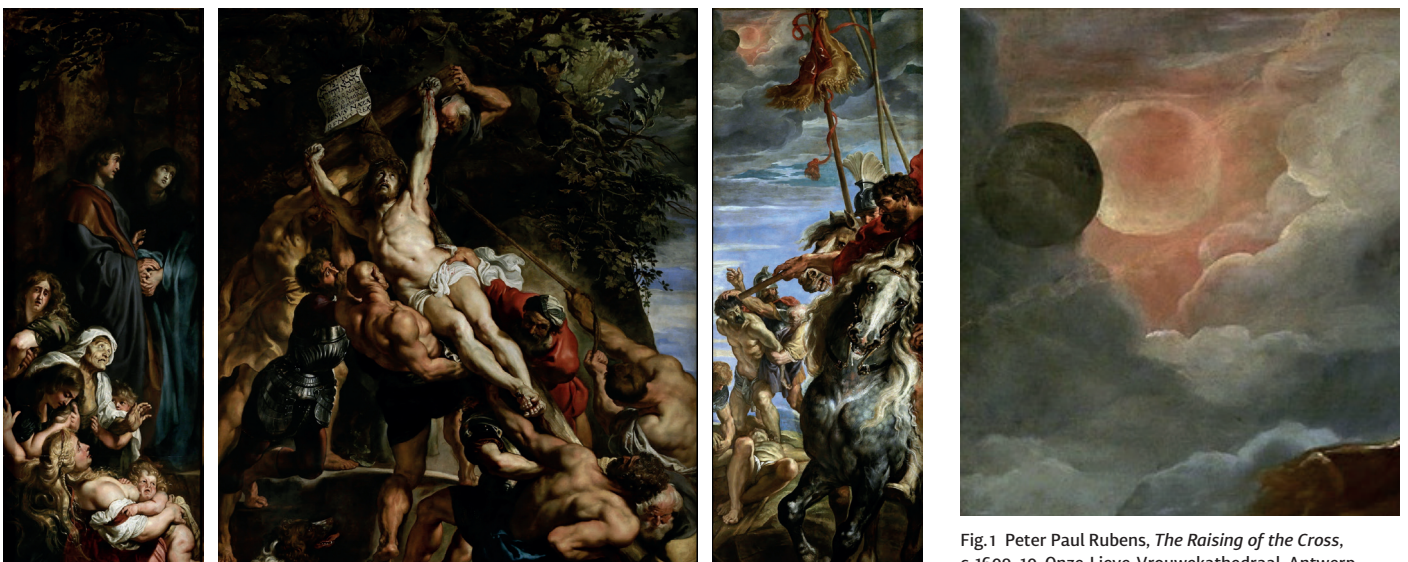


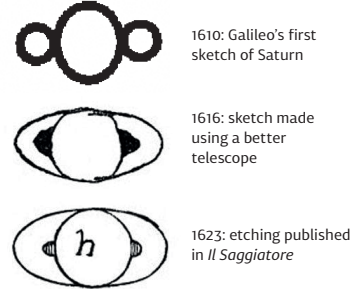
Fig.1 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Raising of the Cross*, c. 1609-10. Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal, Antwerp.



Fig. 2 The comet on the roof of the Rubenshuis, Antwerp.

Fig. 3 Peter Paul Rubens, *Saturn Devouring his Son*, 1636. Museo Nacional del Prado

Fig. 4 Galileo's sketches of Saturn seen through a telescope



of their neighbour Michiel Coignet, the court astronomer and mathematician with an outstanding European reputation, who manufactured the devices in his workshop. Surviving examples can still be admired in many museums all over the world. Another painting by Rubens, *Saturn Devouring his Son* of 1636 (fig. 3), shows the planet Saturn in the upper left corner, flanked by two 'stars'. We now know that these are Saturn's rings, but when Galileo first observed them in 1610, he did indeed draw a couple of stars like this, which means Rubens must have been familiar with Galileo's drawing (fig. 4).

The third work is the marvellous visualization, done in 1620, of the origin of the Milky Way, now in the Prado. The keen-eyed astronomer will quickly spot the mistake here too: the Milky Way was not really created from milk spilled by Juno while nursing the infant Hercules, but from the gravitational contraction of a cold cloud of molecular hydrogen. But it is noteworthy nonetheless how Rubens has the mother's milk turning into dozens of tiny stars: Galileo discovered in 1610 that the Milky Way is not some kind of haze but is made up instead of individual stars – a realization that marked the first step towards an entirely new understanding of the structure of the universe.

The Friends from Mantua clearly features a self-portrait of the young artist surrounded by several other men and with the Mantua skyline in the background (fig. 5).³ The friends that the work depicts have not been unambiguously identified, although most authors believe they include Justus Lipsius and the painter's elder brother, Philip Rubens. The group is depicted, moreover, in a darkened landscape, suggesting a nocturnal scene. Most experts date the work to between 1602 and 1608. However, in view of the facts set out above, it is not unreasonable to suppose that what the young and ambitious Rubens painted here is actually the 1605 solar eclipse that he witnessed in Mantua, with the associated darkening somewhat exaggerated. Given that the phenomenon was a topic of discussion amongst the European intelligentsia of the time, it would have been natural for the young Rubens to have turned it into a statement: I was there, I saw it and have reflected on it. If this hypothesis is correct, 3 p.m. on Wednesday 12 October 1605 can be given as the work's *terminus post quem*.

The other figures in the painting might then be acquaintances of the artist familiar with the phenomenon of a solar eclipse. His brother Philip, for instance,

received a university education that will have included astronomy/astrology as one of the liberal arts, while his mentor, the Neostoic Justus Lipsius, will also have held pronounced views on astrology similar to those expressed in Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones*. It is tempting to identify the other figure in the foreground as Galileo Galilei, one of Europe's great mathematicians and physicists at the time and whose reputation was then still unblemished. There is a strong resemblance at any rate with the famous portrait of the scientist by Ottavio Leoni (fig. 6).

All this clearly remains a hypothesis with numerous questions unanswered. The present article is merely intended to suggest an angle for further research into the circumstances and significance of what we currently call *The Friends from Mantua*, but which we might one day refer to as 'Solar Eclipse in Mantua', 1605.

- 1 R. Van der Linden, 'Driemaal een zonsverduistering', *Antwerpsche Tijdinghen* 36.2 (June 2015).
- 2 J. Van Camp and R. Van der Linden, 'Michiel Coignet: briljant maar vergeten Antwerps wiskundige, astronoom en instrumentenmaker', *Heelal* 64.8 (August 2019).
- 3 'Peter Paul Rubens in a Circle of Friends' in *Portraits I* (*Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard*, xix, no. 37).



Fig. 5 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Friends from Mantua*, 1602-04. Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne

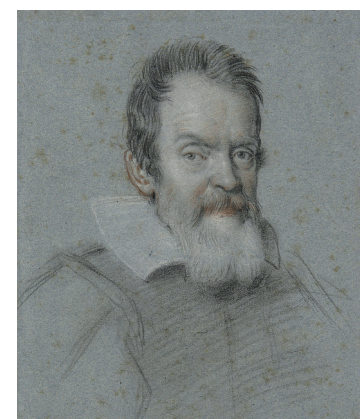


Fig. 6 Ottavio Leoni, *Portrait of Galileo Galilei*. Biblioteca Marucelliana, Florence

(continued from page 2)

raisonné of Rubens's oeuvre. In 1938 a leaflet was issued by Elzevir Publishers, Amsterdam, inviting subscriptions to *The Work of Peter Paul Rubens: An Illustrated Catalogue of the Paintings, Drawings and Engravings in Six Volumes Demi Quarto*. As in Rooses, the genre scenes were planned for volume four, and an item from this section was chosen to give potential buyers an idea of how the final publication would look. The work in question, *A Sailor and his Mistress* (No. 5), did not appear in Rooses's catalogue and a reproduction of it had been first published only a few years previously, by Glück. Burchard gave it the number 841a, placing it between *Soldier and Girl* (No. 6) and *Shepherd and Shepherdess* (No. 7) in Rooses's sequence. The leaflet included a catalogue entry on the painting written by Burchard, and it remained the only one by him ever to be published. Yet even this entry remained unfinished. In his own copy of the leaflet he later noted numerous additions and corrections to his text. Nevertheless, this sample text became the pattern for all Corpus entries.

The starting point of each entry is the original painting with its material substance, supported by the latest art-technological findings. The second step follows Ludwig Burchard's tradition and traces the history of the motifs in an iconographical reading. At the same time, I aim to illustrate the connection between this particular image and related motifs in other works by Rubens on the one hand, and images by other artists on the other, trying to establish the referential framework. The reader can follow this not only through a verbal, but also the visual argumentation illustrated by a copious amount of images.

Including all known copies, there are nearly 400 works mentioned in this new book, for which I gathered as much information as possible: the provenances of the copies and repetitions, as well as a bibliography as complete as possible. Apart from hopefully being valuable work for generations of following researchers, this work is worthwhile because it teaches about the changing perceptions of Rubens's images. Decisions on whether paintings were made in Rubens's studio or elsewhere, are based on the viewing of the original paintings whenever their photographs seemed promising. I have experienced a lot of support from colleagues in museums from Basel to New York, and in the houses of private collectors, for which I am very grateful.

Max Rooses Archival Project

Help wanted

The Rubenianum obtained a grant from the Flemish Community to research and publish the dispersed archives of Max Rooses (1839–1914). Rooses was the first director of the Plantin-Moretus Museum, but also a ground-breaking figure in the Flemish cultural movement of his day, a man of letters and a politician. To our readers he is of course best known as a pioneer of the emerging *Rubensforschung*, author of impressive early reference works and a pioneering curator of old master exhibitions. By inventorying and digitizing his papers scattered over the Rubenianum, the Letterenhuis, the Plantin-Moretus Museum and the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, we aim to complete his fascinating biography, and to disclose the full research potential of his legacy for art history. In telling his story, we will also involve the still-existing allegorical wall-painting cycles in the *salons* of his former mansion. *Are you aware of documents, letters, annotated books etc. from Max Rooses in other collections? Please inform project associate elise.gacoms@antwerpen.be.*



Eduard Pellens, *Portrait of Max Rooses*. Woodcut



Unidentified interior, Collection of KIK-IRPA, neg. no. A144990.

Browsing through the Van Herck history

The Rubenianum is proud to announce its first online exhibition in collaboration with Archiefbank Vlaanderen. The exhibition is the result of the study day on the Van Herck art dealers' business and family organized by the Rubenianum in 2019. We introduce you to the family history and share articles by the conference speakers on the scattered archival and art collections. The texts are illustrated by numerous images of archival records and linked to inventories and databases. The material is surprisingly rich, not only for the Antwerp art-market history, but also for interior decoration studies, Antwerp museum history, and of course for art history, especially the field of baroque sculpture. Go explore this new application now, and discover the hidden gems in the Van Herck collections.

Rubenianum Lectures 2020

Due to Covid-19, we have rescheduled our 2020 programme of Rubenianum Lectures for after the Summer. This year's cycle reflects, in its varied choice of topics and acclaimed speakers, the international outreach and exchange that characterize both Flemish art history in Rubens's day and present-day scholarship in the field. We look forward to welcoming you to the following talks:

20 September: Prof. Filip Vermeulen (Erasmus University, Rotterdam), *The Art of Collaborating: Artistic partnerships in Antwerp during the 16th and 17th centuries*

25 October: Peter van den Brink (Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen), *Dürer was here... and portrayed Antwerp (amongst other things)*

15 November: An Van Camp (Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford), *Drawing after Antiquity: Flemish artists in Italy*

13 December: Prof. Nils Büttner (Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Stuttgart), *Rubens recto/verso. Writing the Corpus Volume on Rubens's Medici Cycle*

The dates of these lectures are subject to national regulations regarding public events, which remain unclear at the moment of publication of this newsletter. Possible changes in the programme will be communicated through our website.

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