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Peter Paul Rubens was born in Siegen, Germany, on 28 June 1577. His parents were the lawyer Jan Rubens (1530–87) and Maria Pijpelincx (1538–1608).<sup>[1]</sup> Jan had also been an alderman of Antwerp, but fearing reprisal for his religious tolerance during the *Beeldenstorm* (Iconoclastic Fury), he fled in 1568 and took refuge with his family in Cologne. There he was the personal secretary of William I of Orange's (1533–84) consort, Anna of Saxony (1544–77), with whom he had an affair. When the liaison came to light, Jan was banished to prison for some years. Shortly after his death in 1587, his widow returned with her children to Antwerp.

Rubens's study at the Latin school in Antwerp laid the foundations for his later status as a *pictor doctus*, an educated humanist artist who displayed his erudition not with a pen, but with a paintbrush. He derived his understanding of classical antiquity and literature in part from the ideas of Justus Lipsius (1547–1606), an influential Dutch philologist and humanist.<sup>[2]</sup> Lipsius's Christian interpretation of stoicism was a particularly significant source of inspiration for the artist.<sup>[3]</sup> Rubens's older brother Filips (1574–1611) had heard Lipsius lecture in Leuven and was part of his circle of friends, as was Peter Paul, who continued to correspond with one another even after the scholar's death. Although Rubens may not actually have met Lipsius, he did portray himself with his brother and the humanist two times in friendship portraits, the second one made shortly after Filips's death in 1611.<sup>[4]</sup>

After his school years, Rubens served for some time as a page to Comtesse Marguerite de Ligne (1552–1611), an appointment he doubtless owed to his father's previous aristocratic relationships. As a page, Rubens mastered court etiquette and developed his celebrated knowledge of languages, skills that would serve him well later when he was a European diplomat. His artistic education also began around this time. He studied with diverse masters, including Tobias Verhaecht (1561–1631), Adam van Noort (1561–1641), and



Otto van Veen (1556–1629),<sup>[5]</sup> and upon completing his training he joined the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke in 1598.

Rubens did not stay in Antwerp for long; he set off for Italy on 9 May 1600, entering the service of Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga (1562–1612) in Mantua. He would serve the duke for eight years, spending most of his time in Genoa and Rome. In 1603 Gonzaga sent Rubens on a mission to Spain, where he received several significant commissions at the court of Philip III (1578–1621). He sojourned in Rome between 1606 and 1608, working with great diligence on the most prestigious commission of his day, namely the high altar of the Chiesa Nuova.<sup>[6]</sup>

In 1608, upon learning that his mother was dying, Rubens returned to Antwerp, but arrived too late.<sup>[7]</sup> He did not return to Italy, but settled permanently in the city on the Scheldt River, leaving only temporarily when he was called away for diplomatic missions and foreign commissions. Rubens no doubt was drawn to Antwerp because of the good prospects it offered. In the decades following the Fall of Antwerp in 1585, the city's churches began to commission works of art again.<sup>[8]</sup> Moreover, Rubens's return coincided with the beginning, in 1609, of the Twelve Year Truce with Spain, which marked a new period of economic growth that stimulated the city council and other local institutions, as well as the urban elite, to grant countless commissions to artists. The Brussels court, too, took notice of Rubens's great talent. In 1609 he was appointed court painter to Archduke Albert (1559–1621) and Archduchess Isabella (1566–1633), the Spanish governors of the Netherlands; they allowed him to continue living in Antwerp, an unprecedented privilege evidencing the great respect and social status he had acquired by this time. On 3 October 1609 Rubens married Isabella Brant (1591–1626), whose father, Jan Brant, was a city secretary. One year later he bought the property on the Wapper, on which he built, between 1611 and 1615, his stately and still extant house, fitting out one wing as his workshop.

Interest in Rubens in the Northern Netherlands bore no relation to that in his own country. The Dutch Republic hardly figured in Rubens's ever-full order book. After Calvinism became the official religion there, the church fell away as the most important patron of artists, and the war between the Republic in the north and the Spanish-controlled southern states meant that the stadholder and his court had rather more pressing concerns than decorating their residences. Moreover, the war impeded normal contact between the two countries, and Rubens was suspect because of his official diplomatic work in the service of the Spanish crown. Still, there were confreres and art lovers in the Northern Netherlands who were familiar with his work. For instance, Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687) expressed his great appreciation for Rubens, calling him "the Apelles of our time," referring to the highly praised Greek painter of antiquity.<sup>[9]</sup> Prince Frederik Hendrik (1584–1647) was another admirer, as is testified to by several splendid pictures by Rubens in his collection from around 1632.<sup>[10]</sup> Telling in this respect is that only one of the works was ordered directly from Rubens: a painted portrait bust of Emperor Julius Caesar.<sup>[11]</sup> It may have been part of a series of twelve portraits of emperors that either Frederik Hendrik or his predecessor Maurits (1467–1625) commissioned from various artists between 1619 and 1625, including Rubens and the Utrecht painters Abraham Bloemaert (1566–1651) and Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629).<sup>[12]</sup> In the case of Rubens, Sir Dudley Carleton (1599–1654), the English ambassador to The Hague and Rubens's acting manager, may well have played a mediating role. In 1618 Rubens had acquired



Carleton's vast collection of ancient sculpture in exchange for nine paintings and a set of tapestries valued at 6,000 guilders. The middleman for this transaction was the Haarlem painter Frans Pietersz de Grebber (1572/73–1649).<sup>[13]</sup> De Grebber and Rubens likely met in June 1612, when Rubens made a brief trip to the Northern Netherlands, visiting Haarlem and also friends in Leiden.<sup>[14]</sup> Rubens would return briefly to the Republic on two other occasions. In 1627, at the end of a diplomatic mission in The Hague, he spent a few days meeting fellow painters in Utrecht and elsewhere.<sup>[15]</sup> In the Republic, Rubens's work was known chiefly through prints that were initially produced and printed there.<sup>[16]</sup>

Though he was not engaged to paint significant commissions in the Republic, neither he nor his workshop was at a loss for work. For example, in 1620 his workshop produced two altarpieces and at least thirty-nine ceiling paintings for the Jesuit church in Antwerp.<sup>[17]</sup> Rubens also worked for art dealers who, in addition to authentic work by him, also purchased countless replicas and copies by his assistants.<sup>[18]</sup> Rubens, moreover, profited on two counts from his position as court painter. First, he received numerous prestigious commissions from the archduke and archduchess; primarily after 1621, Rubens painted some of his most sublime works for Isabella. Second, he benefitted immensely from Isabella's sphere of influence and the many diplomatic missions he led on her behalf, which brought him into contact with the most important European rulers and their entourages. In Paris in 1623 he signed a contract to paint a grand allegorical series glorifying the lives of Marie de' Medici (1575–1642) and King Henry IV (1553–1610) in the Palais du Luxembourg.<sup>[19]</sup> In 1628 he spent seven months at the Spanish court in Madrid; though officially on a diplomatic mission, in between the meetings he visited the royal collection to copy works by Titian and also painted an equestrian portrait of King Philip IV (1605–65). Diplomacy took him to London from May 1629 to March 1630 as part of peace negotiations, during which time he also worked on designs for the ceiling decorations of the Banqueting House in Whitehall Palace.<sup>[20]</sup> Still, it was primarily Rubens's diplomatic work that induced Charles I (1600–49) to knight him upon the successful completion of the talks. Soon thereafter, political intrigue endangered Rubens's position as a diplomat and he abandoned this career in 1633. Nevertheless, foreign rulers continued to engage his services as a painter. In November 1636 Rubens began working on decorations for the Torre de la Parada, Philip IV's hunting lodge, for which 112 paintings arrived in Madrid on 1 May 1638.<sup>[21]</sup>

Four years after the death of Isabella Brant on 6 December 1630, Rubens took a second wife, the sixteen-year-old Helena Fourment (1614–73). Her father was a tapestry dealer for whom he had recently designed his celebrated *Life of Achilles* series.<sup>[22]</sup> In the spring of 1635 Rubens worked on the decorations for the *Blijde Inkomste*, or Triumphal Entry, into Antwerp of Isabella's successor, Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand (1609/1610–41), who would appoint him court painter a year later.<sup>[23]</sup> Rubens spent his final years on his estate of Elewijt, near Mechelen, painting mostly relatively small landscapes. He suffered greatly from gout, and his health deteriorated to the point where he ultimately lost the use of his hands. His death in Antwerp on 30 May 1640 marked the end of a life during which Rubens had excelled in so many areas. His friend Ambrogio Spinola (1569–1630), marquis of Los Balbases, considered that painting should be appreciated as the least of Rubens's many talents; although such a view has a grain of truth, it is one with which few would agree today.



- Piet Bakker, 2017

## Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information on Peter Paul Rubens is from Hans Vlieghe, *De schilder Rubens* (Utrecht, 1977).
2. For a survey of the people in Rubens's immediate intellectual circle in Antwerp, see M.A. Nauwelaerts, "Pieter Pauwel Rubens en het Antwerpse humanism," *Hermeneus* 49 (1977): 147–58.
3. Mark Morford, *Stoics and Neostoics: Rubens and the Circle of Lipsius* (Princeton, 1991).
4. Frances Huemer, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Part 19, vol. 1, Portraits Painted in Foreign Countries* (London, 1977), 163–66, no. 37; Hans Vlieghe, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Part 19, vol. 2, Portraits of Identified Sitters Painted in Antwerp* (New York, 1987), 128–32, no. 117.
5. Verhaecht, a landscape painter and Rubens's first teacher, would have taught him only the rudiments of his craft. Van Noort and Van Veen were both history painters. In the short period preceding his departure for Italy, Rubens collaborated with Van Veen and Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625) a few times.
6. Michael Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy* (Oxford, 1977), 85–99.
7. Filip Vermeylen, "Antwerp Beckons: The Reasons for Rubens' Return to the Netherlands in 1608," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 55 (2004): 17–33.
8. Such commissions were necessary on the one hand to fill the empty places left by the ravages of the *Beeldenstorm* in 1566, which was followed by the systematic removal and sale of ecclesiastical art by the Calvinists, and on the other hand as replacements for images with an iconography that was not in keeping with the ideas of the Counter-Reformation. The Counter-Reformation also prompted the construction of new church buildings that had to be provided with works of art.
9. "Den Apelles van onze tijd." Albert H. Kan, *De jeugd van Constantijn Huygens door hemzelf beschreven* (Rotterdam, 1971), 73.
10. For a survey of works by Rubens in the stadholder's collection, see Jan Gerrit van Gelder, "Rubens in Holland in de zeventiende eeuw," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 3 (1950–51).
11. Marjon van der Meulen, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Part 23, Copies after the Antique* (London, 1994), 2: 119–20, no. 109. The same image was also used for the painting of Julius Caesar in the Leiden Collection, see the entry in this catalogue. See also Michael Jaffé, "Ruben's Roman Emperors," *Burlington Magazine* 113 (1971): 300, fig. 2.
12. On this series, see Elizabeth Nogrady, "Het schilderen van series: een Utrechtse

specialiteit,” in *Het Bloemaert-effect: Kleur en compositie in de Gouden Eeuw*, ed. Liesbeth M. Helmus and Gero Seelig (Exh. cat. Utrecht, Centraal Museum; Schwerin, Staatliches Museum) (Petersberg, 2011), 46–54.

13. Jan Gerrit van Gelder, “Rubens in Holland in de zeventiende eeuw,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 3 (1950–51): 130–32. See the biography of Pieter de Grebber (ca. 1600–52/53) in this catalogue.
14. R. de Smet, “Een nauwkeurige datering van Rubens’ eerste reis naar Holland in 1612,” *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten* (1977): 212–18; Jan Gerrit van Gelder, “Rubens in Holland in de zeventiende eeuw,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 3, no. 1 (1950–51): 120–21.
15. For an extensive account of this visit, see Pieter T.A. Swillens, “Rubens bezoek aan Utrecht,” *Jaarboekje van “Oud-Utrecht”* 46 (1945): 105–25.
16. Jan Gerrit van Gelder, “Rubens in Holland in de zeventiende eeuw,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 3 (1950–51): 128–30.
17. John R. Martin, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Part 1, The Ceiling Paintings for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp* (London, 1968). The decorations were lost in a fire in 1718.
18. The flourishing tapestry industry also called upon Rubens’s inexhaustible talent. On commission for rulers, weavers, and tapestry dealers, Rubens designed numerous tapestry series, the most famous of which is *The Constantine Series* of 1622. Koenraad Brosens, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Part 13, Subjects from History. III. The Constantine Series* (London, 2011).
19. Frances Huemer. *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Part 19, vol. 1, Portraits Painted in Foreign Countries* (London, 1977), 44–61.
20. Gregory Martin, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Part 15, The Ceiling Decoration of the Banqueting Hall* (London, 2005), 2 vols.
21. Svetlana Alpers, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Part 9, The Decoration of the Torre de la Parada* (London, 1971).
22. Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Part 10, The Achilles Series* (London, 1975).
23. John Rupert Martin, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Part 16, The Decorations for the Pompa Introitus Ferdinandus* (London, 1972).

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