

The Rubenianum Quarterly

2021
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Arnout Balis remembered

Friday, 19 November 2021 was a sad day at the Rubenianum. A memorial event was staged there in honour of Arnout Balis, who had died unexpectedly and far too early. An audience of mournful people gathered in the Burchard Room for a programme of tributes by his closest friends and colleagues.

Thomas Leysen, Chairman of the Rubenianum Fund, opened the meeting with a sensitive speech, dwelling on his friendship and respect for Arnout.

The eminent Rubens scholar Elizabeth McGrath was closest to him intellectually. She gave an impressive overview of their joint 'Life with Rubens', enlightened by a delicate whiff of humour. Paul van Calster, who has known our outgoing and cheerful friend for half a century, reflected on the happy times they spent together starting as colleagues at Ghent University. And finally, Arnout's student Koen Bulckens and his colleague Bert Schepers paid tribute to their mentor.

The event was graced by an intermezzo by lutenist Floris De Rycker and live-streamed for our friends overseas. The speeches were accompanied by lively photographs of Arnout and at the well-attended reception afterwards it was heartwarming to see how much he was loved and appreciated by so many.

Arnout, like plenty of 'old school' scholars, was worried about the gradual decline of and even contempt for serious connoisseurship in art history and the museum world. Acquiring a keen eye for quality and stylistic distinction and thus achieving a high level of connoisseurship was of paramount importance to him. Most of our readers will recall his splendid essay on Rubens's *Man in Armour*, published in the very first issue of the *Rubenianum Quarterly* (2010/1) as well as his last contribution to this periodical: an outstanding article on the enigmatic Willem Panneels (2020/3).

With Arnout Balis no longer among us, we have lost not only a dear friend, colleague and mentor, but also one of our last truly great art historians. *Cécile Kruyffhoft*

Link to the commemoration: <https://abk-stuttgart-de.zoom.us/j/69015034379?pwd=M0doUkRaNOxpNFo3THFrOUeVtJhoZz09> | Passcodes: Meeting-ID: 690 1503 4379; Password: Arnout19IX



The **ARNOUT BALIS MEMORIAL FUND** has already received some €40,000 in donations. This brings us close to the objective of the publication of a volume of Arnout's collected essays. The great generosity of many donors is highly valued by the whole Rubenianum team. European donations can still be channeled through KBF Belgium:
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Dear Friends of the Rubenianum

In this issue, we look back on the tributes that were delivered during the memorial session for Arnout Balis on 19 November. Despite the constraints due to COVID, it was a moving and heartfelt occasion, during which the Rubens community came together to mourn and remember their great friend and mentor. Arnout's unique personality and scholarship were evoked in very personal and warm words by all speakers, and many came to learn more about certain facets of his generous and multifaceted personality.

Nils Büttner has now taken up Arnout's mantle as chairman of the Centrum Rubenianum, and it is good to see that the whole team at the Centrum has picked up the challenge to complete the publication of the remaining volumes of the Corpus by 2024.

Also at the Rubenshuis and the Rubenianum, there was a changing of the guard, with Bert Watteeuw taking over from Ben van Beneden and Véronique van de Kerckhof. Elsewhere in the present Quarterly, we look back at Ben's career and at the remarkable impact he had on the rejuvenation of the Rubenshuis as a museum. In one of the next issues, we will have the chance also to remember Véronique's tenure at the Rubenianum.

While such a generational change inevitably induces regrets and a certain wistfulness, I for one am convinced that the Rubenshuis, the Rubenianum and the Centrum Rubenianum are in good hands with Bert and Nils now at their helm. They can build on the strong foundations laid by their predecessors.

*Thomas Leysen
Chairman, Rubenianum Fund*

'The Sap of Life'. A Conversation with Ben van Beneden on the occasion of his retirement *by Cécile Kruyffhoft*

In September 2021 Ben van Beneden retired as director of the Rubenshuis. During his tenure of just under fifteen years, he transformed the museum into a lively public institution. He raised the museum's profile with internationally acclaimed exhibitions such as 'Rubens in Private: The Master Portrays His Family' (2015) and spectacular long-term loans, including 'David Bowie's Tintoretto' and The Massacre of the Innocents, one of Rubens's greatest masterpieces.



© Ans Brys

Q You retired more than six months ago. What does it feel like?

A Apart from the observation that I find the compulsory retirement age an obsolete idea, it feels great! I enjoyed my years as director tremendously and am grateful to my colleagues and the museum's supporters – Friends of the Rubenshuis, collectors and art dealers alike – for helping the museum to flourish. But I am not someone who clings to a position. A change is good for the museum, too. And I'd also like to do other things.

Q That sounds as though you've had enough.

A Let's just say that I would have preferred to have the museum at arm's length from the government (as museums in the UK and the Netherlands are). I've always been a fervent champion of greater autonomy for museums. Even so, I think

I can say with satisfaction that I have in fact achieved many of the objectives I set out when I took the job. Let me give an example: in the very first policy document I issued at the Rubenshuis, one point had top priority: improving the basic infrastructure of the museum – such technical aspects as climate control and accessibility. It is therefore a source of great satisfaction to see that the complete renovation of the museum, as well as the prestigious new annex and the re-landscaping of the garden, has been included in the Masterplan for the Rubenshuis. This means that the museum will be ready to enter a new phase under the guidance of the new director.

Q What were your priorities for the museum?

A When I arrived at the Rubenshuis, I found a tired, worn-out museum. The presentation of its permanent collection had not changed for years and made an incoherent and uninspiring impression. Moreover, the quality of the collection was very uneven, and the museum lagged behind in terms of collection care. I thought it imperative to strengthen and enrich the collection, by purchasing works whenever possible – a splendid terracotta relief by Lucas Faydherbe was recently acquired – and by securing long-term loans of outstanding quality. My favourite? *The Apostle Matthew* by the young Anthony van Dyck (on permanent loan from the King Baudouin Foundation). In fact, that policy was not so new: shortly after the opening of the museum, the first curator of the Rubenshuis, Frans Baudouin, arranged loans from the collection of the Brussels lawyer and collector Gaston Dulière. Later on, it was possible to buy, from his collection, *Sleeping Silenus with Putti* by François Duquesnoy, one of the highlights of the museum.

In addition, a targeted restoration programme was set up. Recent achievements in that area include the restoration of Willem van Haecht's *Picture Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest* and, of course, the restoration of the garden screen and garden pavilion, which were designed by Rubens and are the only original elements of the house to survive. A milestone in the history of the museum.

Q I thought your exhibition 'Rubens in Private' was outstanding, but in today's world, can this practice of flying artworks around the globe be justified?

A We have come to expect a limitless exchange of artworks in our globalized and growth-addicted world, but the question is indeed: how desirable is this development with regard to the preservation of art (let alone the preservation of the planet)? Every time a work of art is handled, it is exposed to risks. Nor is this policy sustainable. After every successful exhibition, there is a tendency to look forward to the next one – in spite of the fact that the costs are so high and the effort required so great, certainly for a small museum with a small staff. Twenty-five years ago, if you said to someone that you were going to a museum, they would have assumed you were going to see the permanent collection. Today they ask: 'What's on?' Museums of the future will be forced to meet the challenge of continually 'reinventing' the permanent collection to keep it attractive and mounting the temporary exhibitions that visitors have come to expect. In general, I would argue that exhibitions are justified only if they are scientifically relevant and contribute to our knowledge.

Q During your time as director, the number of visitors to the Rubenshuis rose by 50 per cent, from 140,000 in 2006 to 210,000 in 2019. How important are visitor numbers?

A The number of visitors is important because entrance fees generate revenue. Other than that, I never thought much of the importance of numbers. You don't have to be in a gallery very long before noticing that many people spend very little time looking at the art. An inordinate regard for visitor numbers, and the time-worn idea that quantity means quality, betrays a one-dimensional notion of what a museum should be.

Q What advice would you give to your successor, Bert Watteuw?

A I've known Bert for many years, and I believe we have quite a bit in common: boyish enthusiasm for one thing – though that sounds strange coming from a retired person – as well as a true love of the arts and a passion for history. (Real concern for the future is always more persuasive in those who have a genuine feeling for the past.) I would also like to believe that Bert is, like me, a defiant traditionalist. Luckily for him, we also differ in many ways! In the coming years, the Rubenshuis will face major challenges. Bert is first and foremost a scholar, but he will have to reinvent himself as a builder. He will also have to ramp up the museum's digital offerings. This means that he will have to exercise keen judgement in deploying the museum's human, intellectual and financial resources. It will be tough, but

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Two new acquisitions for the Rubens House in honour of Ben van Beneden

Bert Watteeuw

Ben van Beneden is the sort of old-school gentleman in whose presence one commits a social faux pas simply by calling him that. Devising a fitting salute to a director so averse to pomp and circumstance is not a simple task. While colleagues and collaborators paid tribute during a pleasant evening in the pupils' studio of the Rubens House in September, a subsequent dinner in his honour had to be postponed due to tightening COVID measures. Although we felt that such moments were important, we were equally keen on finding a way to express our gratitude in a more permanent manner. Given Ben's reluctance to take the spotlight, we set out to add to the collection in areas that are of particular interest to him. With the generous support of the Friends of the Rubens House, we were able to seize two fortuitous opportunities which allowed us to do just that: building on Ben's acquisition policy with two important additions to the collection which we are confident will give him quiet and lasting joy during future visits.

Between 2019 and 2021, Ben oversaw the comprehensive conservation and restoration of a masterpiece from the collection, Willem van Haecht's 1628 *Art Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest* (fig. 1). The painting, safeguarded for future generations and sparkling in its renewed glory, returned to the museum in late August, during the last days of Ben's tenure. Having curated the exhibition 'Room for Art in Seventeenth-Century Antwerp', focusing on such gallery paintings and shown in Antwerp and The Hague in 2009–10, Ben has a deep interest in Van Haecht's astonishing 'metapictures'. While Van Haecht might not be an 'artist's artist', he is most definitely an 'art historian's artist'. Recently, Ben has shown that Rubens and Van Dyck, depicted as guests in Van der Geest's gallery, had a hand in the conception of Van Haecht's painting. This mesmerizing work, included in the CODART canon of 100 masterpieces of Dutch and Flemish art and designated a *topstuk* by the Flemish government, offered our best chance of finding a suitable token of gratitude.

To our delight and exactly at the right time, a provincial auctioneer in the United Kingdom listed a most suitable lot: a painting depicted in the art gallery of Cornelis van der Geest, where it is displayed casually leaning against a cupboard brimming with precious porcelain (fig. 2). Previously tentatively attributed based on its second-hand version in Van Haecht's painting to Marten Ryckaert and Gillis Mostaert, the signed picture turned out to be by Paul Pril, an artist whom



Fig. 1 Willem van Haecht. *The Art Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest*, 1628. Oil on panel, 100 x 136 cm. Rubenshuis, Antwerp.

Rubens himself must have met in Rome and whose work he admired (fig. 3). Our excitement about the aptness of this potential gift was shared by the Friends of the Rubens House, and we were thrilled when we succeeded in our mission of reuniting both paintings after nearly four hundred years. After a light conservation treatment, as the picture is in good condition, and



Fig. 2 Detail of fig. 1.



Fig. 3 Paul Bril. *Landscape with Nymphs, Satyrs, and Goats by a Waterfall*, c. 1616/19. Oil on canvas, 65 x 89 cm. Rubenshuis, Antwerp.

Fig. 4 A Roman *trapezophoros* with figure of a boy personifying Spring, c.2nd century CE, restored and inscribed as a figure of Hesperus c. 1600, height 80 cm. Rubenshuis, Antwerp.



Fig. 5 Drawing accompanying a 1577 letter from Andrea Londano to Francesco I de' Medici. Archivio di Stato, Florence, Archivio Mediceo del Principato, 661, fol. 10v.



reframing to match the frame seen in the gallery painting, the landscape will be on display from February in the *Kunstkamer*, daringly and successfully reassigned by Ben in 2007. Through loans, several of the paintings displayed in Van Haecht's masterpiece have been shown next to or near the picture that so brilliantly records their provenance. Now, for the first time, the museum can permanently display one of the pieces of this prettiest of puzzles, making for a stimulating viewing experience for our visitors.

After training in Antwerp, Paul Bril (c. 1553/54–1626) settled in Rome in the 1570s, where he joined his brother Mathias. Demand for his Flemish specialism – landscape painting – was high and Bril painted frescoes commissioned by popes and cardinals as well as smaller compositions on copper, panel, and canvas for both local customers and the export market. By 1601, when Rubens first visited Rome, Bril had become a very successful landscape painter and his workshop was a meeting place for Northern artists. That Rubens admired Bril is evident from a 1610 *Landscape with Saint Jerome* by the latter, which was transformed into a *Landscape with Cupid and Psyche* by the former (Prado, Madrid). The *Landscape with Nymphs, Satyrs, and Goats by a Waterfall*, newly acquired by the Rubens House, was painted in Rome c.1616–19. Luuk Pijl, who is currently preparing the catalogue raisonné of Paul Bril's oeuvre, has confirmed this to be the prime version of a composition known in other iterations by Bril himself (unsigned) and in copies by, for example, Marten Ryckaert. With its dramatic rocky landscape framed by trees, its rushing waterfall, its frolicking satyrs and nymphs, and the minute details of goats climbing cliffs, all bathed in a delicate, Italian light, the painting is a charming example of Bril's artistry. Through its connection to Rubens's own collecting practice, and its depiction in the *Art Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest*, it is the perfect addition to the Rubens House collection, where it will complement a small selection of landscapes by other specialists in the

genre who had close ties to Rubens, such as Jan Wildens and Lucas van Uden.

Another dimension to Ben's scholarship is a pronounced interest in sculpture. Attentive visitors will have noticed that, under his tenure, the decor in the Rubens House has been much enlivened with exquisite work by Lucas Faydherbe, a pupil and intimate friend of Rubens. Objects in ivory, silver, and terracotta add a rich textural quality to the galleries, while illustrating Rubens's irrepressible drive to bring his designs to life in three dimensions. Beyond this characteristic curatorial approach, Ben will be tackling the subject from a scholarly angle in volume xxii.5 of the *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* devoted to 'Sculpture and Designs for Decorative Art'. Given Ben's penchant for Rubens in the round, adding a significant piece of sculpture to the collection seemed another good way of paying homage. As this meant we had to enter terrain with which Ben was very familiar, we had to resort to a ruse and lots of secrecy to achieve our goal.

When a British collector indicated a willingness to part with a relatively small piece of sculpture from the 2nd century CE through a private sale, this intelligence soon reached Ben, who, through a network of informants, much like Rubens, is ever au courant of opportunities on the art market. The sculpture was a *trapezophoros*, a luxuriously fashioned table leg representing Spring in the guise of a young boy carrying a torch and a basket of flowers and fruit (fig. 4). Later, probably during a restoration around 1600, the boy was identified on the base of the sculpture as 'Hesperus', the evening star. Although very attractive, the iconography of the statue wasn't the cause of Ben's interest. Its provenance, on the other hand, very much was.

The sculpture is first documented in a 1577 drawing accompanying a letter from an art dealer to Francesco I de' Medici, where it is shown next to an Attic marble grave stele known to have been in Rubens's collection, now in the Leiden Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (fig. 5). From the collection

of a Venetian senator, it passed to Daniel Nys, a Flemish art dealer active in Venice, who shipped the statue to London in 1615 for the collector and dealer Dudley Carleton, a former English ambassador in Venice. Carleton in turn, having taken on an ambassadorial post in the Netherlands, traded some one hundred classical sculptures for paintings with and by Rubens in 1618. While in his possession, the statue seems to have inspired Rubens for depictions of the Christ Child standing on its mother's lap. In 1626, after having plaster casts made, Rubens went on to sell the bulk of his sculpture collection to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, in whose 1635 inventory 'A Naked Boy with Fruit' is listed. A detailed description made in 1637 by a French visitor confirms that this is in fact 'our boy'.

While sealing the deal, Ben was told the white lie that disagreement had arisen in the family in whose charge the boy was, and that he had unfortunately been withdrawn from sale. I trust he will forgive us the mischief. Four full centuries after an eight-year stay in the Rubens House, the charming boy, of small stature but great import, returns to his former residence to take pride of place in the 'Pantheon', a semi-circular room designed to showcase statues collected by the artist. From February onwards, he will much enhance the sculpture gallery, allowing us to tell the story of Rubens's activities as a collector of classical sculpture and as an art dealer. Enduring yet modest, this ancient yet youngest inhabitant of the Rubens House, carrying light, flowers, and fruit, takes the perfect shape to present Ben with our gratitude. In case you, too, might be looking for a way to salute an old-school gentleman without committing the social faux pas of calling him that, we kindly suggest you find an opportunity to acquaint yourself with these new acquisitions in the Rubens House in the coming months. While Ben might not be present during your visit, I am confident that your presence will be taken as the perfect gift.

(continued from page 2)

he has the full support of a competent and loyal team, which has recently been significantly expanded. My advice? 'Go out there and enjoy yourself!'

Q Above, you said that there were other things you wanted to do. What are you doing now?

A I'm working on my *Corpus* volume on Rubens's designs for small sculptures and decorative objects in ivory, carved by his favourite sculptors, Lucas Faydherbe and the brilliant Georg Petel. Stunning works of art! In addition, I'm co-curating two exhibitions: a Rubens show at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, and an exhibition on Flemish masterpieces, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Flemish 'Masterpieces Decree' (*Topstukken decreet*), which chiefly aims to protect artworks of outstanding quality in Flemish collections. To this end, I'm collaborating with Thomas Leysen, chairman of the Masterpieces Advisory Board. Furthermore, I consider it my sacred duty to go on sharing my enthusiasm for the art of Rubens. It contains the very sap of life!

The Rubenianum Lectures

Sunday, 13 March 2022, 11 am

AN VAN CAMP

Curator of Northern European Art,
Ashmolean Museum of Art and
Archaeology, University of Oxford

Rubens and his Landscape Drawings: Sketching en Plein Air

Rubens expressed his love and fascination for nature not only through paintings but also through a range of superb drawings, which in turn informed his painted oeuvre. In this talk, An Van Camp will present Rubens as an inimitable draughtsman of nature by exploring his *plein-air* sketches, which include delicate landscape compositions as well as sensitive studies of trees and shrubs. Guided by Van Camp, we will explore the landscape that emerges from these atmospheric masterpieces while taking particular note of Rubens's intriguing autograph inscriptions.

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

What is this thing called love?

Otto Vaenius's *Amorum emblemata* (1608) enriches the Rubenianum library

What is love? To find answers to that age-old question, seventeenth-century young people could turn to Otto Vaenius's polyglot edition of love emblems: the *Amorum emblemata*. The book by Rubens's master contains no fewer than 124 finely detailed oval emblems with Cupid in the lead role, accompanied by inscriptions and verses in Latin and poems in vernacular languages. Its sole intent was to provide counsel and guidance to those inexperienced in love's trials and tribulations.

In December 2021 the Rubenianum was able to acquire a copy of the Latin/French/Dutch edition, published in 1608. In the handy-sized oblong booklet format, we can observe an expressive Cupid swiftly shooting his arrows at unsuspecting youths or measuring his strength with that of Hercules – unless we see him dreamily musing on his beloved or wrestling with rose bushes to capture the perfect flower. We find advice and comfort in the accompanying wisdoms and sayings in Latin, French and Dutch. Noteworthy is also one of the introductory poems by none other than Peter Paul Rubens's brother Philip,



Peter Paul Rubens, *A leafless pollard willow*, c.1620. Charcoal on paper, 390 × 364 mm. The British Museum, London.



another indication of the close ties between Vaenius and the Rubens family. Although Vaenius was not the first to issue a collection of love emblems, his approach was widely imitated and very influential, not only for the emblemata literature per se, but also in art and the rendering of Cupid in particular.

This rare book is available for consultation in our reading room to anyone interested, in particular all lovers in need of guidance... (Call number: 5/023bis). *Ute Staes*

American Friends of the Rubenshuis and the Rubenianum created!

We are pleased to announce that US-based donors can now make tax-deductible contributions to the American Friends of the Rubenshuis and Rubenianum at the King Baudouin Foundation United States (KBFUS). Because KBFUS is a public charity within the meaning of Sections 501(c)(3) and 509(a)(1) of the IRC, donors may claim the maximum tax benefits allowed by US tax law for their contributions. If you wish to support us, here is how to proceed:

- ♦ Gifts by cheque: Address your cheque to KBFUS, write American Friends of the Rubenshuis and Rubenianum in the memo section of the cheque, and send it to KBFUS at 10 Rockefeller Plaza, 16th Floor, New York, NY 10020
- ♦ Gifts by credit card: <https://kbfus.networkforgood.com/projects/54267-r-kbfus-funds-rubenshuis-and-rubenianum-be>
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