

RUBENS AND ITALIAN ART

Rubens has sometimes been called an Italian artist, particularly by Italophiles,¹ and it was Giovanni Baglione, author of the first life of the artist to appear in print (1642), who said that he had adopted 'a good Italian style'.² It is hard to think of an assertion that could be more irritating to Rubens's fellow countrymen, since, despite spending eight years in Italy, he decided to return to the southern Netherlands in 1608 in the full knowledge that he could have pursued a successful career in Rome, had he so chosen. Nevertheless, there is something about Rubens's cosmopolitanism (which included a preference for writing in Italian), his regular travels abroad, and his absorption in the literature of classical antiquity, that point to an impatience with any restriction on his artistic or intellectual life. This exhibition brings together a mass of material that seems to confirm Rubens's Italianism, but it needs to be remembered that he never repudiated his Netherlandish background and that he also made copies and adaptations from northern art throughout his life.

There were two main areas in the art of the past that interested Rubens: the art of antiquity and that of the European sixteenth century. When studying the former, particularly in Rome, he did not think much of the available drawn and engraved reproductions, preferring to make copies for himself. But, when dealing with more recent art, he adopted a different approach. It is the argument of this exhibition that Rubens bought quantities of sixteenth-century Italian drawings which he took to Antwerp, and that, during the remainder of his life, he returned to this material from time to time and retouched individual sheets, sometimes very extensively. This urge to rework was very different from the business of making a direct copy because it involved improvisation and a degree of distance from the original. Indeed, his approach to these drawings amounted to destroying another artist's handiwork. The literature on Rubens's attitude to Italian art has tended to make him appear subservient, fawning with admiration over a canon of excellence,³ but the evidence suggests something closer to a sense of personal competition, which is absent from his study of the art of antiquity.

According to Giovanni Pietro Bellori, the seventeenth-century critic and historian, Rubens carried 'good Venetian colour' back to Antwerp,⁴ and most of the artist's early critics and biographers described him as more of a Venetian than Flemish artist.⁵ Rubens was certainly influenced by the workshop practice of Titian (c.1490–1576) and Jacopo Tintoretto (1518–1594), but he never used canvas texture to the extent that they did, and he had no taste for allowing colour to remain visible in the grain of the canvas so as to be modified by what is brushed across it. As has often been observed, Rubens treated the canvas as a smooth surface rather than a rough one and remained at heart a panel painter in the northern tradition.

Opposite
Rubens after Raphael
Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione
The Courtauld Institute Gallery,
London

There was nothing unusual about Rubens's decision to travel to Italy in 1600. For the previous hundred years innumerable artists from the Netherlands had made this journey. But what they wanted from this experience, and the use they made of it, varied considerably. A great deal depended on the specialism of the individual. For example, a landscape painter would travel knowing that he could offer something different from his Italian rivals, and might not change his work much whilst abroad. By comparison, painters of subjects from history and literature found themselves up against stiff competition, but knew that what they could learn in Italy would stand them in good stead for the rest of their career. Rubens fits into the second category, but he was unusual as he obtained commissions to paint altarpieces in Italian churches, particularly in Rome where the competition could not have been more tough.

Rubens's understanding of Italian art was transformed during the years that he spent in Italy. Although much is known about his movements at this time, his visits to picture collections are less well documented, and, unlike Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), he left no sketchbook recording what he saw as he moved from place to place. It has been assumed that many drawings after Italian works were made directly by Rubens during his travels, but if, as I think, these are mostly copies by other artists that he simply retouched, they cannot be used as evidence that he had seen the originals. Indeed, the inaccessibility of a particular work could be the reason why he wanted a copy of it in the first place. However, his period as court artist in Mantua certainly meant that he knew the work of Andrea Mantegna (1430?–1506), Giulio Romano (c.1499–1546), Antonio da Correggio (c.1490–1534), and Titian at first hand, and his position as a servant of the Gonzaga must have helped open doors elsewhere.

Rubens left Antwerp to travel to Italy on 9 May 1600. His nephew wrote later that he went first to Venice.⁶ To my mind no copies entirely by Rubens survive from this visit, although, as will be shown later, he stopped and made some in Treviso. Within a year of arriving in Italy, Rubens entered the service of Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga (1562–1612) of Mantua. Exactly when this happened is unknown,⁷ and, although it may have occurred before the end of 1600,⁸ there is no firm evidence to confirm it before 1601. At any rate, once Rubens had secured a job in Mantua he did not stay there long. He had obtained an income and social status, but knew that he needed to travel further afield. In late July 1601, Rubens persuaded his employer to let him go to Rome, where he arrived with a letter of introduction to Cardinal Montalto, nephew of Pope Sixtus V.⁹ He was back in Mantua before July 1602 when he made a brief visit to Verona in order to meet his brother.¹⁰

Rubens's time in Italy was split into two separate periods by a visit to Spain between 1603 and 1604. Duke Vincenzo decided to send some costly presents to Philip III (1578–1621) and Francisco Sandoval y Rojas, Duke of Lerma (1552–1625), the powerful royal favourite, and Rubens was chosen to deliver them, which suggests he had risen faster through the ranks as a courtier than as a painter. The visit did not interrupt Rubens's studies because it gave him a glimpse of the many Italian pictures that had been sent to Spain during the sixteenth century on the orders of Charles V and Philip II. Indeed, Venetian secular art was then (as now) better represented in Madrid than in Venice itself. As early as 24 May 1603, Rubens wrote to Annibale Chieppio, Duke Vincenzo's secretary of state, about the 'many splendid works of Titian, of Raphael and others, which have astonished me, both by their quality and quantity, in the king's palace, in the Escorial, and elsewhere'.¹¹ Since this was written only eleven days after arriving in Valladolid, Rubens must have been fast on his feet. At this point he would have seen a number of portraits and religious works by Titian, but it is unlikely that he gained access to the king's private apartments in the Alcázar at Madrid where the mythological paintings were kept,¹² and this was not achieved until his second visit to Madrid in 1628–9.¹³

The exact date of Rubens departure from Spain and return to Italy is unknown, but it is usually placed early in 1604.¹⁴ On 2 June Rubens was documented as receiving his court salary at Mantua, backdated to 24 May,¹⁵ which suggests that he sailed from Spain in March. Back in Italy, Rubens returned to Mantua where, among other duties, he was documented in 1605 painting two copies for presentation to the Emperor Rudolf II in Prague after works by Correggio in the ducal collection.¹⁶

In 1606 Rubens went back to Rome from where he wrote to Chieppio that he had 'devoted all summer to the study of art',¹⁷ and this city became his base until departing for Antwerp on 28 October 1608. He would never return (although he wanted to do so in 1629),¹⁸ but, during the eight years of his travels in Italy and Spain, Rubens had not only given himself a visual education but had assembled a 'paper museum' to take home with him. This contained copies of works he had seen, and preparatory studies by earlier artists and records of works that had been lost or exported from Italy, ranging in date from the 1480s to the time of his visit.

RUBENS AND LATE FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN ART

Most artists of Rubens's generation were entirely indifferent to Italian art of the fifteenth century, but Rubens was not. One of the earliest Italian drawings which he obtained and retouched (or at least one of the earliest that can be dated with some confidence) is a copy after Giovanni Bellini's *Saints Benedict and Mark* [fig.1, cat.no.3] from the *Frari Triptych*, painted in 1488, and this is among the first drawings catalogued in the exhibition. It must be admitted though that Rubens's interest in Quattrocento art was limited and he may have agreed with Vasari that it looked dry, hard, and sharp,¹⁹ something which could also explain his aversion to the work of Albrecht Dürer.

The exceptions are Rubens's copies and adaptations based on Andrea Mantegna's *Triumphs of Caesar*, now at Hampton Court, the great series of canvases painted for Francesco Gonzaga in the late 1480s and completed in the 1490s.²⁰ Rubens not only studied these works when he was in Mantua, but returned to their compositions in the 1620s when he painted a free version incorporating two of them [see fig.11], discussed below, and made the drawing of *Three Men with Staves* [cat.no.2]. If there is any coherence in Rubens's occasional study of the Quattrocento it is that he chose work by artists with an evident response to classical antiquity.

RUBENS AND SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN ART

The largest numbers of drawn copies by Rubens, or retouched by him, are after the work of Michelangelo (1475–1564), Raphael (1483–1520), Giulio Romano, and Polidoro da Caravaggio (1490/1500–1543?), which suggests a bias towards central Italian art of the first half of the sixteenth century. There is less evidence of Rubens's study of Leonardo (1452–1519) but *The Battle of Anghiari* [represented here by Gerard Edelinck's engraving after Rubens's copy, cat.no.4] had a lasting influence on his battles and hunts, and the impact of this composition was obvious, soon after arriving in Italy, in one of his most important early drawings, a large and ambitious composition showing warriors fighting fiercely for possession of a standard [cat.no.5].

By comparison, he possessed very few drawings after Venetian pictures or by Venetian artists (which makes his ownership of a sheet by Domenico Campagnola [fig.2, cat.no.56] all the more unusual and interesting). This lacuna was counter-balanced by the large number of full-sized painted copies he made from the work of Titian, which will be discussed later in this essay. Perhaps surprisingly, the majority of these recorded portraits, a field which Rubens generally avoided in his own work, unless painting friends or the sort of people who could not be refused. For Rubens, it seemed there was little point attempting to reproduce the colour and texture of Venetian art in anything other than pigment on canvas.



Fig.3 · Anonymous Sixteenth-Century Draughtsman after Raphael, retouched by Rubens *A Naked Man Clinging to a Wall* [cat.no.22]
The British Museum, London

Rubens's interest in Michelangelo's work was stimulated by his visit to the Sistine Chapel soon after arriving in Rome in 1601 when he made eight drawings after the prophets and sibyls on the ceiling [see cat.nos.9, 10] and several more after the *Last Judgement* on the altar wall. In this Rubens was out of step with many contemporary artists in Rome, who, whatever their stylistic allegiance, tended to view Michelangelo's work with caution and even distaste, a shift in taste that became increasingly obvious as the century progressed.

Rubens owned a diverse group of drawings after Raphael, including a number recording individual figures or small groups taken from larger works, rather than complete compositions. One outstanding example is an early copy from Raphael's studio, retouched by Rubens, which depicts *A Naked Man Clinging to a Wall* [fig.3, cat.no.22], one of the figures in the famous fresco of the *Fire in the Borgo* from the Stanza dell'Incendio in the Vatican. Perhaps surprisingly, the frescoes in the Stanze were less absorbing to Rubens than Raphael's designs for the Acts of the Apostles. Despite what is usually said, he probably knew these better from the tapestries in the Sistine Chapel than from the cartoons because the latter (which he may have seen in Genoa) had been cut into strips to help the weavers.

Rubens bought quantities of drawings after Giulio Romano's designs, probably from his studio in Mantua. The largest sub-groups were twenty-one large copies (which have been very little studied), now in the Louvre,²¹ after the triumph of a Roman emperor from the Sala degli Stucchi at Palazzo Te in Mantua, and three after the small cartoons (known as the *petits patrons*) for the great series of tapestries on the life of Scipio Africanus that were woven for François I of France. The most brilliantly and extensively retouched sheet from the latter group, depicts *Scipio Welcomed Outside the Gates of Rome* [fig.4, cat.no.36]. Rubens also owned red chalk counterproofs from at least two of the remaining compositions in this series, which appear to have been retouched in his studio at a later date [see cat.no.39]. Although Rubens studied a range of Giulio's designs, these two groups suggest a parallel with Mantegna's similarly imperial *Triumphs*, which had also been made in Mantua. Aretino's famous (and untranslatable) characterisation of Giulio's work as *anticamente moderni e modernamente antichi* could as well be applied to Rubens.²²

Rubens was also interested in the work of another Raphael pupil, Polidoro da Caravaggio, but, rather than buying drawings from his studio, he had to make do with the work of journeyman copyists dating from the mid-sixteenth century, when reproductions were virtually mass-produced after the much-admired façades that Polidoro had decorated in Rome during the 1520s. However, Rubens did obtain an original drawing by Polidoro, a *Saint Paul* [cat.no.27], which he also retouched. Of all Polidoro's palace façades, the one painted for Giovanni Antonio Milesi was perhaps the most admired, and Rubens owned and retouched no fewer than nine drawings after it, five of which are present in this exhibition [cat.nos.30–4], among them *The Castration of Uranus by Cronus* [fig.5, cat.no.32] from the frieze between the first and second floors. Rubens's collecting and reworking of this material reflected the taste of his time since Polidoro's reputation remained very high during the seventeenth century.



Fig.4 · Rubens
after Giulio Romano
*The Life of Scipio Africanus: Scipio
Welcomed Outside the Gates of Rome*
[cat.no.36]
Private Collection

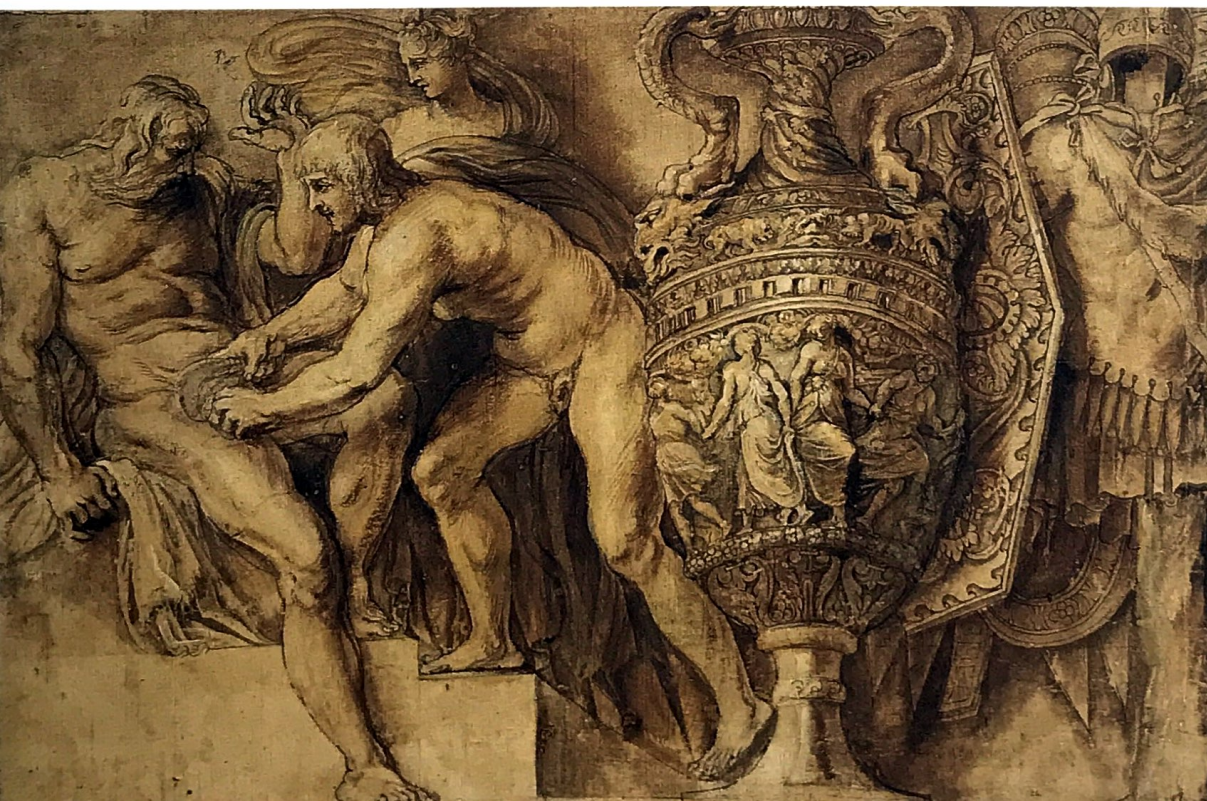


Fig.5 · Anonymous Sixteenth-
Century Draughtsman after
Polidoro da Caravaggio,
retouched by Rubens
*The Castration of Uranus
by Cronus* [cat.no.32]
Private Collection

RUBENS AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

In February 1607 Rubens recommended the purchase of Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*, now in the Louvre, Paris, to Duke Vincenzo.²³ It was perhaps his most generous acknowledgement of a living artist's work. Among other contemporaries, he probably met the very elderly Federico Zuccaro (1540/41–1609) in Rome in 1602 or Mantua in 1605, and obtained some drawings that dated from earlier in Federico's career [see cat.nos.67, 68, 70]. He also knew something of another artist of mature years, Federico Barocci (1535?–1612), whose work was to be seen near that of Rubens in the Chiesa Nuova in Rome, and whose significance for his working methods will be discussed later. By contrast, when Rubens was in Spain, he dismissed the work of his contemporaries there (both native-born and Italians in exile) as showing 'incredible incompetence and carelessness', adding 'God preserve me from resembling them in any way'.²⁴ But Rubens was not that keen on the work of modern artists in Italy either, whom he may reasonably have viewed as rivals unless they specialised in fresco, like Federico Zuccaro. The mass of visual evidence suggests he kept his eyes firmly fixed on the example of the early sixteenth century.

The exception was Annibale Carracci (1560–1609). Rubens's knowledge of his work can be studied from a fragmentary sheet by this artist which Rubens enlarged into an intimate and tender family group at a fireside [fig.6, cat.no.75], as well as the only drawing that documents his knowledge of any of Annibale's Roman works, which is a copy after a section of the vault in the Galleria Farnese [cat.no.76]. But, perhaps surprisingly, the latter was not made by Rubens from the original when in Rome but is a pedestrian copy by another artist which he reworked vigorously in the 1630s. At times Rubens may have been less well informed than might be expected. For example, he owned three red chalk figure studies that Annibale had made when in Bologna before he travelled to Rome [cat.nos.71, 72, 73], but all were incorrectly inscribed by Rubens as the work of the early sixteenth-century artist Antonio da Correggio,²⁵ even though he almost certainly met Annibale when in Rome.

THE PAINTED COPIES

Rubens differed from his contemporaries as he made painted copies on the same size as the originals at almost every stage of his career, even though this was normally something that an artist would only do when at the beginning of his training. It is all the more surprising because Rubens was a shrewd businessman who did not waste his time and energies unnecessarily; he was used to delegating a great deal of work to his assistants (who included many proficient copyists), and the painted replicas were not made for sale, but were almost invariably kept in his own collection. In the past there have been differences of opinion over the attribution and dating of both the painted and drawn copies.²⁶ This makes it crucial to establish a secure chronology within which to place the more controversial works.

It seems that Rubens started making large painted adaptations from Italian art before he left Antwerp for Italy, but, for obvious reasons, he had to use intermediary copies as models, not the originals. His earliest efforts were not helped by being painted on panel which provided an un-Italian hardness of surface. These pre-1600 copies are not documented in any way, so their attribution is something of an act of faith. They are also different from most of Rubens's later painted copies because they were made on a larger scale than the models. The most plausible attribution is a version of Michelangelo's lost *Leda and the Swan*, now in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, which is represented in this exhibition by a second, smaller, but almost certainly autograph version [cat.no.8 and back cover].

When Rubens reached Italy he switched to painting on canvas and started making full-size facsimiles of works that interested him. In my opinion, the earliest surviving example is a copy in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, after Titian's *Isabella*

Fig. 6 · Annibale Carracci, retouched by Rubens
*A Woman with Two Children in Front of the Fire,
Accompanied by a Woman Carrying a Basket*
[cat.no.75]

Département des Arts graphiques,
Musée du Louvre, Paris

d'Este, in Red [fig.7],²⁷ the original of which was then in Mantua but is now lost. The copy looks like the work of a Flemish artist and has an exaggerated attention to surface at the expense of the volume and texture found in Titian's portraits. The relative tightness of this copy suggests it was painted in 1600–1, soon after Rubens's arrival in Italy, because it does not have the confident paint handling found in his work after 1603, which he learned from Tintoretto as much as from Titian.

The two copies which can be dated to Rubens's first visit to Spain are included in this exhibition [cat.nos.47, 48]. Rubens usually preferred to make a complete record of a work which interested him, but, in one case, he copied only the head from Titian's *Charles V on Horseback*, then hanging in the Madrid Alcázar, although he did so on the same scale as the original. His record of Titian's *Charles V in Armour with a Drawn Sword* [fig.8] was not made in Madrid – as usually assumed – but at the fortress of Simancas, conveniently near Valladolid. It has been assumed that Rubens was bowled over by the splendour of these Habsburg portraits, but he may have been just as interested in them as likenesses of famous figures from history, which he guessed – quite rightly as it transpired – could be turned to profitable use in his own work.

The painted copies were usually the product of his travels, made so that he could take home a record of a work that was only briefly available to him, and, as a result, he made fewer copies after he had returned to Antwerp. An exception is the *Cupid Shaping*

Fig.7 · Rubens after Titian
Isabella d'Este in Red
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Fig.8 *opposite* · Rubens after Titian
Charles V in Armour with a Drawn Sword
[cat.no.48]
Private Collection



his *Bow* [fig.9], now in Munich, based on a work by Parmigianino (1503–1540), which, exceptionally for Rubens, was dated as 1614, at which time the original had been taken to Vienna. Rubens could have seen it when he was in Spain in 1603–4, but this was a return to his practice before going to Italy when he had made adaptations from Italian art using intermediary copies. Parmigianino's invention seems against the grain of Rubens's temperament,²⁸ and he made the Cupid more masculine, stripping the figure of most of what makes it provocative and unsettling.

Rubens set out for his second journey to Spain in late August 1628 and he arrived in Madrid by 15 September.²⁹ It was this visit that precipitated the most sustained and remarkable series of painted copies in his entire career. Rubens was not in Madrid for long (he left on 29 April 1629), but, in addition to his duties as a diplomat, he painted a number of works for the king and leading courtiers, as well as full-size replicas of many of the works by Titian in the royal collection. All of this was achieved without the help of the large workshop that he was used to having at his beck and call in Antwerp, and must have been made at extraordinary speed. An authoritative list of the copies was provided by Francisco Pacheco in his *El Arte de la Pintura* of 1649,³⁰ who had obtained information from Diego Velázquez, his son-in-law and Rubens's frequent companion at this time. Pacheco's information is confirmed by the inventory of Rubens's collection drawn up after his death in 1640. One of the largest and most impressive of these is *Diana and Callisto* [fig.10, cat.no.53], can be seen in this exhibition alongside Titian's original [cat.no.52] for the first time since Rubens painted his version in the Alcázar.

He continued painting full-scale copies during the 1630s. It must have been relatively early in the decade that Rubens made his version, now in the Courtauld Institute Collection, after Raphael's portrait of *Baldassare Castiglione* [illustrated on p.10], the original of which is now in the Louvre. The banker Lucas van Uffelen bought the Raphael in 1631 and took it to Amsterdam straight away,³¹ quite possibly stopping in Antwerp, en route, and it is hard to explain how Rubens saw the original otherwise. Although the prototype was on canvas, Rubens painted his copy on panel, thereby making the soft and tactile surfaces of Raphael's work look more hard and more resilient. In doing this, Rubens returned yet again to one of the features of his earliest painted copies.

Fig.11 · Rubens
A Roman Triumph
 National Gallery, London



THE RETOUCHEDED AND RESTORED PAINTINGS

Seventeenth-century sources make it clear that Rubens occasionally retouched paintings by earlier artists, and two examples, after compositions by the Netherlandish artist Marten van Cleve (1527–1581), survive in private collections.³² When Rubens arrived in Valladolid in 1603 he brought with him gifts of eight large copies that had been painted by a contemporary Italian artist, Pietro Fachetti, after scenes designed by Raphael and Francesco Salviati (1510–1564). Fachetti's canvases became 'rotted and spoiled' during the journey and Rubens was forced to give them a very rapid restoration in order to save the day.³³ Again, when Rubens visited England in 1629 he was not too grand to 'mend' a portrait by Giulio Romano in the collection of Charles I.³⁴ These may seem like humdrum jobs, but, as will be shown later by looking at Rubens's retouched drawings, he found these interventions congenial.

The restorations already mentioned were clearly meant to be as discreet as possible, but there is a rather different and far more extreme example of Rubens reworking some earlier painted copies. *A Roman Triumph* [fig.11] in the National Gallery, London, usually dated to the 1620s, has for long been recognised as a free version of two different scenes from Andrea Mantegna's *Triumphs of Caesar*, now at Hampton Court. But, in order to create it, Rubens did not start afresh but took two small painted copies on canvas from a series after Mantegna's cycle and stuck them down onto a panel.³⁵ He made use of a complete copy of *The Elephants* which occupies the right-hand side of the new work,³⁶ and he cut down a copy of *The Vase Bearers*, keeping only the right-hand portion, which he fixed to the left-hand side of the panel. The strip which joins these down the middle was an entirely new piece of canvas added by Rubens. He then proceeded to work all over the surface so as to unify the appearance of this patchwork, adding a new landscape with classical buildings and completely obliterating many figures, but also leaving some visible, such as the youth leading the sacrificial bulls. Three of the remaining copies from the set after Mantegna, which Rubens had owned but did not cannibalise to make new compositions, have survived, and are now in the Národní Galerie, Prague.³⁷

In short, the method found in *A Roman Triumph* was exceptional among Rubens's painted copies, but it is not unlike the way he treated some of his own works by adding strips of wood or canvas to their edges before reworking. It is even closer to the way he intervened on earlier drawings which he liked to cut up, stick onto new pieces of paper, and retouch.

DRAWN COPIES BY RUBENS AND THEIR CHRONOLOGY

The drawn copies entirely from Rubens's hand form a tiny group in comparison to the huge mass of retouched material. As a young artist in Antwerp, Rubens made small pen and ink copies after sixteenth-century northern printmakers which reproduced the calligraphy of the originals very carefully, and it seems that before 1600 his bias was towards northern art. Soon after arriving in Italy, Rubens made two exceptionally large watercolour copies after frescoes by Giovanni Antonio da Pordenone (1483/4?–1539) in the Malchiostro or Annunciation Chapel in the Duomo, Treviso, one of which, *The Emperor Augustus and the Tibertine Sibyl* [fig.12, cat.no.46], shows that he had completely changed his way of working when faced with large images in a different medium. Both drawings were made using black chalk for the underdrawing with some red reserved for areas of flesh. The figures were made to look weighty and massive through the crisp delineation of their outlines which were filled with flattish areas of coloured wash, a technique which Rubens adopted as a response to Pordenone's broad handling of fresco.

A similarly large scale was adopted in the series of chalk copies of Michelangelo's prophets and sibyls [fig.13] which Rubens made not long afterwards in Rome in 1601.



Fig.12 · Rubens after Giovanni Antonio da Pordenone *The Emperor Augustus and the Tibertine Sibyl* [cat.no.46]

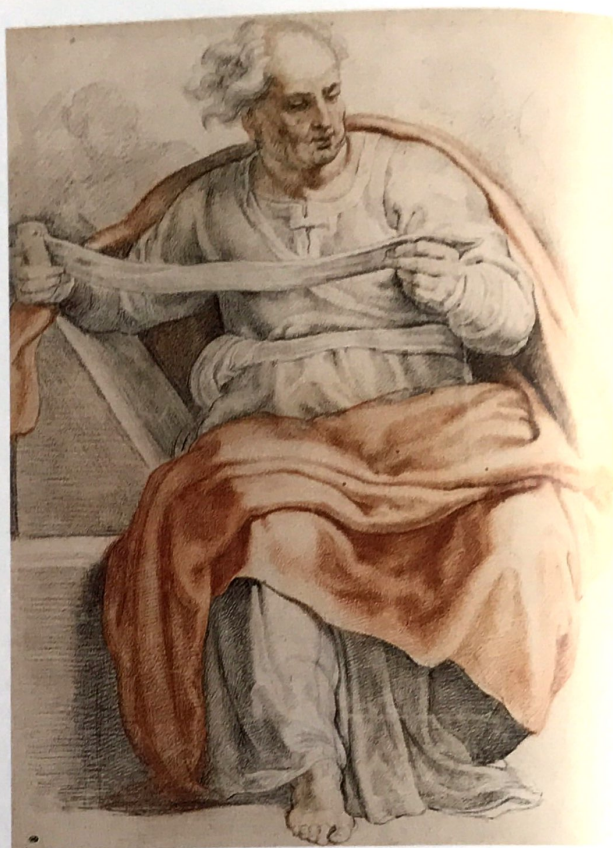
Département des Art graphiques, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Fig.13 · Rubens after Michelangelo *The Prophet Joel* [cat.no.10]

Département des Arts graphiques, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Fig.14 opposite · Rubens after Titian *A Naked Woman Bending Forward, and Five Women's Heads*

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



Rubens drew the earlier sheets in the series entirely in black chalk and added red almost as an afterthought, but, as work proceeded, he became more assured in separating different areas which were to be drawn either in red or black. This combination of different coloured chalks to describe particular areas of the draperies can only have been based on direct study of the colour in the frescoes themselves.

These large copies are sometimes a little angular and stiff, but are certainly by Rubens, not least because *The Emperor Augustus and the Tibertine Sibyl* has a lengthy inscription in his hand. He soon turned to making smaller and less laborious copies, preferring black chalk for sculptures and red chalk for paintings. Two examples of the latter, in this exhibition, were made from works by Michelangelo: a copy of one of the nude youths on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel [cat.no.12] and another of God the Father [cat.no.11] from the *Creation of Adam*. A similar gain in concision and assurance can be seen in his studies from ancient sculpture.

Whilst Rubens's travels of the late 1620s stimulated a spate of full-size painted copies mostly after Titian, already discussed, only a couple of drawings after earlier works of art can be securely dated to this period. One, now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles [fig.14], was drawn in red and black chalks and extracted several studies of women from Titian's *Venus and Adonis*, *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto*, which were all then hanging in the first of Philip IV's private apartments in the Alcázar at Madrid.³⁸ Rubens used the chalk in a very north Italian way, but he organised this sheet along the lines of the Netherlandish model books that had influenced his youthful copies in Antwerp, creating a miniature anthology of women's heads with elaborately braided hairstyles.

Almost immediately after visiting Madrid, Rubens arrived in London where the picture collections were no less impressive. A sheet, now in the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam,³⁹ has on one side a copy of some figures [fig.15] from Titian's famous *Christ Presented to the People*, now in Vienna, but then in the



possession of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham (1592–1628), recently deceased, whose collection Rubens singled out for praise in a letter dated 9 August 1629.⁴⁰ On the verso is a study for a painting that he made for Charles I, during the visit, which makes the dating of the copy reasonably secure. By comparison with the Getty drawing, made in Madrid, Rubens changed his use of materials, employing chalk to make rough guidelines over which he drew fluently in pen and ink, making some changes of detail and transforming Titian's two horsemen into Süleyman the Magnificent and the Emperor Charles V,⁴¹ following an identification current at the time although not stated in print until 1648.⁴²

The last broadly dateable group of drawn copies in Rubens's career was adapted from frescoes by Francesco Primaticcio (1504–1570). He must have seen them at Fontainebleau in the early 1620s, but the way in which the drawings were made with the brush (not unlike an oil sketch) with soft tonalities and slightly acidic colours, points to a later dating in the 1630s.⁴³ Two of Rubens's pupils, Abraham van Diepenbeek (1596–1675) and Theodoor van Thulden (1606–1669) visited Paris in the early 1630s and were busy as copyists. Van Thulden issued a series of etchings of the Galerie d'Ulysse in 1633, and there are many more detailed and accurate black chalk copies in the Albertina, Vienna, and elsewhere after Primaticcio's frescoes, which are sometimes given to Van Thulden but have more recently been attributed to Van Diepenbeek.⁴⁴ A number of correspondences of detail with Rubens's copies prove that he had access to these chalk copies and that the coloured drawings were made in the mid-1630s. Some of the coloured adaptations were based on complete compositions by Primaticcio, as in the very rich but transparently handled *Ulysses Sacrificing to Pluto* [fig.16] in the Kunstsammlungen at Weimar,⁴⁵ while others combined figures taken from a number of sources to make new compositions with different subjects.

Fig.15 opposite · Rubens after Titian
*Süleyman the Magnificent and the Emperor Charles V
 on Horseback*
 Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam

Fig.16 · Rubens after Francesco Primaticcio
Ulysses Sacrificing to Pluto
 Kunstsammlungen, Weimar



RUBENS'S RETOUCHE DRAWINGS

One may wonder what historical evidence exists to prove that Rubens retouched so many drawings in the manner claimed. He left no convenient explanation for posterity, and this was clearly a private activity that he did not need to discuss with others. But it should be remembered that he frequently retouched *modelli* (finished sketches for works of art) which had been drawn by assistants in his workshop after his own compositions, which were to be engraved. In addition, there is evidence that Rubens sent drawings made by his assistants of antiquities (or pseudo-antiquities) to his friend Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637), which he both inscribed and retouched in pen and ink.⁴⁶ It would have been entirely consistent if he treated the drawings in his collection in the same way.

From the early eighteenth century onwards there was no doubt among those people who studied and collected drawings that Rubens had retouched many earlier sheets. The key figures in this were Jonathan Richardson (1667–1745) and Pierre-Jean Marie (1694–1774), who, between them, more or less created the modern study of old master drawings. Their information must often have come from artists themselves, whose knowledge had been handed down within the workshop system. In Richardson's *Essay on the Art of Criticism* of 1719, he wrote that he owned several drawings, both original and copies, that had been reworked by Rubens.⁴⁷ Richardson distinguished between two different kinds of retouched drawing, and, in both Rubens's intervention was viewed as an original contribution not a copy. In one case he was working on top of what were seen as essentially mechanical reproductions by journeymen copyists, and in the other, he used original designs by earlier artists, which, in Richardson's opinion, provided the best of both worlds.

Rubens reworked earlier drawings in a number of different ways, at one extreme only adding a few small touches of emphasis, and, at the other, almost completely obliterating the prototype. (Detailed discussions of many works of this kind are to be found in the catalogue entries that follow this introduction). He used a wide range of materials, but had a preference for working with the brush in bodycolour which was thick enough to mask the underdrawing. Despite the diversity of this material, two main groups can be discerned: drawings that were simply retouched and drawings that were enlarged or had sections of paper cut away and replaced before being reworked.

One of the most extreme examples of Rubens enlarging and reworking an earlier

Fig.17 below left · Bartolommeo Passarotti, retouched by Rubens *Saint Bartholomew and Saint Mary Magdalene with Two Other Figures* Staedelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt

Fig.18 below right · Rubens after Michelangelo *Night* [cat.no.14] Collection Frits Lugt, Institut Néerlandais, Paris

Fig.19 opposite · Anonymous artist after Federico Barocci, retouched by Rubens *The Martyrdom of Saint Vitalis* [cat.no.66] The Collection of the Earl of Pembroke



drawing is a sheet depicting *Saint Bartholomew and Saint Mary Magdalene with Two Other Figures* [fig.17] in the Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main.⁴⁸ The nucleus is a small fragment of an Italian drawing, executed in a hard and fluent pen style by the same artist who was responsible for three drawings in the present exhibition: *Hercules* [cat.no.16], and *The Punishment of Haman* after Michelangelo [cat.no.15], and a drawing of *Two Robed Men* [cat.no.61], all of which are here attributed to Bartolomeo Passarotti (1529–1592) or his school. Rubens's first step was to take the Italian drawing and attach it to a bigger sheet so as to expand the composition. He then cut this sheet vertically along the outline of a standing male nude so as to get rid of his outstretched right arm. The left-hand side was discarded and a new piece of paper added, so that he could turn the standing man into Saint Bartholomew holding his flayed skin and add the kneeling figure of the Magdalene. The core fragment is perhaps an eighth of the entire sheet and the remainder entirely by Rubens.

On other occasions Rubens took drawings which had previously been trimmed and stuck them down onto larger sheets or attached them to new margins, expanding the composition on all or some of the edges. Several of these enlarged works are in the exhibition. One is after the figure of *Night* [fig.18, cat.no.14] from the tomb of Giuliano de' Medici in the New Sacristy at San Lorenzo, Florence. This is an unusual example of Rubens taking one of his own copies and reworking it at a later date. The other is a red chalk study, here attributed to Annibale Carracci, which depicts *A Woman with Two Children in Front of the Fire* [fig.6, cat.no.75]. The difference between these works is that in the first case Rubens used the new margins to make further studies of the sculpture as if turning it around in space, while in the other he took a small drawing of a seated woman seen from the back and expanded it into a completely new family group. Both indicate what a creative and thoughtful activity this was for Rubens.

Fig.20 · Anonymous Draughtsman after Paolo Veronese, retouched by Rubens
Christ in the House of Simon [cat.no.60]
The British Museum, London



RUBENS AND ITALIAN WORKING METHODS

Rubens had been trained in one pictorial tradition in Antwerp, but, while in Italy, had to compete in another, and he returned to the Netherlands with an exceptional mastery of two very different approaches to art. No doubt his own work looked like that of a foreigner to his Italian contemporaries, since there were purely technical aspects of the way that he painted flesh, for example, that revealed his Netherlandish training. But he was remarkably successful in Rome and his work remained in demand among Italian patrons, particularly in Genoa. Rubens equipped himself to beat the Italians at their own game and he did so before returning to find even greater success in his homeland.

In Italy, Rubens had learnt how to run a workshop and how to design large works that could be prepared fast and efficiently by a team of assistants. One of the most important steps in this process for the Italians was the preparation of a detailed compositional drawing or painting (a *modello*), which could be made in a range of media (including oil paint), but generally on paper. But Rubens preferred to make oil sketches on canvas whilst in Italy, using a rust-brown ground,⁴⁹ not unlike the one he would adopt in the final work. This was very different from the streaky *imprimatura* which became such a feature of his later oil sketches,⁵⁰ only possible if working on panel. Rubens's oil sketches show the grafting of Italian working methods on to a preference for northern materials.

He was particularly interested in the systematic way some Italian artists prepared their works, and he owned and retouched copies of two of Raphael's *modelli* for his famous altarpiece of the *Transfiguration* in San Pietro in Montorio, Rome, one of which is included in the present exhibition [cat.no.20]. Rubens found that this practice had been developed much further in Urbino by Federico Barocci, who was reaching the end of his life at the time Rubens arrived in Italy. Surprisingly, there is only one surviving copy after a work by Barocci that can be convincingly attributed to Rubens [fig.19, cat.no.66] and it is a retouched sheet after a finished altarpiece, not a preparatory study.

Barocci had become famous for making both monochrome oil sketches and ones in colour on paper.⁵¹ These show how carefully he prepared his work, since these could only be made after the entire composition had been resolved. Rubens was not always as thorough as this and his way of working was more flexible, allowing a greater degree of improvisation. Many Italian artists, including Raphael and Barocci, also made full-size cartoons on paper, but Rubens probably thought this method too laborious and worked straight onto the canvas in a north Italian manner. When he painted his *Transfiguration* of 1604–5 for the Santissima Trinita in Mantua, a work now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy, Rubens used ideas taken from Raphael's altarpiece of the same subject. But Rubens did not follow his elaborate preparatory methods, adopting instead a broad and quick way of painting, closer to that of Tintoretto, placing outlines on the figures in red or deep pink, leaving areas of the reddish-brown ground exposed, and creating vivid effects of light with white lead.⁵² Rubens adopted a canonical Roman model in this work, but his own treatment was unconventional in terms of recent Roman painting.

After returning to Antwerp, Rubens generally started work by making a quick pen sketch on paper, but, in some cases, he replaced this with a concise monochrome study on panel, followed by a larger oil sketch in colour (following in Barocci's footsteps), as when preparing the ceiling panels of the Antwerp Jesuit church in 1620–1.⁵³ He must have realised that the only way to produce this huge commission in a short time was to adopt Italian workshop practices.

CONCLUSION

Rubens's visit to Italy had a curious impact on Flemish art of the early seventeenth century. Many of the next generation of artists passed through the large and very successful workshop that he established on returning to Antwerp, but it is striking how few of these pupils and assistants bothered to go to Italy, with the important exception of Van Dyck. Rubens's teaching and his study collection of drawings and painted copies were sufficient to make young artists think twice about undertaking the long, expensive, and sometimes dangerous journey.

It has been usual to think of Rubens's retouched drawings as the activity of a young man learning fast, and to date them during his visit to Italy.⁵⁴ But the variety of approach found in them reflects the range and development of his draughtsmanship throughout his career and should be spread accordingly. A chronological yardstick is provided by the *modelli* for engravings which Rubens had made by assistants in his studio and then retouched. These run from the mid-1610s to the end of his career, and can be dated with some accuracy from the prints which were based upon them. They show a distinctive development from the restrained use of pen and ink in the earliest examples to a vigorous and impatient application of wash and bodycolour in those from the 1630s.

Rubens was not the only artist to retouch earlier drawings. This complicates matters since his celebrity has led to any reasonably competent retouched drawing being attributed to him. The aim of this exhibition has been to select only drawings that have been plausibly reworked by Rubens, but some borderline cases are identified here [cat.nos.39, 67]. Enough drawings were retouched in Rubens's manner to suggest that Flemish artists found this a good way to make old and tired copies saleable. But, in some cases, there may have been more creditable motives for imitating Rubens's practice. It has been suggested that Jan Erasmus Quellinus (1634-1715) made drawings in Italy in 1660 that were retouched on his return to Antwerp by his father, Erasmus Quellinus II (1607-1678).⁵⁵ Quellinus's distinctive manner can be seen from his copy after Titian's *Pentecost*,⁵⁶ formerly attributed to Rubens,⁵⁷ and currently in a private collection. A drawing often said to be by Rubens, the *Perseus Disarming and the Origin of Coral* after Giulio Romano [cat.no.38], is here argued as retouched by Quellinus. On the other hand, the recent suggestion that a large copy after Paolo Veronese's *Christ in the House of Simon* [fig.20, cat.no.60] was copied by Jan Erasmus and retouched by his father, is unconvincing because it is broadly handled in Rubens's late manner and also inscribed by him. The attribution has been based on a comparison with Quellinus's paintings, which are largely irrelevant in determining the niceties of graphic style.

This exhibition and its catalogue have attempted to show that Rubens's engagement with the work of other artists was an activity sustained throughout his life, involving a variety of approaches which stretch the word 'copy' to its limits. A careful study of this material reveals what he admired unconditionally, what he found useful or instructive, what fed his imagination, and what he revised or developed. These activities suggest a man sufficiently confident of himself to learn something new from artists of a different time and tradition, sometimes of inferior abilities.