

## Rubens in Holland, Rembrandt in Flanders

70

[ G A R Y S C H W A R T Z ]

Peter Paul Rubens was not what you would call a man of one piece. In point of fact, and it hurts me to say so, he could be downright devious. Take his visits to the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands in July 1627 and December 1631. When Rubens showed up in Utrecht on the earlier visit, he was feted by Gerrit van Honthorst with a dinner in his honour to which all the prominent artists of the city were invited. He praised the paintings of his host, especially the night scenes (he surely knew that in Italy Honthorst was known as Gherardo delle Notti), and on subsequent days visited the main masters in their studios, buying a number of pictures by Cornelis van Poelenburgh. This part of the story was published sixty years later by someone who was at the events – Joachim von Sandrart, who in summer 1627 was a young German apprentice to Honthorst and went on to become a major figure as a painter and writer on art. Because Honthorst was indisposed, Sandrart got to accompany Rubens on his studio visits in Utrecht and Amsterdam, which understandably he wrote up as the highpoint of events.

There is a story behind the story, however, which we know about from the correspondence of key insiders. First of all, Rubens had no desire whatsoever to come to the Republic, with which his country, the Habsburg Netherlands, was at war. He and his friend Balthasar Gerbier were engaged in the sale to the duke of Buckingham, for a hefty 200,000 francs, of a collection of ancient marbles. Rubens was anxious to conduct the business in neutral territory between the northern and southern Netherlands, in the town of Zevenbergen. It was Gerbier who insisted on combining their talks with studio visits in Delft, Utrecht and Amsterdam.

That is not even the innermost of these circles within circles. The entire enterprise, Dutch painters and Gerbier's statues both, was nothing other than a pretext to cover a spying mission Rubens was carrying out, on the order of Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia of Spain, regentess of the Habsburg Netherlands, to throw a wrench into renewed negotiations on a peace treaty between the Republic and Spain.

Rubens's position on the secret council of the Spanish king and confidant of the Infanta also lay behind his disastrous trip to The Hague four years later. On his Lady's orders, Rubens transgressed diplomatic protocol and showed



Paulus Pontius, after Peter Paul Rubens,  
*Self-portrait by Peter Paul Rubens, 1630,*  
engraving on paper, 36.5 x 27.2 cm  
Teylers Museum, Haarlem



Rembrandt, *Self-portrait, 1631*  
etching, touched up in black chalk, 14.8 x 13 cm,  
British Museum, London

up unannounced at the court of the stadholder, Frederik Hendrik. Despite his proud ownership of six paintings by the famous master and his desire for more, the stadholder had no choice but to send him packing. Two days after his arrival, Rubens left the Republic with his tail between his legs, going back to face the extreme annoyance of Flemish aristocrats at home, who saw their own diplomacy being undermined by the Infanta and her favourite.

To be generous, it must be said that Rubens's shifty behaviour was occasioned at least as much by the circumstances attending the Eighty Years War (1568-1648) as by his character. Having said which, it must be noted that the events of his life and the civil war between north and south were closely intertwined. The war began nine years before Rubens was born in 1577 and did not end until eight years after he died, in 1640. He was born in Germany because in 1568 his Protestant father Jan had fled Antwerp for safety from the Spanish oppression of Protestants in the city of which he was town secretary. Jan drew even closer to the Revolt when he became the lover of Anna van Saksen,

the wife of Prince William of Orange. He was rescued from the death sentence pronounced on him only through the impassioned appeal of his wife, the more than admirable Maria Pijpelinckx. After Jan's death in 1587, Maria took her two sons back to Antwerp and re-entered the Catholic church.

Like the other inhabitants of the Netherlands, Rubens enjoyed a reprieve from hostilities during the twelve years of the truce between north and south, from 1609 to 1621. (In the north, this was a relative blessing. The Republic seized the occasion to hold a mini-civil war of its own, between Calvinists and Remonstrants.) The truce went into effect on 9 April 1609, half a year after Rubens's return to Antwerp from Italy. Setting himself up in a studio that was soon internationally famous, it came to his attention that printmakers from The Hague, Haarlem and Leiden had begun to copy paintings of his engravings of the highest standard. Rubens paintings that happened to be in the north were engraved by Willem van Swanenburg in 1612 and Andreas Stock in 1614, while in 1613 Willem Buytewech produced etchings after designs by Rubens and Jacob Matham brought out a print after his *Samson and Delilah*, a proud possession of Burgomaster Nicolas Rockox of Antwerp. Rubens was so impressed that he came north to stimulate more of the same. After the death in 1617 of the great Hendrik Goltzius, the foremost engraver of his time, Balthasar Gerbier wrote a forty-eight-page eulogy including the following slightly weird annotation, in literal translation: 'Rubens, [Jan] Breughel, [Hendrik] van Balen and some more [Flemish artists] being in Holland, Goltzius and other Haarlemers traveled from that city to encounter them in a village where – having played the joke of not identifying themselves – they arrested them in order to pay honor to the noble spirits, which they did by raising an undisguisedly joking wineglass [why joking?] in order to drink to mutual friendship and trust.'

Rubens was so impressed by the quality of Dutch printmakers that he took two of them consecutively in service, Pieter Soutman and Lucas Vorsterman. In 1619 Rubens applied through a befriended Dutch officeholder for copyright in the Republic of Vorsterman's prints after his paintings.

If anyone in Holland knew all about this, it was the omnivorous adapter and collector of other artists' creations Rembrandt van Rijn. In 1627, when Rubens visited the Republic, Rembrandt was poised to hit his stride in The Hague as a well-paid painter for the Rubens-loving court of Frederik Hendrik. Rubens was the man to beat in Netherlandish art, and Rembrandt set out to emulate if not to surpass him. As Simon Schama wrote in his brilliant disquisition on the two masters: 'Rembrandt ... could not quite leave off wanting to be Rubens.' That desire expressed itself astonishingly literally in a self-portrait etching of 1631, a year after the model provided by Rubens through an engraving by Paulus Pontius.

A more subtle cross-border connection became apparent a few years later. In 1633 Rembrandt took on the guise of the most famous Leiden artist before him, Lucas van Leyden. He borrowed Lucas's appearance from a print by Andries Stock after a painted self-portrait, which was provided with a caption telling that Lucas died in 1533. Rembrandt's print was a centennial tribute to Lucas as well as a self-glorifying claim to be his successor. Around the same time Rubens copied the same image, probably from the print rather than the painting, with allegorical attributes that pay homage to Lucas as the very embodiment of artistic fame. The legend below attributes mystical qualities

to the artist, calling Lucas the light, moon and sun of the paintbrush. Rubens, Rembrandt and Lucas van Leyden were participants in a Low Countries artistic culture that covered all seventeen provinces of north and south.



Andries Jacobsz Stock after Lucas van Leyden, *Self-portrait*, c. 1620, engraving, 21.8 x 16.7 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Peter Paul Rubens after Andries Stock after Lucas van Leyden, *Self-portrait*, c. 1633, brush and ink, white and yellow body colour over a sketch in black chalk, 27.9 x 20 cm, Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, Paris



Rembrandt, *Self-portrait*, 1633, etching, 13.2 x 10.3 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

1631 was the year that saw Rembrandt turn seriously to Rubens as a source and model. The self-portrait print has a funny equivalent in his *Self-Portrait in Oriental Costume with Poodle*, in which Rembrandt dresses himself in Oriental garb like a figure in Rubens's *Adoration of the Magi* and like his wealthy Antwerp sitter Nicolas de Respaigne. Rembrandt's *Crucifixion* of 1631 is based on a print after a Rubens design, as are his *Raising of* and *Descent from the Cross* of about 1633. The latter were painted for Frederik Hendrik in a series of the Passion of Christ, commissioned following Rubens's ill-fated two days in The Hague. I must confess that I have been unable, for long years now, to suppress the thought that Rembrandt visited Antwerp not long before making those Rubensesque self-portraits of 1631. The Rembrandt documents show a gap between 15 November 1630, when he signed an apprenticeship agreement in Leiden, and 1 March 1631, when he bought a piece of land outside Leiden. In those four months Rubens was in Antwerp and could have received his younger colleague before or after his marriage to Helena Fourment on 6 December 1630.

This hypothesis, which I fear is unprovable, would help to explain why Rembrandt, more than any other artist of his time, associated himself so emphatically with Rubens. His dedication to the Flemish master extended to the pur-

chase of an early Rubens painting, *Hero and Leander*. He also owned seven paintings by another Antwerp artist whom Rubens admired and envied for his truth to (low) life, Adriaen Brouwer. My favourite example of Rembrandt's appropriation of motifs from Flemish painting concerns his first Amsterdam masterpiece, the *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, painted in early 1632.



Rembrandt, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632, oil on canvas, 169.5 x 216.5 cm, Mauritshuis website, The Hague



Montage of detail from Adriaen Brouwer, *Drunken Peasant Passed out in a Tavern*, c. 1630, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam onto Peter Paul Rubens, *The Tribute Money*, c. 1612, Legion of Honor Museum, San Francisco (also copied in an engraving by Claes Jansz Visscher)

Insofar as the painting owes its success to its introduction into the usually static formula of the group portrait elements from narrative and genre painting, the sources for that tactic lay in Antwerp, in Rubens's *Tribute money* (1612) and Brouwer's *Drunken Peasant Passed out in a Tavern* (c. 1630). History does not tell what the Brabant masters thought of this tribute to their art.

Because the difference between Rubens and Rembrandt, like that between their countries, is often reduced to Catholicism versus Calvinism, it is worthwhile looking at this issue more closely. When the Antwerp art historian Frans Baudouin, director in life of the Rubens House and founding father of the Rubenianum Study Centre, delved into the religious history of the Rubens's family, he came to a surprising conclusion. That is, that the return of Maria Pijpelinckx to Catholicism when she moved to Antwerp with her sons was inspired more by opportunism than by conviction. Even more than Jan Rubens, Maria was attached to Lutheranism, the religion of her mother. Rubens was therefore brought up as a kind of Lutheran marrano, a Protestant Catholic. As for Rembrandt, the Amsterdam archivist Bas Dudok van Heel places him unreservedly in the ranks of the Dutch Remonstrants, a Reformed movement that its detractors call Catholic Protestants. Both artists had an uneasy relationship with the dominant creed in their countries.

This nuance has long been lost. It was especially absent in the mid-nineteenth century, when Rubens and Rembrandt became symbols of their respective nations. In 1843 the new Monarchy of Belgium placed a statue of Rubens in the square adjoining Antwerp Cathedral. The square, the Groenplaats, had been a cemetery, and the statue of Rubens was placed on the sacred spot where the churchyard cross had stood. The response from the north was more defensive. As a nationalist hero, Rembrandt could not compete with the humanist diplomat giant of European culture that Rubens had been. On the eve of the inauguration of the Rembrandt statue, on a commercial Amsterdam market square, the Amsterdam archivist Pieter Scheltema felt called upon to hold an hours-long lecture defending Rembrandt from charges of boorishness, moneygrubbing and bad behaviour. Because these accusations were mainly true, scholarly study of Rembrandt got off to a false start from which it has never entirely recovered. Rembrandt's own ambition to vie with Rubens was revived and taken on by his admirers 200 years later. Admirers who were moved more by patriotism than love of art, let alone of historical truth.

Coming at the dawn of the age of nationalist museology, this strained posthumous competition led to predictably unhappy results. No collection of Rubens paintings became a lasting part of Dutch cultural heritage until the mid-twentieth century, nor were paintings by Rembrandt acquired in Belgium. There are only two paintings by Rembrandt in public collections in Belgium, and a mere handful by Rubens in Holland, not counting the mid-twentieth century donation to Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen of twenty oil sketches. These are pitiful figures for major collecting nations. It took positive distaste to attain a record like this.

To this unfortunate rule there is one historical exception. That was the painting collection built by King William II of the Netherlands (1792-1849; r. 1840-49). The catalogue of the auction sale held of his collection in 1850 lists eight paintings by Rembrandt and eight by Rubens; the rest of the collection attests to a deliberate attempt to balance the art of the northern and southern

Netherlands, with twenty-seven seventeenth-century paintings from Flanders and twenty-six from Holland. This approach to the art of his fatherland, I am convinced, was due to William's personal ambitions. Fatherland is indeed the word; when William began to collect, his father was king of a shortlived monarchy joining the southern provinces of the Netherlands to the northern ones. That arrangement, so attractive to the House of Orange, did not last long, but son William never gave up the unrealistic hope that he would some day rule over all of the Seventeen Provinces. His art collection may have reflected William's personal taste as well, but it surely corresponded to his dynastic dream. He promoted the status of his own art collection by opposing any and all public spending on acquisitions for the national museums.

In 2006, the year when Rembrandt's 400th birthday was celebrated all over the world, I lectured on this subject to the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts in Brussels. It was a thrilling experience for me, since the Academy is housed in the very building, erected in 1824 by William I as a Brussels palace, where William II and his wife Anna Pavlovna lived before the Belgian breakaway of 1839 drove them to The Hague. The collection went with them, to be reinstalled in the Gothic Hall behind a town palace on the Kneuterdijk, where it was open to the public when the royal pair was not in residence. When William died unexpectedly in 1849, it turned out that six months earlier he had secretly borrowed one million guilders from his brother-in-law Tsar Nicholas I, putting up his art collection as collateral. His heirs refused to honour the debt, and a proposal in Parliament to form a fund of private money and a loan from the state to buy the collection for that paltry million was voted down by fifty votes to eight. At auction, the finest private art collection ever assembled in the Netherlands, including masterpieces not only by Rubens and Rembrandt but also Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, Dieric Bouts and Hans Memling, Perugino and Sebastiano del Piombo, Lucas Cranach and Hans Holbein, Raphael and Titian (well, almost Raphael and Titian), Claude Lorrain and Gaspar Dughet, Murillo and Ribera, went blowing in the wind.

After the lecture I was approached by a friendly man who had kept silent in the question period. 'Mr. Schwartz,' he said, 'I have something to show you that is not known to many people. The room next door where the Academy is now serving drinks was the gallery where those paintings you were talking about once hung. There are still traces of that function on the walls. The hooks from which the paintings were hung are still in place. Because the Palace of the Academy was recently placed on the list of protected monuments, fixtures like those cannot be removed.' We moved next door, and indeed there they were.



The picture I made with my telephone camera shows more than the glow on the wall. I too was gleaming. ■

#### FURTHER READING

Frans Baudouin, 'Rubens' kinderjaren in Keulen en in Antwerpen,' in *Rubens in Context: Selected Studies. Liber Memorialis*, Centrum voor de Vlaamse Kunst van de 16e en de 17e eeuw.

S.A.C. Dudok van Heel, *De jonge Rembrandt onder tijdgenoten: godsdienst en schilderkunst in Leiden en Amsterdam* (The Young Rembrandt Among his Contemporaries: Religion and Painting in Leiden and Amsterdam), Rotterdam, 2006.

J.G. van Gelder, 'Rubens in Holland', *Nederlandsch Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 3 (1950-51), pp. 103-150.

Carlos van Hasselt, exhib. cat. *Flemish Drawings of the Seventeenth Century from the Collection of Frits Lugt*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1972.

Erik Hinterding and Femy Horsch, 'A Small but Choice Collection: the Art Gallery of King Willem II of the Netherlands (1792-1849)', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 19 (1989), pp. 5-122.

Max Rooses and Charles-Louis Ruelens, *Correspondance de Rubens et documents épistolaires concernant sa vie et ses œuvres*, 6 vols., Antwerp, 1887-1909 (available online at Google Books).

Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt's Universe*, London, 2006.