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How Rubens Added Italian Passion to Flemish Restraint

Stephen West · Wednesday, April 10th, 2019

In Peter Paul Rubens's spectacular *Daniel in the Lions' Den*, a buff Daniel, with long brown hair flowing over the shoulders and dressed only in a loincloth, clasps his hands in prayer as he looks up to the heavens. The terrified young man is fully aware that he's surrounded by a pack of ferocious lions but pretends not to notice them.

Painted about 1614-16, the Old Testament hero at the center of the huge canvas may seem slightly ridiculous to modern eyes. Yet the nine lions—including one sleeping at Daniel's feet, another baring his enormous teeth in a growl, two others circling each other menacingly—are wonderfully realized. They're believably fierce-looking and the true stars of the scene.

The painting, on loan from the National Gallery in Washington, is one of three that first greet visitors to *Early Rubens*, an elegant exhibition of 48 of the Flemish master's works that just opened at the Legion of Honor museum in San Francisco. Organized with the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, the show focuses on the decade-plus period after Rubens returned to his hometown of Antwerp, in modern-day Belgium, from eight years of work in Italy.



Peter Paul Rubens, *Self-Portrait in a Circle of Friends From Mantua*, about 1602–05, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne. Photograph: Sabrina Walz, Rheinisches Bildarchiv Cologne.

Rubens led a charmed life. Born in 1577 to a wealthy and well-connected family, he received a classical education in Antwerp, trained as an artist, and headed to Italy in 1600, when the Low Countries were torn by Protestant-Catholic tension that had flared into wars for decades. While attached to the court of Mantua in northern Italy, Rubens studied the fluid brushwork and coloristic style of Venetian Renaissance painters including Titian, Veronese, and Tintoretto. He also accepted private commissions for paintings, a side hustle to his day job working for the Duke of Mantua. He traveled to Florence and lived in Rome, where he was exposed to works by Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo, and Caravaggio.

Rubens's great stylistic achievement after returning to Antwerp was to inject these Italian influences—the classical references, the heightened color and emotion, the freezing of a dramatic scene at one moment in time — into Northern painting on a grand scale, as in *Daniel in the Lions' Den*.

One of the earliest paintings in the exhibition, *Self-Portrait in a Circle of Friends From Mantua* of

about 1602-05, shows the influence of these Renaissance masters. Rubens, with his head turned over his shoulder, gazes directly at the viewer, flanked by his friends on each side. Wearing a dark cloak and sporting a mustache and beard, he looks confident and fully mature. It's a composition that Raphael easily could have created.



Rubens returned to Antwerp at an opportune time, just before Peter Paul Rubens, *Young Woman with Curly Hair*, about 1618-20, the Catholic wars. The port city's economy boomed, with merchants ordering portraits and landscapes to decorate their homes. The Catholic Church commissioned new altarpieces and other artworks to promote the Counter-Reformation. Rubens married Isabella Brant, the 18-year-old daughter of a local official, and established a highly successful studio and workshop in the city.

As co-curator Sasha Suda of the Toronto museum writes in her essay for the catalog, Rubens became a "civic booster" for Antwerp, and "his entrepreneurial, diplomatic, intellectual, and artistic abilities eclipse those of any artist throughout Western history."

While Rubens's reputation was based on big, splashy "history" paintings inspired by classical or biblical tales, he was also a master of the portrait. The exhibition features 10 of them, including fine depictions of his brother Philippe and wife Isabella.

Young Woman With Curly Hair of about 1618-20 shows Rubens's confident touch. The lack of any detail in the dark background suggests this work was probably an oil study for a finished painting that was lost or never completed. Still, it beautifully captures the subtle texture of the woman's pale skin and braided blond hair under soft lighting. It documents what a wealthy young woman of that time and place actually looked like.

An entirely different sort of painting—and more representative of what made Rubens famous—is *The Massacre of the Innocents* of about 1610. It illustrates the New Testament episode in which King Herod, after hearing of the birth of a child who will become the king of the Jews, orders all infants in Bethlehem under the age of 2 to be killed.

The gruesome scene is littered with dead babies. A man prepares to stab an old woman with a black sword. A mother tries to scratch out the eyes of a muscular man as he pulls away her child. Another man prepares to smash a baby against a stone pedestal. It's the equivalent of an extremely bloody action movie for the 1600s.



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, about 1610, the Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photograph: Sean Weaver, Art Gallery of Ontario.

Early Rubens runs through Sept. 8 at the [Legion of Honor](#) museum, Lincoln Park, San Francisco, and from Oct. 12 through Jan. 5, 2020, at the [Art Gallery of Ontario](#) in Toronto. An extensive catalog, edited by co-curators Sasha Suda of the Art Gallery of Ontario and Kirk Nickel of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, is published by [DelMonico Books-Prestel](#).

Top image: Peter Paul Rubens, *Daniel in the Lions' Den*, about 1614-16, National Gallery of Art,

Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund. All images courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

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