Hill Art Foundation

Teacher and Student: Rubens and Van Dyck in The Hill Collection

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Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and Sir Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) were the twin geniuses whose works and multifaceted careers shaped and determined art production in Flanders—and in much of Europe—in their own lifetimes, and whose enduring achievements still largely define our understanding of Baroque painting to the present day. Few artists have ever had as broad or lasting an impact on the development of the western art tradition.

Rubens was a generation older than Van Dyck, who began his career as Rubens's most talented pupil and assistant, but the reputations of the two men remain closely associated with each other, and their lives, especially throughout the second decade of the 1600s, were intimately intertwined. Peter Paul Rubens was born on 28 June 1577 in Siegen, Germany, to Calvinist parents who had fled Antwerp a decade earlier. His father, Jan Rubens, was a lawyer and magistrate. The family subsequently moved to Cologne, where they remained until Jan's death in 1587, after which his widow returned to Antwerp to live with her two sons. Rubens attended the Latin school in Antwerp, where he received an excellent education in the classics and modern languages, concluding his formal education around the age of thirteen. His aptitude in the fine arts led him to apprenticeships with several local artists associated with the guild of St. Luke, notably Otto van Veen (circa 1594–98), who trained him in the craft of painting. Rubens became a master in the guild in 1598, aged 21.

In May 1600, fulfilling a long-held ambition, Rubens set out on an extended sojourn through Italy, stopping first in Venice, where he was exposed first-hand to the masterpieces of Titian and Tinteretto, before settling in Mantua, as court painter to Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga. He held the post until 1608, having not only access to the masterpieces by Titian, Correggio and Raphael in the Duke's celebrated collection, but the freedom to travel to Florence and Rome, where he studied the major monuments of Antiquity and the High Renaissance. In 1603–04, Rubens was sent by the Duke of Mantua as his envoy to the royal court in Madrid, launching what would become a lifelong side-career in international diplomacy.

Following word of his mother's impending death, Rubens rushed back to Antwerp early in December 1608. Five months after returning to his native Flanders, the Southern Netherlands ended a long and bitter conflict with the secessionist Dutch Protestant Republic, ushering in a prolonged period of political stability and economic prosperity, the likes of which the region had

not experienced for half a century. In September 1609, Rubens was appointed court painter to the Archduke and Archduchess Albert and Isabella, Hapsburg Governors-General of the Spanish Netherlands, securing for himself a large annual pension and exemption from the restrictive regulations of the local guild. A crucial element of the archduke's campaign to reconvert the Spanish Netherlands to Catholicism was the founding of new churches and the refurbishment of old ones, for which Rubens was commissioned to provide numerous altarpieces and large-scale church decorations. Among the first and most important of these projects was the magisterial triptych, *The Raising of the Cross* (Antwerp Cathedral) for the High Altar of St. Walburga in 1610–11 and an equally ambitious pendant made for a chapel in the Cathedral, *The Descent from the Cross* (also Antwerp Cathedral), in 1611–14. Directly inspired by the altarpieces of Tintoretto, Michelangelo and Caravaggio that he had studied in Italy, Rubens created a new and monumental kind of painting that was startlingly naturalistic, lucid, and emotionally raw, and would inspire the devotion and piety required of Catholics by Counter-Reformation ideals. Vast in scale, including dozens of over-life-sized figures interlocked in twisting poses of tortured suffering and pious grief, such paintings required the participation of a large stable of able assistants and collaborators for their execution. From the outset of his career in Antwerp, Rubens would, of necessity, oversee the running of a large workshop.

Rubens rapidly established himself as the most important and fashionable artist in the city, and his great triptychs, as well as other prominent church commissions, steadily established the reputation that would put him at the center of the European artistic stage. Confident in his own abilities, Rubens's rise to prominence was as swift as it was unchallenged, and the decade following his Italian sojourn was marked by an uninterrupted succession of seminal masterpieces. The rise of a wealthy class of patrician merchants—notably Nicolaas Rockox, *burgomeister* of Antwerp, Balthasar Moretus, a successful printmaker, and Cornelis van der Geest, a spice merchant—offered him good prospects for important and lucrative commissions. For Rockox, Rubens produced the rich and vibrant *Samson and Delilah* (National Gallery, London) of circa 1609–10; for Van der Geest, he almost certainly painted the imposing *Commander Being Dressed for Battle*, probably in the years 1610–14. If the former is a potent and psychologically complex image of sexual desire and betrayal, the latter is an equally powerful rendering of leadership, duty and devotion.

Peter Paul Rubens, *Commander Being Dressed for Battle*, 1610–14. Oil on panel, 48 1/4 x 38 3/8 inches (122.6 x 97.5 cm).

Painted at the moment that Rubens was enjoying the public triumph of his great Cathedral triptychs, *Commander Being Dressed for Battle* depicts a dark and curly haired man of mature years, with a stern gaze and military bearing—his status identifiable by the baton poised in his gloved hand—being dressed in armor by two young pages, one fastening the breastplate to the backplate, the other raising a plumed helmet to the commander's head. The painting's brilliant play of light and shadow across a multitude of materials and surfaces—the curving metal carapace of the armor; the commander's shimmering mail shirt; the sparkling gilt decorations of the breastplate and gloves; reflections in the helmet; rippling highlights of the page's salmon–colored velvet sleeve and blond hair; the deep shadows which define the volume and angle of the page boys' heads—are a virtuoso display of the painter's unrivalled mastery. But Rubens does not fail to invest the image with humanity and psychological insight, as well as technical bravura. Straight-backed and unflinching, the commander reveals unyielding determination in his steely expression, but also a certain melancholy, and the ungloved hand that he rests on the younger boy's shoulder makes for a poignant gesture of avuncular intimacy. The boys themselves are rendered with equal sensitivity: one dipping forward while the other rises up and tips back in almost choreographic counterbalance, their starry-eyed admiration for the master evident in their devoted expressions and concentrated attention to his service.

Although original and inventive in its composition, the painting reveals Rubens's continuing fascination with Italy and its art. The military armor is itself certainly based on Milanese prototypes, its style suggesting a date of manufacture in the second quarter of the 16th century. As previous writers have noted, Rubens's may have been referencing Titian's famous *Portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere, Duke of Urbino* (Uffizi, Florence)—a painting he would have known from his time in Florence—in arriving at the pose of the commander. The subject of a warrior being dressed for battle by his pages is quite rare, but it too has precedents in paintings Rubens would likely have known from his Italian stay. The most influential examples of Italian military portraiture of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries include a tiny Venetian panel from around 1500, formerly attributed to Giorgione and known through many replicas, the finest of which is today in Castle Howard, Yorkshire; Paris Bordone's *Portrait of a Man in Armor with Two Pages* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) of around 1540; and the *Portrait of Alof de Wignacourt with his Page* (Louvre, Paris), painted by Rubens's near-contemporary, Caravaggio, in Malta in 1607–08. Although Rubens's picture shares an informality and psychological intimacy with the small Giorgionesque panel and Bordone's portrait, and exhibits a striking naturalism similar to that of Caravaggio's image, it has a baroque vitality and energetic brushwork that distinguishes it from its predecessors.

Nonetheless, Rubens's commander is unlikely to be a portrait, as no known sitter has ever been convincingly associated with the painting, and his face seems too idealized to be an actual likeness. Rather, the image should be understood as a sort of grand genre painting embodying the traits of heroism, leadership, selfless duty and military courage. In this, as well as in the manner of its paint handling, it resembles two large allegorical paintings by Rubens representing *A Virtuous Hero Crowned by Victory* (one in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, the other in the Gemäldegalerie in Kassel), which were executed at approximately the same as the present work, *circa* 1612–14.

Although the earliest certain reference to the painting is in an 1802 inventory of the collection of George Spencer, Second Earl Spencer (1758–1834), housed at his grand country estate, Althorp, in Northamptonshire—where it remained until it was acquired by the present owner in 2010—this panel was certainly painted by Rubens for his client and patron, Cornelis van der Geest (1577–1638). Van der Geest acquired a string of important paintings directly from Rubens and helped to finance some of the artist's grandest public commissions in the 1610s, including *The Raising of the Cross* triptych. As it happens, a fascinating painting of 1628 by Willem van Haecht (1593–1637), a minor Flemish artist who specialized in pictures of art galleries and was the son of Rubens's first teacher, establishes the original provenance beyond any reasonable doubt. Van Haecht's painting (today in the Rubenshuis, Antwerp) commemorates a visit paid in 1615 by Archduke Albert and the Archduchess Isabella to the private art gallery of the rich spice merchant Cornelis van der Geest in the Huis de Keizer, his home in the Mattenstraat, Antwerp, and reproduces in miniature the many paintings in his extensive collection, including his numerous commissions from Rubens. Hanging on the far right-hand side of the back wall, in the uppermost tier of paintings, is

the *Commander Being Dressed for Battle*. Another version of the composition is known, today in the Detroit Institute of Arts, and has occasionally been proposed as Rubens's original as reproduced in Van Haecht's gallery picture. However, the Detroit version is more leaden in handling and lacks the deft brushwork, flickering light and translucent application of glazes found in the present painting and in all of Rubens's finest autograph works. The Detroit Institute of Arts has in consequence demoted the attribution of their painting and it is today universally considered a replica of the present painting produced in the workshop by assistants. It is inconceivable that Rubens would have supplied a studio copy rather than a work from his own hand to one of his most active and discerning patrons, or that Van der Geest would have accepted it.

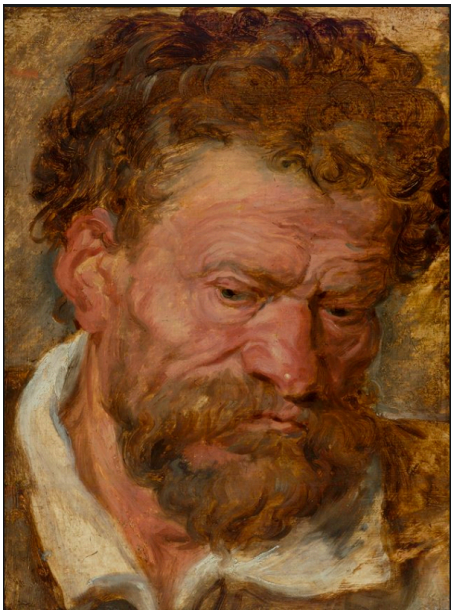
Painted on a panel consisting of four vertical planks, the *Commander Being Dressed for Battle* displays a number of small *pentimenti* still visible to the naked eye, but no trace of underdrawing, attesting to the artist's attentive engagement in composing the picture, but also the supreme confidence with which he laid out the composition directly on the panel. As was typical of his practice at least until the early 1620s, Rubens relied on painted head studies, known as 'tronies' (or 'faces'), which were often made as independent studies that would be kept in the workshop and employed over and over again, often with only small adjustments of expression or attitude, as models for the individual faces in his large-scale mythologies, history paintings and hunting subjects. In Antwerp, this traditional workshop practice of painting head studies from life can be traced back to Frans Floris (1519–1570) who, like Rubens, operated a large and busy studio. While some of Rubens's head studies were made after live models in the process of developing a particular composition, others were made without specific subjects in mind, and formed part of a repertory of images that the artist and his assistants could draw upon as the need arose. One such 'tronie', the *Head of a Youth* (Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin), was used as the inspiration for the head of the dark-haired page with upturned eyes in the *Commander Being Dressed for Battle*. We know, however, that the lively oil sketch itself dates from at least a decade prior to the present painting, and had already been employed by the artist in at least a half–dozen previous compositions, beginning with *The Mocking of Christ*, painted for the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, Rome, in 1601–02. It is a mark of Rubens's unsurpassed facility that he could adapt his sources repeatedly over many years, while imbuing them with absolute naturalism and spontaneity on each occasion.

It would be Van Dyck's remarkably precocious facility as a painter that recommended the young artist to Rubens when he was still only a teenager. Anthony van Dyck was born in Antwerp on 22 March 1599, the seventh child of Frans van Dyck, a well-to-do silk merchant, and Maria Cuperis, a skilled embroiderer, who was to die just after Anthony's eighth birthday. In 1609, when he was only ten years old, Anthony was recorded in the records of the guild of St. Luke as the pupil of Hendrick van Balen, a talented painter of small religious and mythological scenes. Although there is scant documentary evidence to account for Van Dyck's years in Rubens's studio, it seems certain that he had joined the master's workshop by 1616–17, when he was around 16 or 17 years old. By April 1618, Van Dyck is described by Rubens himself as 'my best pupil'. Van Dyck led the

Rubens workshop in the production of the full-scale painted cartoons for the '*Story of Decius Mus*' tapestry series, referred to in contracts as early as November 1616 and delivered to the weavers to start production by May 1618. By February 1618—at just 18 years old—Van Dyck enrolled as an independent master in Antwerp's Guild of St. Luke. He opened his own workshop at this time, but continued collaborating with Rubens until October 1620, when Van Dyck travelled to London with a pension from the King James I to work for the British court. His last major collaboration with Rubens was assisting the master in the execution of 39 ceiling paintings for St. Charles Borromeo, the Jesuit church in Antwerp (the paintings were destroyed in a fire in 1718), designed by Rubens but largely painted by Van Dyck, at break-neck speed, in less than nine months in 1620.

It is likely that Van Dyck was afforded the rare privilege of providing Rubens with preparatory studies—both oil sketches and drawings—for his own paintings. More certain is that Van Dyck made head studies from life for the master in the years 1618–20, a supposition that can be deduced from the large number of such studies attributed to Van Dyck in the inventory of the workshop immediately following Rubens's death in 1641, as well as three paintings of head studies by Van Dyck inventoried in Rubens's personal collection. That Rubens retained these many 'tronies' in his studio and his own collection throughout his life underscores the importance they held in his workshop practice and the artistic value he placed on them.

Although Van Dyck mastered Rubens's smooth, polished paint handling with uncanny success, the *Study of a Bearded Man* does not emulate Rubens's style of painting. Instead, this powerful head study is executed in a rougher, coarser manner, alternating between a thickly loaded brush that swiftly and calligraphically evokes the hair, beard and deeply lined face of his aging model, and thinly applied washes of pigment that barely cover the ground layer. The palette is darker and warmer than Rubens's, the man's expression more melancholy and contemplative than the extraverted emotions that typically characterize Rubens's heads. For these reasons, it seems clear that the head was not painted for use by Rubens and his assistants, but for Van Dyck's own use, despite the fact that Van Dyck may still have been engaged in working for Rubens at the time it was made. Its bold handling and impressive naturalism is characteristic of Van Dyck's earliest independent works, encouraging a dating of around 1618, immediately after he first established himself as a master in his own right.



Anthony van Dyck, *Study of a Bearded Man*, 1618.
Oil on panel, 11 5/8 x 8 7/8 inches (29.5 x 22.5 cm).

A number of Van Dyck's 'tronies' survive, most of them from his early career in Antwerp, including a beautiful panel in the Rockoxhuis, Antwerp, showing studies of a bearded man from two positions that is very comparable in mood and handling to the present study. Like the present sketch, the Rockoxhuis heads can be dated to circa 1618–20, and do not seem to have served in any of Van Dyck's surviving narrative paintings.

In subsequent years the careers of Rubens and Van Dyck diverged, but each continued on a trajectory of ever greater international success and influence. In 1621, Marie de'Medicis commissioned Rubens to paint two vast allegorical cycles, one celebrating her life and the other the life of her late husband, King Henry IV, for the Luxembourg Palace in Paris; although the second cycle was never completed, the series devoted to the Queen Mother of France was finished and installed to acclaim in 1625 (today in the Louvre, Paris). Partly in acknowledgement of his success in various diplomatic missions, Rubens was honored by Philip IV of Spain in 1624 and knighted by Charles I of England in 1630. He was awarded an honorary degree from the University of Cambridge in 1629, and he received the coveted commission of decorating the ceiling of the Banqueting House at Whitehall Palace, London. In 1638, he was commissioned by Philip IV to design and produce more than 60 mythological paintings based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for the king's hunting lodge on the outskirts of Madrid, the Torre de la Parada (to be executed almost entirely by assistants).

Van Dyck departed for Italy in October 1621, traveling extensively throughout the country, but settling in Genoa, where achieved fame and financial success as portrait painter to the Genoese patriciate, studied the art of Titian and the Renaissance masters, and amassed his own

considerable art collection. By April 1632 he was back in England where he established a studio outside London and, in July 1632, was knighted by Charles I for his services as 'principal painter in Ordinary to their majesties'. Following a year-long return to Flanders, where he was honored by the Guild of St. Luke, he returned to England—by then his principal residence—before a brief journey to Antwerp in the autumn of 1640. Rubens had died some months earlier (on 30 May 1640), and Philip IV had requested that Van Dyck take on completing Rubens's unfinished pictures for the Torre de la Parada, an assignment that he declined. Van Dyck returned to England by way of Paris in early 1641, in weakening health; he died at his home in Blackfriars, aged 41, on 9 December 1641, just nine days after the birth of his youngest daughter.

Both artists left a legacy that held authority over European art for the centuries that followed. The enduring impact of Rubens's influence is evident throughout eighteenth-century French art, in the gallant sensuality of Antoine Watteau, the carnal mythologies of François Boucher and the rapid and fluid brushwork of Jean-Honoré Fragonard. The fiery palette, expressive brushwork, 'exotic' subject matter and dynamic compositions of nineteenth-century Romantic painters such as Eugène Delacroix and Théodore Géricault trace their imaginative sources to Rubens's vast compositions. Similarly, the stormy skies and impetuous torrents of John Constable's Suffolk views found their inspiration in Rubens's small body of painted landscapes as much as in any phenomena of Nature itself that Constable ceaselessly observed. And, as has often been commented, the translation of thick and vigorously sculpted paint into a vision of visceral, pulsating human flesh in the canvases of twentieth-century American and British artists such as Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud found precedent in the monumental and vital naked bodies immortalized by Rubens. Indeed, in popular culture today, the designation 'Rubensian' remains in common usage.

Van Dyck's impact on art history is subtler, perhaps, but little less significant. Like Rubens, Van Dyck painted altarpieces, history subjects and sensual mythologies, often on a large scale, but it was as the preeminent court painter of his day that Van Dyck invented a style and format of portraiture that continues to inspire artists to the present day. His portrayals of noble and well-born sitters—especially Genoese grandees and the courtiers of Charles I—established a model of aristocratic portraiture that defined the genre throughout much of Europe in the seventeenth century and beyond. While always able to convey a lively and convincing likeness, Van Dyck's full-lengths endowed his subjects, regardless of their natural charms (or lack thereof), with a sense of physical grace, innate elegance. His sitters, both male and female, are at once dignified and nonchalant in attitude. The Van Dyck manner—a self-confident air of assertive hauteur; the figure tall, plausibly elongated and dressed in sophisticated and opulent costume; long, gracefully tapering fingers of expressively and prominently placed hands; a penetrating and appraising, direct gaze—became the template to be followed by almost all British portraitists of the eighteenth century, including Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainborough and their nineteenth-century successor, Thomas Lawrence, as well as by the 'society' portrait painters of Gilded Age, most notably Giovanni Boldini, Paul Helleu and John Singer Sargent. Well into the twentieth

century, the greatest portrait and fashion photographs—Richard Avedon, Norman Parkinson and Irving Penn—upheld Van Dyck's legacy, transforming it for a new age and in a new medium.