

# The Rubenianum Quarterly

2023  
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## Hinc Lucem et Pocula Sacra

From here, light and sacred draughts. From this place, we gain enlightenment and precious knowledge. Such is the motto of the University of Cambridge.

Rubens received an honorary degree from Cambridge in September 1629, while in the thick of negotiating a peace treaty between England and Spain. Entertainments for the Magister Artium Honoris Causa – during which Rubens was accompanied by his brother-in-law Hendrik Brant – included a Latin comedy performed in Trinity College and lavish banquets (no doubt including plenty of draughts) in Peterhouse, Trinity, Christ's, and Emmanuel colleges. The house that Rubens left behind during his extended stay in Britain from May 1629 to March 1630 would later be occupied by the Cambridge alumnus and civil war exile William Cavendish and his wife Margaret from 1648 to 1660.

The Rubenshuis and the University of Cambridge are keen on perpetuating and reviving these oldest of ties. As Alexandra Gajewski stated in her November editorial in *The Burlington Magazine* on 'History of art after Brexit': 'Long-term damage could result from an estrangement of the scholarly communities on opposite sides of the English Channel.' An inaugural dinner in Cambridge's Trinity Hall on Thursday, 26 October, attended by Belgian Ambassador to the United Kingdom Bruno van der Pluijm, launched our collaboration. Workshops in Cambridge and Antwerp will forge a path forward.

With Alexander Marr, Professor of Renaissance and Early Modern Art at the University of Cambridge, and with Justin Davies, co-founder of the Jordaens Van Dyck Panel Paintings Project, Knowledge Exchange Fellow at the Art History Department in Cambridge, and a Visiting Fellow at the Rubenshuis, we are developing the foundation for a sustained partnership. The University of Cambridge Department of Art History, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Hamilton Kerr Institute and the Rubenshuis can jointly provide a strong cross-channel platform for the study and presentation of the art of the Southern Netherlands 1500–1800.

By involving other Antwerp partners such as the Royal Museum of Fine Arts and the University of Antwerp, it is our firm intent to counter the risk of 'estrangement' described by Gajewski. With brand-new reading rooms providing unique research facilities and resources up and running by the start of the academic year 2024–25, the Rubenshuis will be well equipped to introduce students and early-career academics from Cambridge to local resources and their keepers. It goes without saying that Cantabrigians will soon discover that much light and even more enlightenment are to be found here, too, not to mention the fine draughts on offer in Antwerp.



Peter Paul Rubens,  
*A path bordered by trees*  
© Fitzwilliam Museum,  
Cambridge.

## Dear Friends of the Rubenianum,

*The year 2023 was the thirteenth since the inception of the Rubenianum Fund. Our community of friends, all of us supporters of this important scientific endeavour, has continued to grow year after year, and together we can now proudly anticipate the completion of the original project within the next two years or so.*

*The international acclaim for the latest volumes that were published is again heartening. As a recent reviewer noted in *The Burlington Magazine*, the corpus 'goes from strength to strength'. The praise for our *Mythology II* was particularly fulsome: 'crammed with careful argument and brilliant insights... and the copy-editing is superb'.*

*This is a well-deserved tribute to the volume's authors, but also to our extremely dedicated and hard-working team in Antwerp, now so diligently presided over by Nils Büttner. It is their deep knowledge of the subject matter, combined with meticulous attention to the manuscripts of our authors, which allows us again and again to publish these volumes that are rightly regarded as scholarly monuments.*

*So let me thank all of these colleagues, as well as our donors and benefactors, for their invaluable contribution. It is only through all these combined efforts that the vast ambition of the Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard will be realized.*

Thomas Leysen  
Chairman of the Rubenianum Fund

## Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard XIV (1): *The Medici Series* by Nils Büttner



Fig. 1 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Meeting of Maria de' Medici and Henri IV at Lyon*, c. 1622-23. Oil on canvas, 394 x 295 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. 1775.



Fig. 2 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Wedding by Proxy*, 1621. Oil on panel, 50.1 x 44.1 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. 15475.

On 26 February 1622, Rubens signed the contracts for two series of paintings to decorate the Palais de Luxembourg, the new residence of Maria de' Medici (1575–1642), widow of the French king Henry IV. She had just achieved a precarious reconciliation with her son Louis XIII after years of difficulties. The contracts stipulated that Rubens should depict in twenty-four paintings 'the history of the very illustrious life and heroic exploits' of the Queen Mother and furthermore 'to represent and paint all the battles of the late King Henry the Great, the encounters he made, his combats, his captures and sieges of towns along with the triumphs of the said victories in the manner of the triumphs of the Romans, following the programme that will be provided by her majesty', and 'to make and paint with his own hand each and every one of the figures' in the paintings which would fill two parallel galleries of the dowager queen's palace. Beginning with Maria's birth, each of the twenty-four paintings in the cycle devoted to her life depicts an event or achievement in the life of this most significant figure – both as regent and as patron. The commission – the largest Rubens ever received – holds a central position in the life and work of the painter. It was no easy task to chronicle the life of a woman, let alone one who was politically controversial, but Rubens,

with his facility in combining historical fact with allegorical allusion, succeeded in celebrating her life and deeds in an unprecedented visual apotheosis. The proportions of the individual paintings are precisely calculated to match one another and suit their intended location, above all with reference to the viewer standing in front of them. There is probably no other work by Rubens for which the literature is so extensive, starting with the more than two hundred catalogues and guides of the Louvre which have been published since the Museum opened to the public in 1793. For the present Corpus volume, this literature has been critically examined and every documentary source investigated and reconsidered, alongside close examination of the surviving works themselves.

This resulted in many new insights ranging from small observations, for example about butterfly wings (fig. 1), to new datings and new identifications of the figures depicted in the paintings. One such involves *The Wedding by Proxy of Maria de' Medici to King Henry IV* (No. 8). Rubens must have executed the first sketch for this painting in the late summer of 1621, after he had been visited by an Italian priest named Nardy (or Nardi). This Nardi reported on 9 September to Richelieu, then Bishop of Luçon and at the court of Maria de' Medici, that he found that

Rubens was willing to furnish a 'cabinet' with paintings and that the artist would come to Paris, to 'see what her Majesty desires, and will work on it there'. This early reference to the series is confirmed by the fact that a datable sketch for Rubens's *Lion Hunt* in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, is executed on the reverse of a first sketch for *The Wedding by Proxy* (fig. 2).

It is safe to assume – for reasons explained fully in the relevant catalogue entry – that this sketch preceded a large version of *The Lion Hunt* that Rubens reported on 13 September 1621 as 'almost finished'. That the sketch for that picture was executed after that for *The Wedding by Proxy* can be deduced from the presence of the mark of the panel maker Michiel Vriendt and the remains of the Antwerp brand, visible in raking light at the upper right of the hunting scene. This means that *The Wedding by Proxy* is on the front (recto) of the panel and would certainly have been first – before *The Lion Hunt* sketch and therefore before Rubens's first trip to Paris. I was able to make this observation thanks to the co-operation of Mirjam Neumeister and Jan Schmidt from the Pinakothek, who have also contributed to the present volume the technical descriptions of the oil sketches in Munich. Rubens will have been aware that the marriage would be a crucial event in the biographical picture cycle, especially since he himself had attended this great event in 1600, and this must have influenced his choice of subject. He would then also have had something to present when he arrived in Paris to demonstrate his suitability for the commission. At the time of the wedding, Rubens was in the service of the Duke of Mantua, whom he also depicted in his painting. He is the man leaning on the altar wearing the chain of the Golden Fleece, of which he was the only member present at the wedding. Contemporaries may have known this, but even the first viewers of the pictures were puzzled by some features. For example, an early visitor laconically noted in his travel diary that he had no idea what was going on in *The Meeting of Maria de' Medici and Henri IV at Lyon* (fig. 1). Anyone who is curious about this – or indeed about the rare butterfly wings I mentioned – need only turn to the new book, and look for Thomas Moffet in the second volume's index.

# ‘Rare and Indispensable: Masterpieces from Flemish Collections’

Well up until 2002, Belgium was practically the only country in Europe where there were still no curbs on the export of national cultural treasures. Many still remember the much-lamented loss of unsurpassed masterpieces such as the *Annunciation Triptych* (‘Merode Altarpiece’, c. 1427–32) by the workshop of Roger Campin (the so-called Master of Flémalle), which went to the Met Cloisters in New York; James Ensor’s *Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889*, now in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles; and Joachim Beuckelaer’s four market and kitchen scenes representing the *Four Elements* (1569), a truly unique ensemble that found its way to the National Gallery in London.

However, in 2003, a ‘Masterpiece Decree’ came into force in Flanders, and from that time onwards ‘rare and indispensable’ movable cultural goods have been protected both physically (conservation and restoration) and from unwanted export. Since then, objects that are interesting, often precious and certainly unique have been placed on the ‘Masterpiece List’, a kind of ongoing register, currently running to over a thousand items (although there are actually plenty of other pieces, for many of them consist of several and, in some cases, even dozens of objects).

But even privately owned cultural goods that are not included in the list can no longer be sold to individuals or institutions abroad without further ado. If the government suspends an export licence, it either undertakes to buy the object at its true international market value if the owner so wishes, or it ultimately lifts the export ban. Since 2003 the Flemish government

has purchased several works of art in this way and on these terms, including, recently, an impressive *bozzetto* (Italian for ‘sketch’) by Jean Delcour, ‘the Bernini of Liège’ (fig. 1). This animated and extraordinarily tactile figurine in fired clay is a scale design for one of the more than life-sized wooden statues Delcour carved for the church of Saint-Jacques-le-Mineur in Liège, where they can still be admired. Another recent acquisition is the delicate and sensitive portrait by Catharina van Hemessen, daughter of Jan van Hemessen, one of the most prominent Antwerp painters of the sixteenth century (fig. 2). Raised in a humanist circle that was open to the intellectual and artistic instruction of girls, Catharina became not only an artist but also the first artist of any gender to paint a self-portrait at the easel (Kunstmuseum Basel).

The conservation projects made possible in part by the Masterpiece Decree are no less important. They include the restoration of *Dulle Griet* (‘Mad Meg’), Pieter Bruegel’s apocalyptic painting of 1563, which was believed lost until Fritz Mayer van den Bergh managed to buy it for a few hundred marks in Cologne. Since 1894 the painting has hung in the magnificent museum built to commemorate the celebrated Antwerp collector. Roughly forty paintings by Bruegel have survived, but only this one is in a Flemish collection. The monumental *Death of the Virgin* (Groeningemuseum, Bruges) by the peerless Hugo van der Goes – like Hans Memling a member of a later generation of fifteenth-century ‘Flemish Primitives’ – was also restored recently. Meanwhile, a few years from now, visitors to Saint Bavo’s Cathedral in Ghent will be overwhelmed yet again by one of the greatest wonders of Western art, the by then fully restored *Ghent Altarpiece* by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck, reinstalled there in a chapel. At the same time, the KIK/IRPA in Brussels is in the process of restoring one of Rubens’s most beautiful late paintings, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned and Adored by Saints* (c. 1630), which, along with a marble sculpture of the *Virgin of Sorrows*, attributed most persuasively to Lucas Faydherbe, adorns the master’s burial chapel in his parish church, St Jacob’s.

In the Masterpiece Policy an important role is reserved for the Masterpiece Board. Its first task is to determine which works meet the ‘rare and indispensable’ criteria, but it also makes it its business to identify the appropriate conservation and restoration treatment for our listed masterpieces and, lastly, to decide which works deserve to be submitted for purchase to the Minister of Culture. Needless to say that decisions of this kind should be as objective as possible. The composition of the Masterpiece Board is extremely important in this regard: its nine members are all thoroughly versed in art



Fig. 2 Catharina van Hemessen (1528–after 1567). *Portrait of a Lady with a Dog*, c. 1550. Flemish Community.

and heritage, but are drawn from different backgrounds and areas of specialization.

To mark the Masterpiece Decree’s twentieth anniversary, Thomas Leysen, who has been chairing the Masterpiece Board for almost ten years now, took it upon himself to organize an exhibition aiming to highlight the diversity and beauty of Flanders’s cultural heritage. From the outset, Thomas, making his world debut as a curator, envisaged an exhibition whose single most important selection criterion would be that the works are aesthetically pleasing and affect him



Fig. 3 Early Romanesque. *Head of Christ*, 1060–70. Teseum, Treasury of Onze-Lieve-Vrouwebasiliek, Tongeren.



Fig. 1 Jean Delcour (1627–1707). *Saint James the Less*, c. 1690–91 (detail). Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent.



Fig. 4 Frans Floris (1519/20–1570). *Family Portrait*, 1561. Stadsmuseum, Lier.

personally. I readily accepted his invitation to become co-curator of the exhibition. Our aim was not to present new scholarly insights, to create a didactic show on twenty years of Flemish cultural policy, or to distil some kind of 'narrative' from a disparate collection of objects. Instead, we wanted to show the beauty and variety of a series of exceptional works that have defied the passage of time and are now permanently embedded in public and private Flemish collections. To that end, we opted firmly for a purely subjective approach, driven by our own preferences.

Chronological in design, the exhibition presents a selection of some hundred key works of art in public and private collections, which together reflect the variety of the Flemish Masterpiece List. It offers a journey of discovery through an array of wonderful objects, linked first and foremost by the fact that each one is rare and indispensable. The selection is richly varied and spans thirteen millennia, from a smooth stone – even smaller

than Marcel Proust's madeleine – worked with a piece of flint some 13,000 years ago to a powerful early Romanesque *Head of Christ* (fig. 3); and from the oldest wall map of Flanders to masterpieces by Hugo van der Goes, Hans Memling, Frans Floris (fig. 4), Peter Paul Rubens and Jacques Jordaens.

The focal point of the Flemish Masterpiece List – and hence also of the works in the exhibition – is inevitably the innovative and influential artistic output of that glorious period from the late Middle Ages to the mid-seventeenth century, in which Flanders was the economic and cultural powerhouse of northern Europe. This artistic outpouring, however, had begun quite a bit earlier, a little before 1400, with the exceptional and fragile works of the often-shadowy panel painters, miniaturists and sculptors who paved the way for the unsurpassed Jan van Eyck. A great deal of this pre-Eyckian art was lost during the religious troubles of 1566 and the stripping of churches by Calvinist reformers, with the

result that barely a fraction of it is still extant today. The rare survivals from the period in question include two small panels, resplendent with gold and royal blue, depicting the *Nativity* and *Resurrection of Christ* (fig. 5). Flemish art is omnipresent in the exhibition, but foreign artists – in spite of being rarely found in Flemish collections – are also featured. Such outliers are as rare as they are important: Michelangelo, Jacopo Tintoretto, Hendrick ter Brugghen, Théodore Géricault, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, George Grosz, Giacomo Manzù, Francis Bacon, Tom Wesselmann, and the far too little-known artistic jack-of-all-trades Domenico Gnoli (see fig. 6).

'Rare and Indispensable: Masterpieces from Flemish Collections' – organized in collaboration with the MAS (Museum aan de Stroom) and with the support of the Flemish Government, EventFlanders and the City of Antwerp – runs at the MAS until 25 February 2024. | *Ben van Beneden, co-curator of the exhibition*



Fig. 5 Southern Netherlands or Meuse-Rhine Region? *Nativity and Resurrection*, c. 1380. Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp.



Fig. 6 Gallery view with works by Domenico Gnoli, Giacomo Manzù and Hendrick ter Brugghen.

## From Scribble to Cartoon. Drawings from Bruegel to Rubens



Maerten de Vos, *Cadmus and Hermione*.  
Museum Plantin-Moretus, Antwerp.

### The Rubenianum Lectures

Sunday, 17 March 2024, 11 am

**DR KLARA ALEN**

Research Curator Historical Garden

**DR BERT WATTEEUW**

Director

*The Portrait of a Lady: Helena Fourment in new archival sources*

Klara Alen and Bert Watteeuw will present fresh material on Helena Fourment, discovered in a hitherto untapped aristocratic family archive. These unknown and unpublished sources shed new light on Rubens's second spouse, flesh out a rather meagre historiographical profile, and return agency to a mute muse.

*The lecture is in Dutch.*

Museum Plantin-Moretus,  
17 November 2023 to 18 February 2024.

In this exhibition, the Museum Plantin-Moretus shows one hundred of the most beautiful drawings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The museum's own collection forms the basis for this exhibition and is complemented by masterpieces preserved in other Flemish public and private collections. It is a unique opportunity to see side by side some of the finest and most spectacular drawings preserved in Flanders, which, due to the light sensitivity and fragility of the medium, are rarely on view. Moreover, several sheets have never been displayed before.

Rather than adopting a traditional approach that emphasizes style and attributions, this exhibition takes the functions of drawings as its point of departure. The visitor is asked to look beyond a drawing's subject and composition to consider how and why it was created and why an artist chose specific materials, techniques, formats and even sizes. In the exhibition it becomes clear how closely these different aspects are related to each other, so that visitors are able to see drawings in the functional context for which they were created.

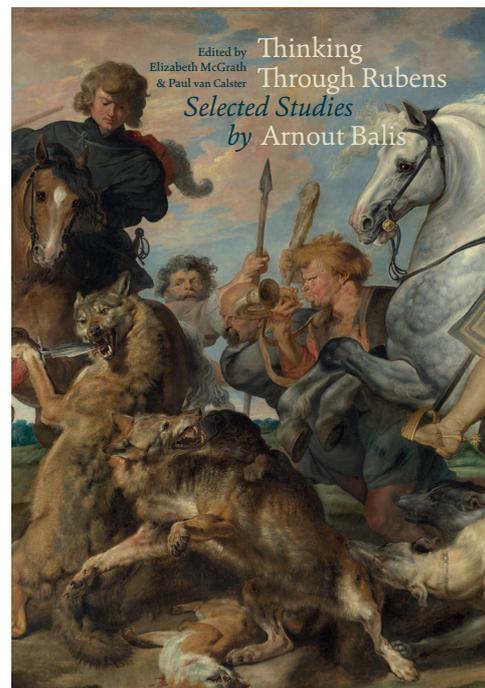
Next to such well-known artists as Bruegel, Rubens, Jordaens and Van Dyck, this exhibition shows splendid sheets by lesser-known draughtsmen active in Antwerp in this period, including Jan van Stinemolen, Gillis Mostaert, Godfried Maes, Maerten de Vos, and Jan Erasmus Quellinus.

The innovative approach of the exhibition curated by Virginie D'haene, and the publication is supported by Getty through its Paper Project Initiative.

The exhibition is accompanied by an attractive scholarly catalogue (edited by Virginie D'Haene), available in English, published by Artha – Art and Heritage Books.

### Topping out the Rubenshuis's new reception building

On Friday, 17 November the Robbrecht & Daem-designed new building topped out. Following age-old tradition, a ceremony was organized to mark the milestone and to thank the BAM Interbuild construction team. In this case the *meiboom* was a Christmas tree, prematurely spreading festive joy over the site and the neighbourhood.



### Selected Studies by Arnout Balis

*Thinking Through Rubens: Selected Studies by Arnout Balis*, published on the initiative of Thomas Leysen and Nils Büttner in commemoration of the great Rubens scholar (1952–2021), was launched on 5 December. Edited by his long-time friends Elizabeth McGrath and Paul van Calster, the book contains a selection of Arnout's studies written for a variety of contexts, some of them already acclaimed as exemplary, and others which deserve to be more widely known. Five of them are made available here for the first time in English translation.

Brepols/Harvey Miller, hardback, 220 pp.  
ISBN 978-1-915487-28-5

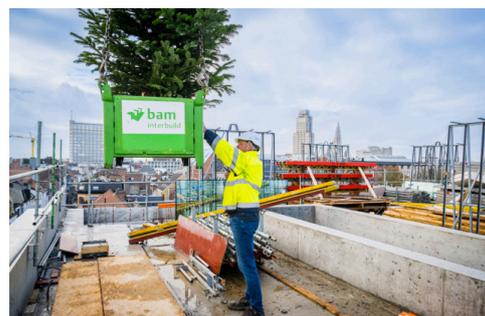


Photo © Frederik Beyens

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