

THE RUBENS HOUSE

H I G H L I G H T S



Rubens
HOUSE

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THE HOUSE

In 1610 Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and his first wife Isabella Brant (1591–1626) bought a house and a piece of land in Antwerp. In the years that followed, the artist had the building enlarged after his own design, adding a covered, semi-circular statue gallery, a studio, a portico in the style of a triumphal arch, and a garden pavilion. The improvements gave his home the air of an Italian palazzo and embodied Rubens's artistic ideals: the art of Roman Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. He also assembled an internationally admired collection of paintings and classical sculpture at the house.

Rubens lived and worked here until his death in 1640. The building is believed to have retained its original appearance until the mid-seventeenth century, at which point it was fundamentally altered. Nowadays, the portico and garden pavilion are the only more or less intact survivals of the seventeenth-century complex.

*My dear friend Rubens,
Would you be so good as to admit the bearer of this
letter to the wonders of your home: your paintings, the
marble sculptures, and the other works of art in your
house and studio? It will be a great delight for him.*

Your dear friend Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc

Aix-en-Provence, 16 August 1626

Jacob Harrewijn (c. 1640–after 1732)

The Rubens House in Antwerp, 1684, 1692

Engravings (facsimiles)

These two prints are the earliest known ‘portraits’ of Rubens’s home. They were commissioned by the then owner, Canon Hendrik Hillewerf, who wanted to showcase the house’s most impressive features. The additions designed by Rubens – the garden portico, the studio, and the garden pavilion – figure prominently. In order to have room for the garden and the studio, the portico was deliberately omitted from the more recent of the two prints. The insets at the bottom show the most interesting aspects of the interior. At bottom left we see Rubens’s semi-circular statue gallery, which the new owner turned into a private chapel. The Harrewijn prints formed the basis for the restoration of the Rubens House in the middle of the last century.

Frans Duquesnoy (1594–1643)

The Sleeping Silenus

Gilded bronze and lapis lazuli

This relief illustrates a story told by the Roman poet Virgil (70 BC–19 AD). On the left we see the incorrigible drunkard Silenus, the tutor and companion of the wine god Bacchus, sleeping off his hangover. He and his donkey are badgered by a horde of merry satyrs and putti, assisted in this by a nymph. In seventeenth-century art, Silenus was often used as an example of intemperate behaviour, and his appetite for alcohol figures in a number of works by Rubens himself. This relief was made by the Brussels sculptor Frans Duquesnoy, who settled in Rome. For the deep-blue background he used the costly semiprecious stone lapis lazuli.

I was charged with all the secret negotiations with France concerning the flight of the Queen Mother [Marie de' Medici] and the Duke of Orléans from France and permission for asylum in our country. I could provide a historian with marvellous material and the unadulterated truth about this matter, which is very different to what is generally believed.

Rubens to the French scholar Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc,
Antwerp, 18 December 1634

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Jan I Brueghel (1568–1625)

**Archduke Albert and the Infanta
Isabella in the Garden of Coudenberg
Palace, Brussels**

Oil on panel

The Low Countries were ruled in Rubens's time by the Archduke Albert (1559–1621) and the Infanta Isabella (1566–1633) on the King of Spain's behalf. Rubens was appointed their court painter in Brussels shortly after returning from Italy. He was granted exceptional leave, however, to remain in Antwerp. In later years, he also performed diplomatic missions for Isabella. This scene shows the archducal couple walking in the grounds of their palace in Brussels. Albert and Isabella's menagerie was admired throughout Europe.

4

Alexander Adriaenssen (1587–1661)

Still Life with Dead Birds

Oil on panel

This well-equipped kitchen has a large fireplace, meat hooks and a wide variety of utensils, including jugs and pots in multi-coloured, painted majolica. Above the fireplace hangs a still life by Rubens's friend and neighbour Alexander Adriaenssen, two of whose paintings he owned. Adriaenssen has assembled a whole flock of different birds for this panel, all of which were actually eaten in the seventeenth century. There are two black grouse at the back, and in the basket a duck, a kingfisher and a starling. Balancing on the edge of the table are a brace of partridges, a jay, a green woodpecker and several songbirds. The basket at the front contains a duck and a cockerel, plucked and ready for the pot.



Rubens wrote as follows of his second marriage to Helena Fourment:

I resolved to marry, as I did not consider myself suited to the abstinence of celibacy. I have therefore taken myself a young wife, born to an honest burgher family, even though many tried to persuade me to marry into the nobility, but I feared the vice of pride that often accompanies high birth, particularly in the case of the women. So I have preferred a person who would not blush at the sight of me taking my brushes in my hand, and, to tell you the truth, it seemed hard for me to trade the precious treasure of my freedom for the embraces of an old woman.

Rubens to the French scholar Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc,
Antwerp, 18 December 1634

5

Peter Paul Rubens (studio)

Helena Fourment

Oil on panel

Helena Fourment (1614–1673) was just sixteen years old when Rubens married her but she was already famed for her beauty at the time. She provided Rubens with plenty of inspiration and a new family, bearing him five children. This painting is a smaller copy of a portrait that is currently displayed in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. Rubens has portrayed his young wife in her most magnificent outfit. The portrait looks very lively because Helena bends over slightly. The orange blossom in her hair symbolises love and fertility. Could Helena have been pregnant with their first child?

Long-term loan from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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Frans Snyders (1579–1657)

Still Life with Game and Fruit

Oil on panel

Frans Snyders was undoubtedly seventeenth-century Antwerp's best animal and still-life painter. In addition to a number of exceptionally large canvases depicting markets or larders, he made a great many smaller works, mostly featuring a combination of small game and fruit. Snyders often truncated his compositions. On the left side of this painting, for example, some of the partridge is out of view and on the right side, a bit of the melon. This creates the illusion that the array of food continues beyond the edges of the panel, a trick that makes for a more direct viewing experience. Like Adriaenssen, Snyders was a friend of Rubens.

THE GALLERY

Several wealthy Antwerp burghers built up impressive collections of art in the early seventeenth century. The room they used to show off their finest items was known as the constkamer. Rubens's art collection was undoubtedly the richest of its time anywhere in the Low Countries. The main focus of his collection was on Italian and 'Flemish' painting from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He owned a superb collection of Roman sculptures too. As an artist, Rubens surrounded himself with works he admired and emulated, but as a businessman he also used his collection as an investment and as merchandise.

Oil sketches

Oil sketches are preparatory studies for larger paintings or other works of art. They originated in Italy, which is why they are also known as *modelli*. Artists used oil sketches to try out the overall composition. They would then present them to their patrons for approval or use them as teaching aids for their pupils. In the Low Countries this method was applied above all by Rubens.

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

St Clare of Assisi

Oil sketch on panel

This sketch is a *modello* for one of the 39 ceiling paintings Rubens made for the Jesuit church in Antwerp. The artist made an important contribution to the decoration of that building. The pictures had to be appreciated from a distance, and so the figures are 'foreshortened'. The ceiling paintings for the Jesuit church were completed by 1621, but were destroyed by fire in 1718, less than a century later. Fortunately, a large number of the preparatory studies in oil have been preserved.

Adriaen van Utrecht (1592–1652)

Still Life with Vegetables

Oil on canvas

This extraordinarily well-painted vegetable still-life was painted by a contemporary of Rubens, the Antwerp still-life painter Adriaen van Utrecht. The composition features a cornucopia of vegetables, which are placed prominently in the foreground. A wooden basket with artichokes, a cauliflower, asparagus, various types of squashes, a bunch of onions and celery stands in the centre of the table. In the foreground, various types of beans and pulses, carrots, partridge, scallions and a lush savoy cabbage teeter precariously on the table's edge. A cardoon can just be made out on the extreme right of the painting. Van Utrecht succeeded in creating an extremely varied and surprisingly rhythmic composition thanks to the inventive combination of various shapes and colours and some carefully thought-out light effects.

Long-term loan, private collection

Georg Petel (1593–1633)

Adam and Eve

Ivory

Rubens was not only an enthusiastic collector of classical sculpture, he was also interested in the work of his contemporaries. His own collection is likely to have consisted primarily of 'cabinet pieces', carved in ivory by his favourite sculptors after his own designs. One member of that select group was the German sculptor Georg Petel, who was active in Antwerp around 1624–28. During that period he collaborated closely with Rubens, who owned three of his sculptures, including this exquisite ivory carving of Adam and Eve. The nature of the material meant that ivory carvers mainly worked in miniature: an elephant's tusk is, after all, only so big.

Buste of 'Seneca'

Roman, first century

Marble

When Rubens returned from Italy in 1608, he brought with him an antique marble bust of – so he believed – the Roman philosopher Seneca (c. 2 BC–65 AD). According to the Stoic ideal preached by Seneca, wisdom, perseverance, self-control and equanimity were the moral qualities needed to endure the cruelties of fate. Seneca, who was especially popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, had a major influence on Rubens and his humanist friends. Rubens incorporated the bust into various of his works. It was not until 1813 that the real portrait of Seneca was discovered.

Daniël Seghers (1590–1661)

Christ appears to St Catherine of Siena

Oil on panel

The still-life was a popular speciality in seventeenth-century painting. Still-life painters tended to focus on subject matter in which they excelled, thus elevating the genre as a whole to new heights. Still-lives with flowers adorning a *trompe-l'oeil* stone relief were Daniël Seghers' trademark. For the central image he would often enlist the services of painters who were more adept with human figures. Apart from these floral still-lives, Seghers also painted garlands or 'ordinary' bouquets in a vase. Even at the time, Seghers' flower paintings were highly prized collectors' items, and his work was as popular with bourgeois collectors as it was with the nobility. Both Cornelis van der Geest and Rubens owned pieces by Seghers.

On long-term loan from the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten,
Antwerp

13

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

**Emperor Aulus Vitellius Germanicus
Augustus**

Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasian

Oil on panel

These busts of the Roman emperors Vitellius (15–69 AD) and Vespasian (9–79 AD) originally belonged to a series of portraits of the first twelve Roman emperors. They were probably part of the decoration in Rubens's house, where they hung above the niches in his 'Pantheon' or statue museum. The sketchily executed brushwork indicates that these works were never intended to be sold. The oval shape suggests that Rubens painted them for a specific purpose and location.

Long-term loan, private collection



Sir,

Please find enclosed the letter of recommendation you requested. I believe it speaks sufficiently to your advantage and that it will suffice to assist you. I hope very much that this letter will be of service to you and that your work will meet with approval from the very outset.

Your devoted friend and servant, Pietro Pauolo Rubens

Rubens to his pupil Lucas Faydherbe, Antwerp, 5 April 1638 [1640?]

I, the undersigned, declare that Mr Lucas Faydherbe has lived with me for more than three years and that he was my pupil. Such is the affinity between my painting and his sculpture that he has, by virtue of my instruction and his diligence, advanced very considerably in his art. He has done various works for me in ivory, very praiseworthy and skilled, as may be seen from the pieces themselves.

Antwerp, 5 April 1640

Rubens to his pupil Lucas Faydherbe, Antwerp, 5 April 1640

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Lucas Faydherbe (1617–1697)

Hercules

Terracotta

Classical Antiquity was a powerful source of inspiration for many artists in the seventeenth century, including Rubens's pupil and young friend Lucas Faydherbe, a successful sculptor and architect from the town of Mechelen. This terracotta bust depicts the Roman demigod Hercules. The subject matter is readily identifiable: Hercules is clad in the skin of the Nemean lion, which he slew with his bare hands. Faydherbe probably made the piece as a model for a statue in another material, such as marble.

Permanent loan, Charles van Herck collection, King Baudouin Foundation

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Theodore I Rogiers (1602–c. 1654)

Ewer and basin

Silver

This beautiful ewer and basin set was modelled on the water jugs and bowls used for washing. It was not, however, meant for practical use. This was a showpiece, a stunning example of the craftsman's art. Appropriately, all the scenes evoke associations with water. The centre of the basin depicts the biblical story of the beautiful and chaste Susanna as she is spied on by two elders while bathing. The ewer shows the birth of Venus from the sea and her coronation by the Three Graces. The set probably belonged to Rubens and was owned by the artist's descendants until 1999.

→ *The walk continues on the first floor, where you first turn left up the small set of stairs.*

Chair

Antwerp, 1633

Walnut and leather

A chair like this one, with a rectangular, upholstered seat and back, was known as a 'Spanish chair', as the design was based on sixteenth-century Spanish models. The use of ornamental copper nails around the upholstery betrays the Iberian influence. Rubens had this chair made in 1633 when he became honorary dean of the Guild of St Luke, the Antwerp painters' guild. His name is imprinted on the back in gold lettering: PET. PAVL RVBENS. Like many other chairs from this period, the back was topped by two meticulously carved lions, probably intended as a traditional symbol of authority. In the seventeenth century, furniture was generally arranged against the walls of the room.

Curiosity Cabinet

Antwerp, c. 1640

Oak inlaid with ebony, decorated with paintings
on copper

The smaller items in a collection of art or curiosities, such as old coins, cameos and fossils, were kept in specially designed cabinets with many small drawers and (often hidden) compartments, frequently made from costly varieties of wood. In the seventeenth century, Antwerp developed into the most important international centre for these curio cabinets. This example is painted with mythological scenes based on compositions by Rubens. They were painted by Victor Wolfvoet (1612–52), an Antwerp master who specialised in copying Rubens's compositions in a small format.

Studio of Rubens

Michael Ophovius

Oil on canvas

Michael Ophovius (1570–1637), prior of St Paul's Abbey in Antwerp and later bishop of Den Bosch, is shown here in the habit of his Order, the Dominicans. He makes a rhetorical gesture with his right hand – a reference to his eloquence as a preacher. Rubens often introduced a suggestion of movement to make his portraits more lifelike and dramatic. This picture is a high-quality workshop replica of a Rubens original. Good likenesses of high-ranking figures were much sought after at the time, and so reproducing portraits was part of the studio's core business.

19

Titian (Tiziano Vecellio) (1485/90–1576)

**Venetian admiral, probably
Francesco Duodo**

Oil on canvas

Titian is considered one of the foremost artists of the Italian Renaissance. His pictorial style, his bold use of colour and virtuoso technique inspired many generations of artists, including Rubens and Van Dyck. Both these Antwerp masters also owned several paintings by Titian. The sitter is a prominent Venetian admiral, probably Francesco Duodo, who was a key figure at the Battle of Lepanto (1571). The Holy League sought to seize control of the Mediterranean from the Ottoman Turks during this major naval battle.

Long-term loan, The Phoebus Foundation

Adam de Coster (1586–1643)

A Man Holding a Glass of Wine and a Youth, by Candlelight

Oil on canvas

A man who is holding a burning candle looks at us sideways while the laughing youth next to him hands him a glass of wine. The painting is painted in the style of Caravaggio (1571–1610), whose work De Coster had probably seen in Rome. The fascinating chiaroscuro effects and the unpolished realism are typical of Caravaggio's style. Adam de Coster mainly became famous for his paintings of his night-time scenes with figures by candlelight. He is referred to as a "Pictor noctium", i.e., a painter of the night in an inscription on an engraved portrait. Rubens painted similar candlelight paintings.

Long-term loan, private collection, United Kingdom

Nikolaus Schwabe (active 1586/89–1629)

Portrait Medal of Christian IV of Denmark

Gold

As a celebrated artist and diplomat, Rubens received many gifts. The chain shown here is thought to have been presented to the painter by King Christian IV of Denmark (1577–1648). Hanging from the chain is a medal with the king's portrait, done in profile in the manner of classical coins. According to tradition, the necklace next to the chain belonged to Helena Fourment, Rubens's second wife. It consists of twenty-five polished rock crystals mounted in gold and twenty-five gold rosettes decorated with white and red enamel.

Adam van Noort (1562–1641)

The Adoration of the Magi

Oil on panel

Shortly after Jesus was born, three kings presented gifts to the Christ-Child. Not in a shabby stable but in the ruins of a palace. These are the remnants of the palace of King David where Jesus was born many centuries later according to legend. The three kings represent three generations and come from the three continents that were known in the Middle Ages.

This biblical scene was painted by Adam van Noort, one of the teachers of Rubens.

Three years after the loss of his daughter, Rubens was struck by a second tragedy, when his first wife, Isabella Brant, died at the age of thirty-four. He expressed his feelings in a letter to his friend Pierre Dupuy dated 15 July 1626:

In truth I have lost an excellent companion, and one worthy of all affection, for she had none of the faults of her sex. Never displaying bitterness or weakness, her kindness and loyalty were perfect; and her rare qualities, having made her beloved during her life, have caused her to be regretted by all after her death. Such a loss, it seems to me, ought to be deeply felt. I must undoubtedly look to time for consolation.

Rubens to the scholar Pierre Dupuy, Antwerp, 15 July 1626

23

Matthijs van den Bergh (1617–1687)

Young Boy on his Death Bed

Oil on panel

Among the most moving subjects in seventeenth-century portraiture are pictures of dying children. High infant mortality meant that parents often did not get the chance to have their child pose for a portrait in life. In that case there was always the option of commissioning a portrait after the child's death. The young boy in this painting holds a cut flower bud in his left hand, symbolising an early death. Rubens too had to contend with the fragility of young lives when his twelve-year-old daughter Clara Serena died in 1623.

Canopy bed

Southern Netherlands, seventeenth century

Oak

Until well into the seventeenth century, it was not unusual for beds to be placed in the main room of the house, as close as possible to the warmth of the fireplace. A free-standing bed in a separate room was a luxury reserved for the wealthy few. Bed curtains, which hung from the canopy or in front of the opening of a box bed, served to protect sleepers from the cold. This bed is strikingly short by modern standards; at that time people slept in a half-seated position, as this was felt to promote good digestion and circulation.



Linen room

A household like Rubens's would have required tablecloths, napkins, towels, bed linens, pillowcases and dishcloths.

Many of these affluent households had a linen press, which they used to get rid of creases in the linen and make it nice and shiny. Tablecloths were folded in a zig-zag pattern and stored in the press. When they were laid out on the table, these creases formed a pretty linear pattern. This also served to indicate that the mistress of the house used a clean table cloth.

Two linen damask napkins are displayed on the wall. They are made of linen, using a damask weaving technique. One of these napkins contains 40 yarns to a centimetre, or 6.8 kilometres of yarn.

The table linens, napkins and towels on display in this room are original seventeenth-century pieces.

The linen is on long-term loan from the collection of Sanny de Zoete, Delft

Follower of Maarten van Cleve (1527–1581)

Reworked by Rubens

The Feast of St Martin

Oil on panel

We know that Rubens retouched paintings done in his studio by his own assistants. It is less well known that he also reworked paintings and drawings by other, mostly older masters. This work depicts the Feast of St Martin (11 November) – the saint who shared his cloak with a beggar. Rubens overpainted the entire panel with yellow, white or brownish tones to make the figures and the fire more true to life. His ‘creative’ interventions were intended to improve the work. It was also an exercise designed to instruct his pupils.

27

Jan I Brueghel (1568–1625)

Singerie

Oil on copper

This type of painting was called a singerie, portraying monkeys dressed as humans. They mimicked human behaviour, encouraging seventeenth-century spectators to reflect on the folly of the world. This copper from the 1620 is one of the earliest-known examples of the genre. The painter based himself on oil sketches which he had made a few years earlier, probably in the Archdukes' zoo in Brussels, to paint these monkeys. Jan Brueghel and Rubens were good friends and often collaborated.

Long-term loan, private collection

Adriaen Brouwer (1605/06–1638)

Peasant Drinking

Oil on panel

With no fewer than seventeen works, genre painter Adriaen Brouwer was especially well represented in Rubens's collection. Brouwer specialised in satirical tableaux featuring drinking and brawling peasants in tavern settings. Pictures like this showed the wealthy townsmen who purchased them how not to behave. That was their key message, but Rubens was undoubtedly also fascinated by his younger colleague's keen powers of observation as well as Brouwer's free technique and use of colour. Although Brouwer died young (aged just thirty-two), his work proved highly influential.

29

Otto van Veen (1556–1629)

Nicolaas Rockox

Oil on panel

The wealthy lawyer, classicist and collector Nicolaas Rockox (1560–1640) was one of the most prominent figures in seventeenth-century Antwerp. He held a number of high public offices, including that of mayor (a position he occupied for no fewer than nine terms), and was a close friend of Rubens. This is the earliest known portrait of Rockox. It was painted by Otto van Veen, Rubens's last and most influential teacher, in 1600.

‘Portefraes’

Southern Netherlands, seventeenth century

Wire

In Rubens’s day, well-to-do burghers wore costly but understated clothing, typically in black. The most conspicuous features of their attire were the cuffs and millstone (or cartwheel) ruff, a heavily starched pleated collar of white linen. Such a ruff required an enormous amount of material, sometimes more than fifteen metres. The material in question was mostly very finely woven linen, often decorated with bobbin lace. As the ruffs grew increasingly large, it took more than starch to keep them in shape. To add extra support, a portefraes was used, a metal construction made of wire covered in silk, silver or gold thread.

31

Jacob van Utrecht (c. 1480–?)

Bartholomeus Rubens and Barbara Arents

Oil on panel

Bartholomeus Rubens and Barbara Arents were Rubens's paternal grandparents. He was a pharmacist, while she was the daughter of a noble family. The couple's only son was Jan Rubens, Peter Paul's father. The two little portraits were painted in 1530, shortly after their wedding. Bartholomeus holds a piece of gum Arabic in his left hand. The substance – which was sold by pharmacists – was an expensive raw material to which medicinal properties were attributed, and which was also used as a binding medium for gouache paint. The two little violets in Barbara's right hand are a symbol of humility. The rosary in her left hand is made of blood coral, which was another expensive product sold by pharmacists.

Studio of Rubens

Grounds of a Chateau in Ekeren

Oil on panel

During his lifetime, Rubens was not only Europe's most important artist but also its most successful. He could afford two country estates, including this property in Ekeren, to the north of Antwerp, which he bought in 1627 at the age of fifty. Nothing remains of the building or the surrounding land. The painting depicts a medieval castle in the midst of a park-like landscape. In the foreground young people can be seen enjoying the weather while a somewhat older man and a young woman observe their activities. The two latter figures are traditionally identified as Rubens and his second wife, Helena Fourment.



Abel Grimmer (c. 1570–c. 1619)

The Four Seasons

Oil on panel

In earlier times people lived much closer to nature than they do today. Their lives were dictated in large part by natural rhythms and the changing of the seasons. This is one of the main reasons that art depicting the months and seasons was so popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These four panels were painted by Abel Grimmer, a contemporary of Rubens. Each panel shows three characteristic activities, one for each month of the season. In the spring, which is shown bottom left, plants are pruned and seeds planted in March; April is the month when the sheep are led out to the meadow; and in May gardeners tend the castle grounds, while nobles entertain themselves on the grass with music.

Wilhelm Schubert van Ehrenberg

(c. 1630–after 1687)

Interior of the Jesuit church in Antwerp

Oil on marble

The Jesuit church in Antwerp, the present-day St Charles Borromeo Church, was regarded as the eighth wonder of the world by many contemporaries. The interior was covered in white marble, so Van Ehrenberg also chose to paint on marble to show the church in all its splendour. In addition to two monumental altarpieces for the main altar, Rubens painted thirty-nine ceiling paintings in 1616–18, in collaboration with Anthony van Dyck, for the church's aisles. The interior of this 'marble temple' was ravaged by fire in 1718, which also claimed Rubens's works.

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

Portico

Rubens spent the years 1600–08 living and working in Italy, where he made the fullest possible use of his time to study classical Roman and Italian Renaissance art. A period in Rome had an especially lasting influence on him, as witnessed by the design of the portico. Its shape is clearly based on that of a Roman triumphal arch, while the imposing central passage is borrowed directly from the Porta Pia – a famous city gate in Rome designed by Michelangelo (1475–1564). Rubens placed two Roman deities on top of the portico: on the left is Mercury, the god of painters, and on the right Minerva, the goddess of wisdom.

→ *The walk continues on the lower floor.*

36

Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641)

Saint Matthew

Oil on panel

Among the most striking works of Van Dyck's early Antwerp period are a series of male figures painted from life, which are clearly apostles, based on their attributes. Van Dyck also used these "tronies" as models for his history paintings.

The young Van Dyck was directly inspired for his apostles by Rubens, who had already painted a series of apostles in 1610.

This powerful yet contemplative male figure is the only example of one of Van Dyck's apostles in Belgium.

Permanent loan, King Baudouin Foundation

37

Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641)

Self-Portrait

Oil on panel

Anthony van Dyck was Rubens's most famous and undoubtedly most talented assistant. He was an exceptionally talented artist whose qualities the older artist must have spotted very quickly. He would become Rubens's first serious rival in Antwerp. He later worked in Italy and in 1632 he was made court painter to King Charles I in London, revealing himself to be a brilliant portrait painter equipped with powerful empathy and dazzling technique. This portrait of the young Van Dyck was traditionally attributed to Rubens. Recent technical examination showed, however, that it is in fact a self-portrait.

38

Studio of Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678)

Self-portrait

Oil on canvas

Along with Rubens and Van Dyck, Jacob Jordaens is part of the great triad of seventeenth-century history painters in the Southern Netherlands. Besides biblical and mythological subjects, Jordaens also painted portraits and genre paintings. He was wealthy and continued to paint until his death. This self-portrait from c. 1645–49 is a reproduction by his studio, which was touched up by the master himself.

Permanent loan, collection of the Courtin-Bouché Fund, King Baudouin Foundation

39

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

Self-Portrait

Oil on panel

Of all the individual self-portraits that Rubens painted, this is perhaps his most informal and intimate portrait. The unfinished appearance of the background and the sketch-like treatment of the costume give the canvas an informal quality. Rubens probably painted it c. 1623–1630 for himself and as a modello for group portraits with his oldest son Albert and his second wife Hélène Fourment. As is the case in his other self-portraits, Rubens chose to portray himself as a gentleman or a man with good social standing rather than as a painter. The overpaintings and yellowed varnish layers were removed during the painting's restoration in 2017–2018.

Rubens was already having to turn down countless pupils by 1611.

It is impossible for me to accept the young man whom you recommend. From all sides applications reach me. Some young men remain for several years with other masters awaiting a vacancy in my studio. Among others, my friend and patron, Mr Rockox, has only with great difficulty obtained a place for a youth whom he himself brought up and whom, in the meantime, he was having trained by others. I can tell you truly without exaggeration that I have had to refuse over one hundred, even some of my relatives or my wife's.

Rubens to the engraver and publisher Jacob de Bie, Antwerp,

11 May 1611

THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

Shortly after Rubens established his studio in Antwerp, international demand for his work rose considerably. Assistants now became indispensable if he was to meet the constant flow of orders. When a big commission arose Rubens produced the preparatory oil sketches, which were then executed on a large scale by a number of assistants. As a rule, the master extensively retouched the most important elements of the scene – the figures and the flesh parts. By doing so, and inserting certain accents, Rubens added the finishing touches to the painting. For the most important commissions, however, he would do the entire work himself. Rubens's workshop practices echoed those of great Italian Renaissance artists like Raphael (1483–1520) and Michelangelo (1475–1564).

40

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and studio

St Sebastian

Oil on canvas

Sebastian was a Roman army officer and a favourite of Emperor Diocletian (245–313). However, when the latter discovered that Sebastian was a Christian, he had him shot with arrows in the Colosseum in Rome. Sebastian miraculously survived his execution and was cared for in one version of the legend by a widow named Irene. This painting only emerged recently and has yet to be securely dated. Rubens might have painted it in Italy or shortly after returning to Antwerp. He drew inspiration for the saint's head from a Renaissance sculpture he had seen in Florence.

Long-term loan, Schoeppler collection, Germany

41

Otto van Veen (1556–1629)

The Capture of Rome

Oil on canvas

This painting is attributed to Otto van Veen, Rubens's most important teacher. Van Veen, who latinised his name to 'Vaenius', was a *pictor doctus*, an erudite humanist artist, with an excellent knowledge of ancient art and culture.

This painting depicts the capture of Rome, which is symbolised by the eponymous goddess who is led out of the city, her hands tied behind her back. The she-wolf that nursed Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome, and his twin brother Remus lies at her feet. A burning city is visible in the background.

Long-term loan, The Phoebus Foundation

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

Henry IV at the Battle of Ivry

Oil on canvas

This canvas is not quite finished, and so it offers a clear glimpse of how Rubens constructed his paintings based on large, loose brushstrokes. Some areas are more developed, while others have merely been outlined. Rubens was clearly still searching for the right composition. The helmeted soldier in the centre, for example, has three arms and two weapons. For the battle scene in the background Rubens enlisted the specialist help of Pieter Snayers (1592–1667). The painting belonged to a six-part series on the life of King Henry IV of France, which was never finished for political reasons.

43

Gerard Seghers (1591–1651)

The Denial of Saint Peter

Oil on canvas

The Antwerp painter Gerard Seghers travelled to Rome in the period from 1608 until 1620, where the work of Caravaggio (1573–1610) made quite an impression on him. Caravaggio's compositions were quite audacious. He added a dramatic overtone to his paintings, using spectacular lighting effects, with bold chiaroscuro contrasts.

In the early years of his career, Seghers was so strongly influenced by the Italian master that he is called a Flemish "Caravaggist". The Denial of Saint Peter is a good example of Seghers's early work. Later on in his career, Seghers followed Rubens's style more closely.

Long-term loan, private collection, France

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

Adam and Eve

Oil on panel

Very little is known about Rubens's output between 1598, the year when he established himself as an independent artist, and his departure for Italy in 1600. This panel depicting the fall from grace of Adam and Eve, the first humans, is one of the few surviving paintings from that period. It is painted in a way that owes a great deal to Otto van Veen (1557–1629), Rubens's last and most influential teacher. At this stage Rubens's treatment of the figures and the landscape was still rather static and precise. After his time in Italy his style became freer and his use of colour more expressive.

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

The Annunciation

Oil on canvas

The Bible describes how the Archangel Gabriel visited the Virgin Mary to announce that she was to be Christ's mother. Mary is shown here in her living room, the domestic atmosphere emphasised by the wicker basket containing her sewing and by the sleeping cat lower right. Rubens started work on this painting after his stay in Italy. The Italian influence is evident from the unusually bright colours and loose painting style, both of which contribute to the dynamic character of the scene. For Mary's blue cloak he used ultramarine, a costly pigment made from finely ground lapis lazuli.

Jan Boeckhorst (1604–1688) and
Frans Snyders (1579–1657)

Farmers Going to Market

Oil on canvas

It was not unusual in seventeenth-century Antwerp for two or more artists to collaborate on a single work. There was more to this than merely an efficient division of labour. It also made such paintings more attractive in the eyes of contemporaries. For this large canvas Jan Boeckhorst, a late pupil and assistant of Rubens, joined forces with Frans Snyders. Boeckhorst painted the figures and the landscape, while Snyders took care of the flora and fauna. Rubens too collaborated on several occasions with the animal and still-life painter Frans Snyders.

47

Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678)

Neptune and Amphitrite

Oil on canvas

This work shows Neptune, god of the sea. He stands on a seashell chariot supported by a dolphin. His wife, Amphitrite, is on the left. A little cupid figure sits between the couple, blowing a conch shell. Several mermen – half men, half fish – appear in the foreground.

The children's heads at the top of the painting represent the four winds. The dispersing clouds and the rainbow tell us that the storm behind the company is abating. Neptune has the power both to call up tempests and to quell them.

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

Portrait of the Emperor Servius Sulpicius Galba

Oil on panel

Rubens was fascinated by Roman antiquity, which is why he painted portraits of Roman emperors very early in his career, in which he tried to capture their personality. This portrait of Galba (3 BC–69 AD) is an excellent example of this. Galba looks downright terrifying with his menacing stare, prominent chin and sturdy neck.

Galba was a promising young politician and soldier but soon became very unpopular as an emperor because of his cruelty. He was killed after just seven months.

Long-term loan, The Phoebus Foundation

We will leave it to Peter Paul Rubens himself to bid you farewell. He wrote this little note to his twenty-one-year-old pupil Lucas Faydherbe in 1638 from his country estate near Mechelen.

*My dear Lucas,
Take care before leaving to fasten up everything securely, and let no originals or sketches remain in the studio. Also remind Willem, the gardener, to send us in due season the Rosalie pears, the figs, or anything else that is good from the garden. Do come here as quickly as you can so that the house can be closed up.*

Your faithful friend, Peter Paul Rubens

Rubens to his pupil Lucas Faydherbe, Het Steen in Elewijt,
17 August 1638

The quotations from the letters have been amended and shortened.

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Peter Paul Rubens, Self-Portrait © photo KIK-IRPA Brussels

