



Wallraf-Richartz-Museum and Fondation Corboud

Peter Paul Rubens' "Self-Portrait in a Circle of Friends at Mantua" (circa 1602-05) leaves little doubt as to which is the lively, self-confident artist — among the most famous painters of his day, and of all time — portrayed in the spotlight.

Glimpses of a master coming into his own

Sensational images abound in Legion of Honor's 'Early Rubens' show

By Charles Desmarais

The exhibition "Early Rubens," at the Legion of Honor through Sept. 8, opens with a bang: three spectacular canvases, each about 10 feet across, each a bravura demonstration of the artist's mastery of color and illusion.

Their placement is a savvy curatorial move, settling the argument right from the start for Rubens as both a great painter and a consummate showman. From left to right, the pictures deliver a virtuoso choreography of human gesture and flowing robes ("The Flight of Lot and His Family From Sodom," circa 1613-15), a catalog of feline mood from wary to ferocious ("Daniel in the Lions' Den," circa 1614-16), and a torturous and deadly struggle ("The Boar Hunt," circa 1615-17).

But the real story of the maturation of Peter Paul Rubens starts in the gallery around the corner, with the penetrating "Self-Portrait in a Circle of Friends at Mantua" (circa 1602-05). A wall label speculates on the identities of the other figures in the picture, whose images look as though they are pasted in. The man with the curly forelock is likely Rubens' brother, Philip, we learn.

We need little help identifying the lively, self-confident artist in the spot-



Art Gallery of Ontario

Rubens' "Massacre of the Innocents," part of the "Early Rubens" exhibition at the Legion of Honor, resonates today with its image of suffering children.

"Early Rubens": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Through Sept. 8. \$13-\$28. Legion of Honor, 100 34th Ave., S.F. 415-750-3600. <https://legionofhonor.famsf.org>

light, however. The light in his eyes, the informal turn of his head, are an invitation to know the man, as if he might next ask us to join the clique.

Rubens continues on E3



Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Peter Paul Rubens' painting "Head of Medusa," part of the "Early Rubens" exhibition at the Legion of Honor, has the lurid punch of a modern slasher movie.

Rubens' metaphors resonate today

Rubens from page E1

The picture was made in the midst of an eight-year sojourn in Italy, time he used to study, to launch his career and to escape the turmoil of seemingly interminable political and religious warfare centered around his home town of Antwerp, in what is now Belgium.

This work and others hung nearby show Rubens working through the influence of his time in Italy, but the exhibition at the Legion focuses primarily on the period just after his return home in 1608. It must have been a heady time, as everything seems to have come together all at once for the 31-year-old artist.

Even as he was deciding not to return to Italy, peace was breaking out, and along with it came an economic boom. Catholic churches that had been stripped of art in wartime religious protests (the so-called Iconoclastic Furies) needed new altarpieces and other decoration, and now there was money for commissions.

Equally important, his older brother, Philip, was appointed Antwerp's municipal secretary in 1609, which led

to important contacts. And that same year, Rubens married Isabella Brant, daughter of an influential politician. A sizable gallery in the exhibition is devoted to the artist's extraordinary portraiture, and includes a spirited picture of Isabella with an impish smile.

Even the real estate gods seem to have smiled on Rubens. A short and unusual

essay by Koen Bulckens in the exhibition catalog tells us that the artist boasted of a work "the largest and most beautiful ever painted in these lands," and that Rubens claimed to be "by natural instinct, more fit to execute very large works than small curiosities." To do that, Bulckens shows, he built a grand workshop adjacent to his home that could accommodate big canvases and big teams of assistants, the better to claim a place for his art next to the grand mural frescoes and tapestries of history.

But neither social connec-

tions nor skill at designing works of grand scale were enough, on their own, to position Rubens among the most famous artists of his age, and of all time. "Early Rubens" — the first show organized for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco by assistant curator of European paintings Kirk Nickel — methodically, majestically leads us to the

two most important additional elements.

One is his enthusiastic embrace of technology to widely distribute his images, as a catalog essay succinctly records. Antwerp was a center for the publication of engravings and illustrated

books, and Rubens entered the business of printmaking by working with a childhood friend who had inherited a publishing business. By around 1620, however, he saw the possibilities for profit and greater artistic control of going off on his own. A room in the exhibition is devoted to

Rubens' original drawings and the spectacularly rich prints produced by master engravers based on them.

It is an entire exhibition-within-the-exhibition that is itself worth the visit. There is an illusion of sculptural depth and a capacity for exquisite detail that a fine engraving conveys as no painting can. The mass distribution of his images — thousands of images could be produced from the copper plates — made the artist rich and spread the word of his accomplishments around the world.

The other aspect of Rubens' fame, of course, is the paintings themselves. They are technically flawless, and they have the look of inventively constructed puzzles, pieced together with interlocking shards of light and color. The subjects are often sensationalistic — some of the best were made to serve the era's entertainment functions of today's adventure and horror films and our costume dramas.

It takes little imagination to picture the response of a 17th century audience to the glittering hyperrealism and soft-core bawdiness of "The Dreaming Silenus" (circa 1610-12), with its nude and drunk-

en central figure surrounded by emptied wine vessels.

"Head of Medusa" (circa 1617-18) has the lurid punch of a contemporary slasher movie. "The Boar Hunt" suggests the unrelenting violence of the shower scene in "Psycho."

One might say that to focus only on Rubens' most obviously sensational secular stories is to give a wrong impression of a devoutly Catholic interpreter of the Bible. Fair enough.

So, how will you read such pictures as "The Entombment" (circa 1612), with its image of the body of a pallid Christ, final drops of blood dribbling from a gaping wound, in anguishing view of those who loved him? Or the New Testament story of "Massacre of the Innocents" (circa 1610), an eternally current metaphor for Authority's desperate self-preservation, even at the expense of children, that can't help but remind us of events in the news today?

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