

The Rubenianum Quarterly

2023
1

Moving the art collection

As I write, just one week remains before the Rubens House's art collection will leave the museum, via a specialized art transport – an exciting and complex operation that has been prepared down to the most minute detail.

In October 2021, we received a green light to move forward with the much hoped-for restoration and renovation of the historic house. The removal of the art collection is an essential part of this process. Some 300 of the most valuable pieces in the permanent installation and 1,100 works in storage needed to be removed. We began by conducting location and condition checks, filling in missing dimensions for objects and taking photos. Conservators advised us about how to safely manipulate, pack and store particular works. Needless to say, we do not want to take any risks whatsoever with this extremely valuable collection. Objects in storage have been examined, cleaned, packed and, in some cases, already sent off. The arrival of Monique Kontzen, Conservation and Collections Management Associate, has been a blessing throughout this process. With the hiring of Jan Callier as move coordinator, the preparations gained still more momentum. As soon as the museum's doors closed in January, we began the final preparations in the galleries: additional professional photography was arranged when necessary, objects were cleaned and labelled, loans that had been on display were returned to their owners, and so forth. The preparations have been and continue to be a somewhat gargantuan feat. I am, of course, enormously grateful to the Collections team of the Rubens House & Rubenianum and to my colleagues in Conservation and Collections Management. Now we just have to do the final packing and moving of the remaining objects.

Alongside these practical and logistical preparations, we have also focused closely on the planned destinations for the works in the collection during the period that the museum will be closed. Our guiding principles have been ensuring maximum visibility for the collection and embarking on ambitious restorations for a number of works. The remaining objects will be kept in storage. For the works that will go out on loan, we sought places with a historical connection to the Rubens House and/or important partners of the museum today. In the course of many conversations, this puzzle has gradually taken shape. Rubens's good friends Rockox and Moretus will watch over collection works that will be loaned to the Snijders&Rockoxhuis and the Museum Plantin-Moretus. *A Woman at the Fish Market* by Adriaen van Utrecht and Marten Pepijn will hang in Het Steen, near the historical fish market. Many other masterpieces from the collection will find a safe haven in DIVA, the MAS, KMSKA, and MSK Gent.

In addition, the closing of the Rubens House offers unique opportunities, including allowing Rubens's *Self-Portrait* to preside over the newly renovated Rubens Gallery in KMSKA.

A number of exciting international collaborations are also in the pipeline, but more on that later.

I am so looking forward to visiting our works in their new settings. Hopefully that will also ease the pains of our empty nest. | *Martine Maris* (trans. Abigail Newman)

Adriaen van Utrecht
and Marten Pepijn,
*A Woman at the
Fish Market*. Rubenshuis

Dear Friends of the Rubenianum,

Antwerp was beset by numerous crises during Rubens's lifetime. War was approaching and in August 1626 the Dutch even planned a direct attack on the city. Before its gates, marauding mercenaries were looting and extorting ransoms with no regard for human life. Added to this were economic difficulties and a banking crisis so great that Spain declared bankruptcy in January 1627. As Rubens wrote to the French humanist Pierre Dupuy on 28 May 1627: 'The city, at least, languishes like a consumptive body, declining little by little.' Rubens met these challenges in an exemplary manner, with hope for recovery founded in his strong faith, stoic attitude to life, and unbroken creative energy.

Almost four hundred years have passed, and the world has changed profoundly, yet war rages once again in Europe, with the inventions of recent centuries adding even more perfidious means of death and destruction to those prevalent in Rubens's time. The danger posed by banking crises has greatly increased in our globalized world, so much so that not even the total bankruptcy of a major state can be ruled out. Our vulnerability was evident following the recent cyber attack on Antwerp in December 2022 when criminals held the city's computer systems to ransom. The city authorities rightly refused to capitulate even though this meant shutting down all electronic communications and resources. Understandably, the situation greatly affected our work on forthcoming Corpus volumes as for weeks no emails could be sent or received, and all texts and images of the Centrum Rubenianum stored on the databases were inaccessible. Despite these setbacks, our authors and the team are working feverishly to complete our goal of publishing three volumes by the end of this year, and we hope that you, our sponsors, will continue to support our efforts through your generous donations to the Rubenianum Fund.

Nils Büttner
Chairman Centrum Rubenianum



Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, Part IV.1

The Holy Trinity and The Life of the Virgin by Fiona Healy

The Holy Trinity, The Life of the Virgin, Madonnas and The Holy Family, Part IV in the series, will fill the gap on the bookshelf between *The Old Testament* and *The Youth of Christ* and complete the discussion of all Rubens's sacred subjects. Part IV is divided into three volumes, the first of which will appear this year and will focus on the Holy Trinity and the Life of the Virgin; the second and third volumes, both scheduled for 2024, will discuss Madonnas and the Holy Family, with volume two looking at Rubens's many smaller devotional images of the Virgin and Child, alone or in the company of various family members and/or saints, and volume three dealing with the large altarpieces, such as that chosen by Rubens to hang over his tomb in St Jacob's, which is currently being restored; this last volume will be written by Brecht Vanoppen (Centrum Rubenianum) with contributions by Koen Bulckens (KMSKA).

While the Life of the Virgin might be expected to cover any momentous event in Mary's life, it deals in fact only with those which take place prior to the

Annunciation – from that moment on, all episodes in the Virgin's life are seen in relation to Christ and are accordingly dealt with in the appropriate *Corpus* volume: the Annunciation in *The Youth of Christ*,¹ and the Virgin's death, assumption and coronation in *The Life of Christ after the Passion*.² Thus, in volume one we have just four subjects documenting Mary's earlier life, beginning with a drawing of her birth (Petit Palais, Paris) that is as much a reflection of contemporary life as it is a sacred scene. It is a work that betrays Rubens's unerring ability to make very human emotions central to his art, in this case focusing on the moment Joachim greets his daughter for the first time. There follow two works on the Education of the Virgin; one, known only through a copy, documents a hitherto unknown and somewhat uncharacteristic early work that reimagines the popular medieval subject of St Anne teaching the Virgin to read (private collection), the second, *The Education of the Virgin* in Antwerp (KMSKA), shows Mary wearing a gown so fashionable Rubens could have

borrowed it from his wife's wardrobe. There, too, the Virgin holds an open book, but Rubens has subtly shifted the emphasis to education in the wider sense of upbringing and the part played by Anne and Joachim in preparing their daughter for her role in the process of Salvation. This is also the theme of the lesser-known and intriguing *The Virgin Prepared for the Temple* (Prince of Liechtenstein, Vienna). Assisted by angels, St Anne gently tends to the Virgin's hair while Joachim's upward glance and gesture indicate the couple are offering their daughter to the Temple and therefore to God, as they had vowed to do at her birth. Rubens appears to have been the first to depict this moment – most preferred to show the lone figure of the young Virgin ascending the steep steps to the Temple. The long-held belief that no altarpiece was ever executed after that sketch has been dispelled by Nora De Poorter, who has convincingly argued that it was for an altar in the Church of the Calced Carmelites in Brussels which was completely destroyed in the bombardment of the city in 1695.³ The series ends with *The Marriage of the Virgin*, another product of Rubens's innovative mind – though not of his brush since he appears to have delegated its execution to the studio. Like the *Education of the Virgin*, this composition proved exceedingly popular, with copies found in many churches throughout Belgium. Reproduced in prints, they made their way to the Americas where they found favour with local painters.

Also included in the Life of the Virgin are paintings of the Virgin as Queen of Heaven (*Regina Coelorum*) and the Immaculate Conception. Rubens's novel representation of the latter (Museo del Prado, Madrid) greatly pleased Philip IV of Spain, who hung it over the altar in his private oratory despite its divergence from the iconographic formula familiar in Spain. Another highly important work is his enormous *Virgin as the Woman of the Apocalypse* (Alte Pinakothek, Munich) (fig. 1), executed in the early 1620s for Prince-Bishop Veit Adam von Gepeckh for the high altar of Freising Cathedral in Bavaria. Here Rubens was given carte blanche as to the design, with Veit Adam's sole stipulation being that a *veduta* of Freising be included, as it is; indeed, Veit Adam's greatest concern was the design of the elaborate carved wooden surround, which ended up narrower and taller than initially planned, forcing Rubens to adjust his preparatory oil sketch (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles). Rubens was never one to be defeated by such an inconvenience, and a comparison of the two compositions demonstrates most effectively his ability to turn any situation to his advantage – in the process here



Fig.1 Rubens, *The Virgin as the Woman of the Apocalypse*, 554.5 × 370.5 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

(continued on page 5)

A Masterplan for the Master

Bert Watteuw

'I confess that I am, by natural instinct, better fitted to execute very large works than small curiosities. Everyone according to his gifts; my talent is such that no undertaking, however vast in size or diversified in subject, has ever surpassed my courage.'

—Rubens to William Trumbull, 13 September 1621

Rubens's oft-quoted description of himself in a letter to William Trumbull, Stuart envoy at the Brussels court, seems to testify to an intimidating level of confidence, an almost swashbuckling, overly boastful and perhaps not altogether palatable or endearing manner. Was Rubens really that full of himself?

A braggart? Just a day before he wrote this letter, the newly built Antwerp Jesuit Church, containing a cycle of 39 ceiling paintings by Rubens, had been consecrated. A first and a triumph for the artist, it may in part have inspired the rather pompous tone of his letter. Nevertheless, we shouldn't mistake this for an unvarnished reflection of Rubens's self-image. With success came new responsibilities. The completion of a large cycle brought with it certain anxieties about the future, and it meant that new commissions needed to be secured quickly. Keeping a fully staffed workshop up and running required aggressive lobbying. In the letter, Rubens is angling for a commission he will land only ten years later, that for the decoration of the ceiling of Inigo Jones's Whitehall Banqueting House, glorifying the reign of James I. The competitive international market for commissions on this monumental scale was not for the faint of heart, and understatement would not keep the Antwerp workshop afloat. Given this context, it becomes clear that these lines are not the braggadocio of one individual. They are in fact a pointed strategy for promoting a collectivity: a large, versatile, well-organized workshop that had been gearing up to conquer the European stage. It is in that collective sense that Rubens's words should be understood, and it is in that same collective sense that they serve as an inspiration for the masterplan for the Rubenshuis and the Rubenianum today.

A new building

Designed by Robbrecht en Daem architecten, located where Rubens housed his own library in 1639, the new building will form the future gateway to the Rubenshuis (fig. 1). Its six storeys will fill a gap in the block of buildings on Hopland. Yet this imposing volume is situated beyond the historical viewing axis conceived by Rubens. Present but subordinate to the historical architecture on site, the building's partial cladding with slender colonnettes references Rubens's love of classical architecture, while monumental spiral staircases on the inside hint at his use of the Solomonic column. These subtle nods to Rubens's own architectural ventures serve to gradually lead visitors from a decidedly twenty-first-century environment towards the most inventive ensemble of seventeenth-century secular architecture in the Low Countries. In fact, the positioning of the new building allows for a complete reimagining of



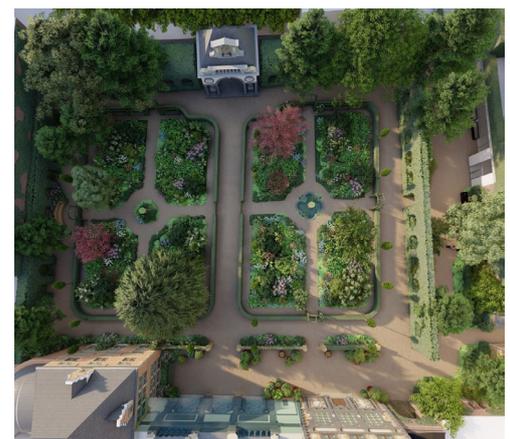
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circulation on site, allowing us to extend dwell time while better managing footfall, resulting in a more qualitative visitor experience. Powered by geothermal and solar energy, the building is key to a sustainable future – part of the energy generated on site will be used for the museum's climate control system.

With visitor facilities at ground level and a subterranean immersive space for digital discovery of Rubens's life and work, the building will truly function as a grand entrance to the artist's private domain. The first floor will provide space for public outreach from the summer of 2024, when the new building will open, until the opening of the museum itself in 2027. From that point forward, it will house the museum café. Levels two and three will function as the Rubenianum reading rooms. From these spacious and well-appointed rooms, both the general public and specialist scholars will be able to browse the lion's share of our holdings in open stacks, an important shift from the closed stack system of the current cramped reading room. Surely the unparalleled views onto Rubens's garden will remedy even the most persistent cases of writer's block. While the scholarly heart of our institution remained somewhat hidden from view, with a separate entrance on Kolveniersstraat, from the summer of 2024 onwards it will be part and parcel of the museum experience. The new building itself has been conceived as two giant bookcases facing one another, between whose shelves floors are suspended. The resiting of the Rubenianum in close vicinity to the artist's workshop and in full view of the museum visitor honours Rubens's own special status as a learned painter, a *pictor doctus*. The top two floors of the new building will consist of office space and support a solar panel array.

A new garden

In the former routing, visitors entered the garden last and did not experience Rubens's intended viewing axis. Newly designed by Ars Horti landscape architects, the garden will serve to welcome our guests in the artist's private realm, making for a tranquil and atmospheric start to the visit proper. That the artist often chose to present himself and his family members in a garden setting in portraits makes this a fitting start. A shadier section with a contemporary feel will guide visitors from the new building to the new entrance of the museum. Sectioned off with a tall hedge rhythmically pierced with 'windows', this part of the design will offer enticing glimpses into the main garden. That main garden will in future be accessed as Rubens himself had envisioned: in a carefully choreographed progression from the courtyard, under the portico, towards the pavillion. Central to the masterplan is restoring this picturesque progress, which is underpinned by an architectural and philosophical programme devised by the artist and accompanied by two quotations from Juvenal's *Satires* that Rubens selected to adorn the portico. To this end, the orientation of the parterres will be changed so as to emphasize the sense of perspective and depth (fig. 2). This operatic and highly memorable stroll is to become the culmination of the museum visit. Thorough archival research by flower still-life specialist Dr Klara Alen has informed the planting palette. By compiling all known plants from Rubens's own garden with those of his close friends and fellow townsmen, she has ensured that the new garden will present visitors with a rich selection of specimens



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grown in seventeenth-century gardens. She has also uncovered some of the ways in which Rubens acquired these plants, for example through the family apothecary, or through a trusted brewer who was deeply involved in the speculative trade in tulip bulbs from his inn The Swan, just around the corner. This research will allow us to tell the story of the garden in a compelling manner. From 2027, the charming gardener's bothy, now inaccessible to the public, will provide space for that, while also hosting small public events relating to the garden.

While historical accuracy is important, restricting ourselves to plants known in the seventeenth century would have greatly reduced the garden's year-round appeal. Early modern gardens peaked in May and June, offering relatively little interest later in the season. To ensure continuing visual interest deep into autumn and winter, the assortment has been complemented with a selection of modern plants that look and feel appropriate in a historical setting. In this, we were fortunate to have the advice of fashion designer and master colourist Dries Van Noten. No doubt the garden will grow into the museum's largest gallery. To block out the environment and to maximize the sensation of a *hortus conclusus*, the approach taken was a reversal of the design principle of 'borrowed landscape'. Much of the surroundings could be blocked out or blurred through the planting of a variety of deciduous and (semi-)evergreen trees, the strategic use of climbers, and most notably by the construction of a *berceau*, an arbour proportioned on the architectural features of the existing historical architecture, guiding the eye back into the garden and towards the house (fig. 3). With underground rainwater storage and considerable buffering capacity during heavy downpours, the garden will invisibly contribute to the climate resilience of the neighbourhood, while serving as an ecological stepstone in a densely urban environment and combatting the heat island effect. The garden is set to become a place where locals, visitors and volunteers will thrive.

A renovated museum

While the new building and the garden will open in the early summer of 2024, work on the Rubenshuis itself is scheduled to be completed in 2027. Conservation architects MAAT_WERK, familiar with the site through



their award-winning work on the portico and garden pavilion, are leading the team. An initial phase will focus on extensive maintenance of the slate roofscape of the house and of the quantity and variety of its windows and doors. These improvements will drastically increase the efficiency of the climate installation. In a second, more complex phase, climatization and accessibility will be tackled. The current outdated installations will be removed from their cramped housing in historic cellars and attics and a new installation will be located in a newly constructed technical basement. This will open up important spaces in the house for public functions and it will allow for the domestic wing to be fully climatized. The chunky mobile (de)humidifiers that so disrupted the visitor experience will be made redundant. This part of the project will secure the safety of our collections and improve the comfort of our guests and museum guards. As indicated earlier, part of the energy needed for this will be sustainably harvested in the new building. A connection to planned district heating is included.

Accessibility is a second focus of the project. By opening up the workshop mezzanine, the pupil's studio, the private studio and a spacious hallway on the upper level of the Italianate workshop wing, we will add 50 per cent more space to the visitor route. This in itself will much improve the quality of a visit and it will allow us to tell new stories in hitherto undiscovered rooms. It will also be an apt response to the recurrent remark in our guest books that the house seems bigger from the outside. As the pupils' studio will also be used for temporary exhibitions, it was essential to us to ensure that this space, and its adjoining rooms, would be made accessible to people with mobility issues. Via a surgical incision, a lift, to be discreetly inserted in a newly designed entrance space outside of the historic fabric of the house, will provide access to the upper floor of the workshop wing (fig. 4). The lift will also serve to access public and back-office facilities in the basement, among which will be much-needed storage spaces.

A myriad of smaller interventions will make for a total renovation of the Rubenshuis, sometimes by stripping away earlier interventions to replace them with more slender and efficient alternatives, thus often restoring the legibility of spaces such as

the workshop, where previous attempts at improving climate control have compromised the architectural quality of the room (fig. 5). Improving climatization, accessibility and the aesthetic quality of our exhibition spaces is a challenging and complicated task and a team-effort requiring a broad set of highly specialized skills. At the other end of this collective effort awaits the return of the museum collection, which has meanwhile been evacuated from the house in its entirety, and – above all – the return of our visitors, among whom we very much hope to count you.

In conclusion

Meanwhile, the City of Antwerp has selected a team of architects for the redesign of the Wapper, the square in front of the museum. The former ticketing office and museum shop will disappear, allowing for an uninterrupted view of the Rubenshuis façade. To evoke the 'rui', a canal buried deep under the square, water will feature in the new design, complementing trees and greenery. The historic Kolveniershof will remain part of the Rubenshuis complex, with a large reception room, auditorium and attic meeting space. The current Rubenianum building is to be replaced with evergreen trees, restoring the typology of a seventeenth-century shooting range and forming the perfect foil for the garden pavilion designed by Rubens himself, thus reviving and concluding the historical viewing axis as intended by the artist.

As part of a team of exceptional professionals, supported by the City of Antwerp, Visit Flanders, The Flanders Heritage Agency, architects, garden designers, conservation architects, engineers, contractors, builders, neighbours, donors, and a range of engaged stakeholders, I dare to repeat Rubens's cocky rhetorical formula, stressing that the first-person singular very much stands in for the first-person plural, just as it did in 1621: *'... je confesse d'estre par un instinct naturel plus propre à faire des ouvrages bien grandes que des petites curiositez. Chacun a sa grâce; mon talent est tel que jamais entreprise encore quelle fust desmesurée en quantité et diversité de suggests a surmonté mon courage.'* We very much look forward to welcoming you back on site from June 2024.

(continued from page 2)

creating a Baroque masterpiece, one that imbues the biblical text upon which it is based (St John's Apocalypse) with that movement and drama for which Rubens was renowned, while conveying the theological notion of the Virgin as the New Eve.

The Holy Trinity is the subject of three different projects. A detailed study of the most famous of these, three enormous canvases for the church of Santissima Trinità in Mantua, commissioned by Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga and completed in 1605, will provide the first account in English to address all aspects of an ensemble that was 'abducted' around 1800. Whereas *The Baptism of Christ* (KMSKA, Antwerp) and *The Transfiguration* (Musée des Beaux-

Arts, Nancy) have survived more or less intact, the central picture of *The Gonzaga in Adoration of the Holy Trinity* was severely mutilated when the portraits of the five ducal children, the Halberdiers and Rubens's self-portrait were cut out and dispersed, though luckily many of these fragments have since resurfaced. The two remaining sections showing the figures of Duke Vincenzo with his wife and parents, and the angels holding the tapestry of the Holy Trinity were subsequently reassembled using assorted pieces of canvas to fill in gaps (Palazzo Ducale, Mantua). Despite the considerable losses, it is nevertheless evident that Rubens devised what must have been a magnificent representation of the ducal family in an architectural setting to rival anything found in Venetian

painting. I will discuss the commission and the subsequent history of the paintings, situate the works in their social and artistic context, and demonstrate the degree to which Rubens engaged with the artistic achievements of the ancient and modern masters after arriving in Italy in 1600.

- 1 H. Devisscher and H. Vlieghe, *The Life of Christ before the Passion: The Youth of Christ (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, v.1)*, I–II, London/Turnhout 2014, nos 1–4.
- 2 D. Freedberg, *The Life of Christ after the Passion (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, vii)*, London/Oxford 1984, nos 36–48.
- 3 N. De Poorter 'Verloren werk van De Crayer en Rubens van naderbij bekeken. De altaarschilderijen van de Brusselse Lieve-Vrouwebroeders', in K. Van der Stighelen, ed., *Munuscula amicorum: Contributions on Rubens and his Colleagues in Honour of Hans Vlieghe (Pictura Nova, x)*, Turnhout 2006, I, pp. 311–29.

Books by two former Rubenianum Visiting Researchers *Abigail Newman*

On Sunday, 12 March, the Rubenianum & Rubenshuis held a festive book presentation to celebrate the publication of two books by former Rubenianum Visiting Researchers, both focused on the impact of Flemish art across Europe. Director Bert Watteuw opened the presentation, and Professor Koen Jonckheere of Ghent University gave concluding remarks.

Supported by a Belgian American Educational Foundation Fellowship, Adam Eaker spent 2012–13 at the Rubenianum while working on his dissertation on Van Dyck and portraiture. He returned to New York and, after a fellowship at the Frick and the defence of his dissertation at Columbia, he was appointed Assistant Curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and subsequently promoted to Associate Curator in 2021.

While spending a year in Madrid researching her dissertation on Flemish painters and paintings in the court city, Abigail D. Newman visited Adam at the Rubenianum, where he introduced her to a number of Rubenianum colleagues. Abigail arrived in Antwerp in the autumn of 2013 with consecutive Fulbright and BAEF fellowships. She has stayed on in Antwerp, returning briefly to Princeton to defend her dissertation in 2016, but otherwise continuing to work in various capacities over the past ten years at the Rubenianum and Rubenshuis, as well as at the Universiteit Antwerpen and the Universiteit Gent.

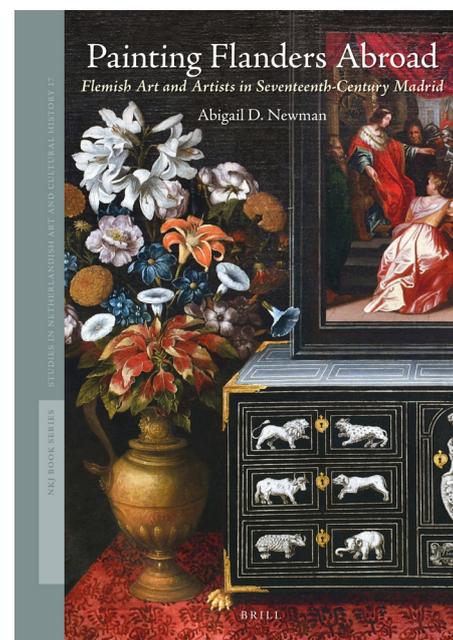
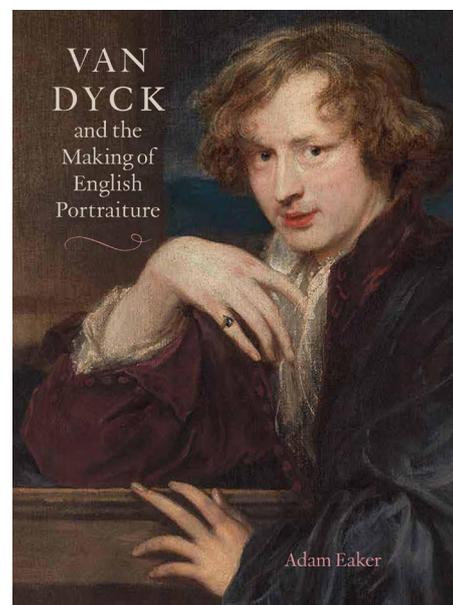
Adam Eaker, *Van Dyck and the Making of English Portraiture*. New Haven/London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art/ Yale University Press, 2022

As a courtier, figure of fashion, and object of erotic fascination, Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) transformed the professional identities available to English artists. By turning his portrait sittings into a form of courtly spectacle, Van Dyck inspired poets and playwrights at the same time that he offended guardians of traditional hierarchies.

A self-consciously Van Dyckian lineage of artists, many of them women, extends from his lifetime to the end of the eighteenth century and beyond. Recovering the often surprising responses of both writers and painters to Van Dyck's portraits, this book provides an alternative perspective on English art's historical self-consciousness. Built around a series of close readings of artworks and texts ranging from poems and plays to early biographies and studio gossip, it traces the reception of Van Dyck's art by such artists as Mary Beale, William Hogarth, and Richard and Maria Cosway to bestow a historical specificity on the frequent claim that Van Dyck founded an English school of portraiture.

Abigail D. Newman, *Painting Flanders Abroad: Flemish Art and Artists in Seventeenth-Century Madrid, Studies in Netherlandish Art and Cultural History 17*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022.

In *Painting Flanders Abroad: Flemish Art and Artists in Seventeenth-Century Madrid*, Flemish immigrants and imported Flemish paintings cross the paths of Spanish kings, collectors, dealers and artists in the Spanish court city, transforming the development and nature of seventeenth-century Spanish painting. Examining these Flemish transplants and the traces their interactions left in archival documents, collection inventories, art treatises and, most saliently, Spanish 'Golden Age' paintings, this book portrays Spanish society grappling with a long tradition of importing its favourite paintings while struggling to reimagine its own visual idiom. In the process, the book historicizes questions of style, quality, immigration, mobility, identity and cultural exchange to define what the evolving and amorphous visual concept of 'Flemishness' meant to Spanish viewers in an era long before the emergence of nationalism.



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