The Rubenianum Quarterly 2021 3

In Memoriam Arnout Balis 1952–2021

Disbelief and shock were the prevailing emotions for all who learned on 6 September or the days thereafter about the sudden passing of Arnout. How could it be that a man who still had so much to give, who was so central to a broad international scholarly network, who was such a good friend to so many, and who – only weeks before – was apparently in good health and in good spirits, was suddenly no longer amongst us?

Since then we have all had to come to terms with our own emotions, and the magnitude of the loss is starting to sink in. It is indeed a terrible blow to lose so prematurely such a kind and generous person. To some he was the learned scholar one could always turn to for advice, for others he was a mentor who was always generous with his time, and to others yet he was first and foremost a true friend.

For the Centrum Rubenianum, it means the loss of our Chairman and our driving force. We will miss his leadership, his enthusiasm, his inimitable personality, his deep knowledge and keen eye. For the Rubenianum Fund, he was an inspiring figure who was held in deep affection by all our benefactors who had the pleasure to join in on our annual trips.

However, all his colleagues at the Centrum Rubenianum and in the Rubenianum Fund are determinded to ensure the completion of his life's project, the Corpus Rubenianum. *With the experienced team of authors and the by now equally experienced editorial team which he assembled, and under the new leadership of Nils Büttner, we will ensure that this monumental endeavour will be brought to a good end while maintaining Arnout's exacting standards.*

This is what he would have wished most of all – and this is what we will do.

Thomas Leysen
Chairman Rubenianum Fund

ARNOUT BALIS MEMORIAL FUND

The Rubenianum Fund has decided to create a special fund in honour of Arnout Balis. This fund will ensure the publication in book form of a broad selection of the many articles published by Arnout throughout his long and productive career. The book will bring together essays and other writings on a wide range of topics to which he has put his inquisitive mind. Presently, these remain scattered over a great number of journals and catalogues, and were published in a variety of languages. Together, they will serve as summation of the work of a formidable scholar.
The other proceeds from the memorial fund will serve to supplement the means of the Rubenianum Fund in order to continue the publication of the remaining volumes of the *Corpus Rubenianum*.

Those who wish to make a contribution can send their donation to the

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Arnout Balis and the Birth of the Rubenianum Fund

I first became acquainted with Arnout Balis in 1990 during preparations for an exhibition, organized by the Rubenshuis, on the artist Jan Boeckhorst, a collaborator of Rubens. Arnout contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue; the other authors included Katlijne Van der Stighelen, Hans Vlieghe and Isabelle Van Tichelen. It was my first encounter not only with the art historian and the man Arnout Balis but also with the Rubenianum and the National Centre for the Visual Arts of the 16th and 17th Centuries, housed in the same building, which had been founded in 1963 with the primary objective of publishing the *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard*, the catalogue raisonné of Rubens's painted oeuvre. After the Boeckhorst project, the Rubenianum became my home away from home. From there I coordinated the Jacob Jordaens exhibition (1993) – curated by Professor Roger-A. d'Hulst, one of the founding fathers of the National Centre, and Nora De Poorter, then head of the Rubenianum – and the Anthony van Dyck exhibition (1999), curated by Christopher Brown. (Both exhibitions were held at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp.) I remember that time as an intensely instructive period, in which I got to know – from the inside out, as a privileged witness – the marvellous, erudite, claustrophobic and unworldly universe of the Rubenianum with its remarkable array of protagonists.

After an intermezzo of four years at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, I returned to the Rubenshuis in 2004 for the exhibition 'A House of Art: Rubens as Collector', curated by Kristin Lohse Belkin and Fiona Healy. The National Centre and the *Corpus* project had meanwhile run into trouble. This did not come as a surprise. For too long it was thought that the funding of the National Centre and its mammoth *Corpus* undertaking would continue to fall like manna from heaven, but in order to go on dining at the table of research funds, tangible scientific results were necessary. These were not forthcoming. The *Corpus* project dragged on. In the 1990s only two volumes were published: *Copies after the Antique* (*CRLB*, XXIII, 1994) by Marjon van der Meulen and the authoritative *Subjects from History* (*CRLB*, XIII, 1997) by Elizabeth McGrath. The year 2002 saw the publication of *Palazzi di Genova* (*CRLB*, XXII) by Herbert W. Roth. After the failure of two consecutive research projects, subsidized by the (National) Foundation for Scientific Research, the funding dried up. The prestigious *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* – the largest art-historical project ever – was in danger of drowning in midstream.

In that period things began to go sour at the Rubenianum, too: staff members who retired were not replaced; the building in Kolveniersstraat gradually emptied out until, in 2006, the staff of the Rubenshuis moved in to prevent its closure. There were plans circulating to take the rich holdings of the library and the extensive documentation and incorporate it all into another library.

The *Corpus* project could only be saved by private funding. In the spring of 2009, Arnout sought me out with a concrete request for help: Did I know anyone – perhaps among the Friends of the Rubenshuis – who could help the *Corpus*? In fact, I did know such people, and introduced Arnout to Thomas Leysen, the best of all Friends. At first glance, Arnout – the archetypal scholar – and Thomas – the businessman, philanthropist, art lover and collector – were the proverbial 'odd couple'. Yet they hit it off. Together we felt it to be both a scholarly and a moral obligation to carry on and complete the project. With the support of the King Baudouin Foundation, the Rubenianum Fund was established. The Fund was officially launched at a black tie dinner at the Rubens House on 10 February 2010 (ill.). The dinner was held in a transparent tent in the illuminated courtyard of the house, and the sudden snowfall only added to the magic of the evening. Shortly afterwards, the first issue of the *Rubenianum Quarterly* appeared – with a fascinating contribution by Arnout Balis on *A Man in Armour*, a masterpiece by Rubens that had recently changed hands – and a series of lectures was set up: the Rubenianum Lectures. Thanks to the Fund's successful fund-raising, the first two (of three) *Corpus* editors could be recruited in September 2010 – they made up Arnout's team. In November the Rubenianum Fund began its Field Trips. The three-day trip to Madrid and the Museo del Prado was the first in what has meanwhile become a memorable series of yearly cultural trips. The National Centre (now called the Centrum Rubenianum) and the *Corpus* project rose up like a phoenix from the ashes: since the establishment of the Fund in 2010, no fewer than seventeen volumes have been published.

The success of the Rubenianum Fund also brought radical change to the Rubenianum. Stimulated by the Fund's drive and its broad appeal, the civic authorities changed tack. Véronique van de Kerckhof was appointed as its new director, and in 2011 two researchers were hired: Lieneke Nijkamp and Bert Watteeuw; the latter recently became the new director of the Rubenshuis and the Rubenianum.

The Rubenianum Fund has been a game changer. It virtually assured Arnout that the monumental *Corpus* project, to which he had devoted the greater part of his working life and which he embodied as no one else, would one day be completed. We will indeed finish the project, for the sake of both Arnout and Rubens. | *Ben van Beneden*

The Rubenianum Lectures

Sunday, 5 December 2021, 11 am

PROF. NILS BÜTTNER
Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart

Beroemd worden. Rubens in Stuttgart

The lecture is in Dutch and will take place at the Rubenianum.

Arnout Balis 29 July 1952–6 September 2021

Elizabeth McGrath

The Rubenianum without Arnout is a notion almost impossible to imagine, let alone accept as reality. Arnout had worked there since 1980: initially on and off, in the old quarters on the Belgiëlei, in a temporary post as research assistant, then as researcher, editor and, eventually, for the last decade or so of his life, as Chairman of the Centrum Rubenianum and Editor in Chief of the *Corpus Rubenianum* – all this, too, while teaching, first at the University of Antwerp (2000–2002), and then, as Professor of Art History, at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (2002–13). It was Arnout's dedication and determination that kept the Centrum and the Rubens *Corpus* on course and steered it through difficult times, as Ben van Beneden has described so eloquently in connection with the Rubenianum Fund (*see page 2*). It was Arnout's generosity of spirit that ensured that colleagues within the institution and throughout the art-historical world could count on moral support as well as help with scholarly problems and issues of connoisseurship. It was Arnout who maintained the Rubenianum as the flourishing, friendly and welcoming place it is today. Arnout stood for openness and inclusiveness in scholarship as in life. His many outstanding publications, exemplary in their originality, scope and intellectual rigour, are only a small part of what he contributed to the understanding of the art of Rubens and his contemporaries, by imparting so much to others.

Arnout Balis began his studies in art history at the University of Ghent (1970–74), and, under the supervision of Roger d'Hulst, specialized in Flemish painting of the early modern period. It was at this time that he began visiting the Rubenianum. His master's thesis was on the so-called Hunts of Maximilian, the famous tapestry series designed by Barend van Orley in the early 1530s. This thesis, with its wide-ranging and comprehensive analysis of function, style and iconography, would result in two important publications. Meanwhile, however, Arnout had been increasingly drawn to Rubens and, with the historical expertise he had acquired, resolved to tackle that artist's hunting scenes for his PhD. Presumably d'Hulst, who encouraged him in this, already had in mind that his brilliant student would be the ideal author for the volume on the subject for the *Corpus Rubenianum*. In 1983 Arnout gained his doctorate, and, on the strength of it, election to the Flemish Academy; and four years later the volume *Hunting Scenes* (Part XVII.2) appeared, to just acclaim – with that usually stern critic, Michael Jaffé, describing it as 'thorough-going, thoughtful and thought-provoking'. The book is an illuminating investigation of the role of hunting in society at the period, as well as an indispensable guide to Rubens's engagement with the subject. It also raises fundamental problems about the role of Rubens's studio in these large works, intended for the grand halls of noblemen and princes. Often executed to a significant degree by the master's assistants, these painted Hunts had been relatively disregarded by connoisseurs, and their importance downplayed. The matter of when a 'Rubens' is a Rubens, the extent to which a painting described by the artist as 'originale di mia mano' could in fact have involved several other hands, was fundamental to the works in this volume, and it was to occupy Arnout in many ways thereafter. How Rubens's workshop operated and how individual members of the studio assimilated their styles to the required Rubens manner, would prove a constant topic of research, as it broadened out into a study of all the artists who might have worked with Rubens, either as pupils in the studio, or as collaborators in some other way, as, most famously, in the case of the artist's friends Jan Brueghel and Frans Snijders. At the same time as publishing on Rubens's contemporaries

and followers, Arnout made great advances in the project of identifying the particular contributions to Rubens compositions from the more distinguished among his assistants, including Boeckhorst and Van den Hoecke, as well as Van Dyck and still-life, animal and landscape specialists such as Wildens and De Vos. His extended essays in exhibition catalogues in Tokyo (1994) and Brussels (2007) provide invaluable surveys of this topic. Most recently, there was his article (2021) in the book on *Many Antwerp Hands*, not to mention the excellent piece on Willem Panneels in the *RQ* (2020.3) which took up a theme Arnout had pursued in the Rubenshuis exhibition of 1993 and resolved in a brief span many questions and misconceptions about that trusted pupil whose copies made from material in his master's 'cabinet' (the so-called Rubens Cantoor) have proved such a useful resource for Rubens scholarship.

One aspect of Arnout's interest in hunting scenes was a fascination with animals, their behaviour and their representation in art. Here his collaboration with Cécile Kruyfhooft on the exhibition staged by Antwerp Zoo in 1982 proved especially stimulating, and over the years he wrote about creatures as varied as Rubens's hippopotamus and Frans Floris's ichneumon (Egyptian mongoose), as well as studying natural history collections and publications (for example, in the *Albums of Anselmus de Boodt* of 1999). It was in connection with an animal fable depicted in an anonymous Flemish painting in Paris (*The Drunken Hart*) – I wrote to Arnout identifying the subject, but he had beaten me to it – that Arnout and I began a regular exchange of ideas. Naturally, I was delighted when in 1991 he took on the job of editing my volume on *Subjects from History* (1997). The process proved to be a shared journey, for Arnout enthusiastically accompanied me in everything from general argument to detailed documentation of facts and attribution of paintings. I say this to illustrate Arnout's extraordinary commitment and dedication as a *Corpus* editor, selflessly contributing information and insights which he could easily have used as the basis for articles of his own. But he cared more about doing justice to the subject in hand, about getting things straight and taking account of every bit of evidence, than he ever did for any worldly success and recognition.

A criticism sometimes levelled against the earlier volumes of the *Corpus*, my own included, was that they provided relatively little in the way of data on the material condition of the works catalogued and on the results of technical investigations. Arnout set out to remedy this. Characteristically, he began by making himself an expert in this area, with the collaboration of the team at the Koninklijk Museum of Antwerp under the direction of Paul Huvenne, in particular Nico Van Hout and Adri Verburg (Arcobaleno). *Rubens doorgelicht* by Nico and Arnout, published by the museum in 2010 (*Rubens Unveiled*, 2012), is an illuminating guide to the artist's methods and technique and the resources available for their study. This knowledge Arnout brought to bear in the regular examinations he undertook of paintings and other works attributed to or associated with Rubens that were brought to the Rubenianum or otherwise came to his attention. Even when hopeful owners might be disappointed with his final opinion, typically expressed with some firmness, they could hardly complain of the serious attention with which he scrutinized every candidate, never failing to take careful notes along the way, with one of an unending succession of blue Bic pens – which he also carried and utilized on all his travels and through the museums and collections of the world.

Arnout was born in Brussels, and his return to this town when he moved from Ghent in 2009 was a homecoming, to the area in the northern district of Schaarbeek which he affectionately named 'Liedtsville'. Here he delighted in the social and ethnic mix, sipping his morning coffee in the Turkish bar opposite his front door. Arnout always liked to get to know any environment in which he found himself, to map it out and unravel its layers of culture and history. He was one of the few art historian visitors to London who chose to wander around local streets, markets and housing estates rather than simply rushing to the museums. With the restrictions of the COVID pandemic he found a new pleasure, of long weekend walks of exploration through Brussels, taking in remote areas as well as the familiar landmarks. These prompted, among other things, a whole new subject of study in the city's wrought ironwork, *fer forgé*, or, as he called some pieces, *fer plié et tordu*. It was with just such a phrase that he liked to characterize his own sculptural creations – for in private this art historian was an ingenious artist – producing for friends and special occasions colourful (and sometimes slyly subversive) constructions of *papier plié et tordu*, with the odd folded and twisted plastic bag thrown in.

An acute observer and analyst, and also something of a philosopher, Arnout was intrigued by the process by which art historians arrive at their conclusions on the authorship and authenticity, or again on what constitutes plausibility in an interpretation of a picture's subject. In a message of a few months ago he wrote: 'Sometimes I think: of course, we are biased, but it is important (a) to know that we are (part of our human condition), and (b) to try to find out how it colours our critical work, then (c) to devise a way around this (call it a new epistemological approach).' It is typical of Arnout that he should be led from art history to human frailty. He was the most loyal and understanding of friends and colleagues, ready with practical as well emotional support (despite the fact that he was not a very practical person in the normal sense of the word – though he was a wonderfully inventive cook). He was also great fun to be with, humorous, optimistic and full of future plans for travel and research, even when facing the surgical intervention that turned out to be fatal.

At the time of his death, Arnout, who in the previous year or so had been almost entirely occupied with editorial work for the *Corpus*, was about to resume his long-term project of the reconstruction of Rubens's Theoretical Notebook for Part XXV. The Notebook, a collection of drawings and Latin texts that Rubens made in his youth and added to over an extended period, was lost in a fire in 1720 and is preserved only partially and in copies or transcriptions – apart, that is, from a couple of pages that somehow escaped. Happily, one particularly striking page turned up very recently and was catalogued by Arnout for the forthcoming exhibition in October in Stuttgart (*on which see RQ 2020.4*). The great problem for any reconstruction is that none of the copies (including a French translation published in 1773) is anything like complete; large sections are omitted in each of them: almost the entire text is missing in a couple; conversely, extraneous material, in terms of both words and images, is sometimes included. Arnout's provisional findings were summarized in an important article of 2001 (*and see also his account of his approach in the RQ Special Issue of 2016*) but his conclusions about the nature of the Notebook and Rubens's aims in putting together this material had modified over the years as more evidence was uncovered and new arguments presented themselves. Arnout enjoyed the fact that the Rubens who was being revealed through his annotations was in some ways an unexpected one, less orthodox and more complicated than the familiar image of the 'great master'. It will be the task of his colleagues to bring the book to completion in a manner worthy of Arnout's intellect and the high standards of scholarship that he bequeathed to the *Corpus Rubenianum*.










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