

**Anne-Marie Logan / Michiel Plomp: Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). The Drawings. Ausstellungskatalog Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 2005, New Haven / London: Yale University Press, ISBN 978-0300104943**

**Peter C. Sutton / Marjorie E. Wieseman: Drawn by the Brush. Oil Sketches by Peter Paul Rubens, New Haven / London: Yale University Press 2004, 271 S., ISBN 978-0-300-10626-8, GBP 40,00**

Rezensiert von:  
Fiona Healy  
Mainz

Nothing suggests that the year 1604 was a particularly significant one in the personal or artistic life of Peter Paul Rubens - and if it was, the event that made it noteworthy and which would have provided later generations with an excuse for widespread celebration was not recorded.

Nevertheless, an unexplainable meeting of curatorial minds determined that the year 2004 would be devoted to Rubens. Celebrating the life and achievements of the most sought-after artist in early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, a prolific and talented painter, draughtsman, designer of sculpture, tapestries and architecture, as well as a diplomat, collector, and scholar, was not difficult. The variety of exhibitions was astonishing, some gave an overview of his large and varied oeuvre, others addressed more specialised aspects. The two exhibitions in America focused on the preliminary stages of pictorial invention by showing drawings and oil sketches, and thus complemented each other admirably. It is through these two media that we today can experience Rubens at his most immediate. The drawings and oil sketches allow us to - metaphorically - look over the artist's shoulder as he works. They offer a glimpse of the process of creation: from rapidly drawn pen sketches, where we sense how Rubens's hand strives to keep pace with the flood of ideas rushing through his mind, to complete compositions 'drawn' in oil as he transfers to panel with almost no corrections and with great economy of means a scene visualised in its entirety in his mind's eye.

On display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York were 117 drawings illustrating Rubens's development as a draughtsman and the broad range of his drawn oeuvre. The catalogue offers readers a mine of information. New discoveries take their place among familiar works; problems of attribution and difficulties in dating are addressed and indeed in cases left unanswered, as for example in the drawing for *Susanna and the Elders*, which for compositional and stylistic reasons is dated 1607-1611 and thus straddles Rubens's final years in Italy and the period following his return to Antwerp in late 1608.

As in the exhibition itself, the catalogue entries are ordered into roughly defined chronological and functional categories. While various significant moments and commissions determined the former, the latter are explained in the introductory essay written by Anne-Marie Logan in conjunction with Michiel Plomp (3-35). This well-structured and highly informative essay looks at the drawings from three angles: 1) types and techniques; 2) Rubens's development as a draughtsman; 3) Connoisseurship.

The first section, "Types and Techniques", adopts the categorisation made by Julius S. Held in his seminal study of the artist's drawings in 1959, and retained in his revised and expanded edition of 1986. [1] Both authors repeatedly acknowledge their debt to his scholarship, and indeed Held's recurring appearance in the text and footnotes makes his immense contribution to Rubens studies immediately evident. The drawings are divided into seven categories: Copies after works of art - prints, ancient and modern sculpture, paintings and other drawings (4-7); compositional drawings (7-9); drawings from the model (9-11); drawings for portraits (11-14); for prints (14-15); retouched drawings (15-18); and Rubens's sketchbooks (18-20). The differing roles and functions of each of these categories within the creative process are explained as is how they changed over time. To meet the increased demand for his work, Rubens continually modified his working methods to facilitate speedy execution by his well-trained studio assistants. Basically, Rubens first made quick pen sketches, known as *crabbelingen* or 'scribbles', of individual figures or groups, then laid out the composition in a drawing, replaced from the 1620s by an oil sketch, after which he made detailed studies of individual figures after (male) models. The assistant charged with executing the painting worked from the compositional drawing/oil sketch and the detailed figure studies. But as the authors make clear, there are still many unanswered questions. While such figure studies are frequent during the 1610s, they subsequently became quite rare. How then did his assistants execute the multitude of figures in projects such as the Medici cycle? Must we assume great quantities of these drawings were lost, or were Rubens's assistants (many of whom remain anonymous) so well trained in 'reading' his oil sketches that the figure studies became unnecessary? It was not until the 1630s that Rubens resumed the practice when devising the *Garden of Love*, because, the authors suggest, of the importance of the costumes in this 'modern' take on the medieval theme.

The second section merges a biography of the artist with his development as a draughtsman in three different periods: Early training and Italy, 1591-1608; Antwerp 1608-1620; 1621-1640. Readers, especially those unfamiliar with Rubens's life, would have appreciated the inclusion of a chronological table denoting important events, travels and commissions. Obviously there is some unavoidable repetition with aspects in the first section, but the emphasis is different since it includes considerable information on draughtsmanship in general and sets Rubens's application in the wider context of his training, travels, and artistic influences.

In accordance with the terms of Rubens's testament, his drawings were auctioned only in 1657 when it became clear that none of his sons would become an artist and none of his daughters marry one. The fate of these drawings, the bulk of which were purchased by the Antwerp Canon Johannes Happaert, who later sold many to collectors such as Prosper Henry Lankrink and Everhard Jabach, is traced by Michiel Plomp in his essay on "Collecting Rubens's Drawings" (37-59). While collecting habits varied in different periods and geographic regions, there was apparently a general consensus that 'good' Rubens drawings were complete compositions or highly finished; these were often framed to hang on walls or pasted into albums, and usually extensively described in auction catalogues. By comparison, little attention was paid to less finished works, portrait heads, and *crabbelingen*, all of which were often kept in boxes, sold en-bloc, and generally considered of less artistic value. Today, it is exactly these works that are the most highly prized while many of the complete compositions are seen as by the studio in preparation for prints. Of particular interest among Netherlandish collectors is the case of Jacob de Wit. Himself an artist, de Wit is particularly important for Rubens studies because his drawn copies of the ceiling paintings of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp provide the most accurate record of the series following its destruction by fire in 1718. So while on the one hand recording Rubens for posterity, he - ironically - also inflicted upon the master's drawings the same sort of 'attention' that Rubens himself had given innumerable drawings by other masters - he reworked them using watercolour, white body colour and strong black washes in the shadows.

The exhibition provided the opportunity to show drawings unknown to Held. Among the new discoveries on display were 1 of the 11 anatomical drawings believed to have originally belonged to Rubens's *Anatomy Book* (cat. 16); 2 of the 3 drawings after the antique discovered in Cologne (cats. 20-21); a design for the *Virgin and Child Adored by Saints (Augustinian Madonna)* of ca. 1627-28 with a 1601-02 copy after the *Belvedere Torso* on the verso (cat. 34). This last drawing has led Logan to question the status of the sheet in Stockholm, considered by Held as *the* preliminary drawing, but which she however believes to be by a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Flemish artist. The authors also take issue with some of Held's attributions and datings, as well as with those of other scholars. They remove four drawings central to Held's understanding of Rubens's development as a draughtsman in his Italian period, and reject Martin Royalton-Kisch's 1999 transferral of three landscape drawings from Rubens's oeuvre to Van Dyck's, though admit to some puzzling aspects that justify adding a question mark after Rubens's name. [2]

The exhibition had first been shown in the Albertina in Vienna, but under considerably different circumstances and with a somewhat different selection. [3] The decision in Vienna to hang the drawings within the context of Rubens's wider oeuvre together with (related) oil sketches, paintings and prints certainly made it easy for visitors to follow the

process of artistic invention from initial idea to finished work, but brought with it the danger of the drawings themselves being overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the finished work or the colourfulness of the oil sketches. In New York the drawings took centre stage, with the presentation of multiple versions of an identical motif giving visitors first-hand experience of connoisseurship at work. That this is not just an issue for non-specialists was wonderfully demonstrated by the juxtaposing of the two versions of *The Portrait of Nicolas Trigault in Chinese Costume* (cats. 73, 74): this prompted two well-known Rubens scholars attending the Study Day to publically debate which is the primary drawing, which the copy. Confronted with convincing arguments in both cases, it was quite evident that here at least connoisseurship is a leap of faith.

A final word on the catalogue. Both essays appear in German in the Albertina catalogue, which is far more lavishly illustrated, with almost all essay illustrations in colour as opposed to the mainly black-and-white ones in the New York edition. There are however some misleading discrepancies in the captions of the German edition: two drawings cited in the English version as by an "unknown Rubens pupil [possibly Nicolaes Ryckmans], retouchings here attributed to Jacob de Wit" (52, figs. 30-31) are misleadingly presented in the German version as 'attributed to Jacob de Wit' ("Jacob de Wit zugeschrieben" (107)) though the text of course makes the relationship clear. Readers of the German catalogue are thus well advised to check the corresponding passages in the English edition, which moreover has the additional advantage of an extensive index of names and references to artists' works.

The exhibition of oil sketches which opened in Greenwich, Connecticut, and later moved to Berkeley and Cincinnati, was much smaller in scale, bringing together just 43 of the more than 450 known sketches by Rubens. Again it is an area that was extensively chartered by Julius Held in his indispensable two-volume book of 1980 [4], and only two of the exhibits were not included there: though a problematic piece that suffers from later interference, Rubens's authorship of *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (cat. 6) was subsequently confirmed by Held in a letter, while *The Emperor Julius Caesar* (cat. 16) is one of a number of sketches of Roman emperors deliberately omitted by Held as being more portraits than head studies. Held included such character studies or *tronies* as a "marginal field" and Sutton/Wieseman followed suit by showing three examples: the chronologically arranged catalogue opens with the much-disputed *Head of a Youth*, which is probably an 18<sup>th</sup>-century copy by an Italian artist, while the other two character studies (cats. 4,7) have been attributed by some scholars to Anthony van Dyck. Here, as with Rubens's drawings, controversies of attribution continue.

The catalogue structure is similar to *The Drawings* volume: the beautifully written introductory essay (16-41) by Peter Sutton also discusses the oil sketches in the context of the artist's life, and being longer allowed the author to give a more well-balanced account than was feasible in *The Drawings*. Not surprisingly, many of the collectors discussed in Marjorie

Wieseman's essay, "Pursuing and Possessing Passion: Two Hundred Years of Collecting Rubens's Oil Sketches" (44-71), are familiar from Plomp's essay in the New York catalogue. In some cases, the early history of the sketches, especially for larger projects like the Medici Cycle and the *Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi*, is well documented, in others only inventories indicate ownership. Both Wieseman and Logan/Plomp note the use of generic terms such as *schetsen* (sketches) makes it at times impossible to tell whether the reference is to drawings or oil sketches. Particularly interesting is Wieseman's account of Rubens oil sketches owned by artists such as Pellegrini, Boucher, Fragonard, Reynolds and of course Delacroix, and their influence on their working practices. She concludes with an instructive look at the appreciation of Rubens's sketches on the market, not in terms of monetary valuation but at how they were described. The final essay by Nico van Hout, "The Oil Sketch as a Vehicle for Rubens's Creativity" (74-81), examines the sketches from a more technical point of view by looking at their physical make-up. Particularly important are his observations on the varying degrees of quality and finish of individual sketches belonging to a single commission such as *Achilles Series*. Van Hout discusses possible reasons for such differences and raises interesting questions about the execution of oil sketches within the workshop.

The chronological arrangement of the catalogue entries effectively traces the role of the oil sketch throughout Rubens's long career. Equally, the choice of exhibits covers all types of projects, from individual paintings, large altarpieces, designs for book illustrations, to large-scale painted decorative schemes and tapestries. The entries are rich in information concerning attribution, technique, and when applicable the related project, and provide good comparative illustrations. Some illuminate work practice within Rubens's efficient studio: *Studies for Figures in a Larder* (cat. 27bis) was designed for a collaborative project with Frans Snyders. With great expressiveness and utmost economy of means, Rubens sketches a maid with a boy at one end of a summarily indicated table, a man wielding a knife at the other, the intervening space left empty for Snyders to integrate his still life. Though thematically and compositionally seemingly unified, the sketch was in fact the design for two separate paintings of identical dimensions and with the common theme of thievery and its consequences.

The exhibits were drawn mainly from American collections with a few notable examples from Europe. Without the two beautiful sketches *Three Nymphs with a Cornucopia* and *The Three Graces* from Dulwich (cats. 23, 24), the *Aurora and Cephalus* from London (cat. 34) and the *Nereids and Triton* from Rotterdam (cat. 37), the exhibition would have boasted just two sketches depicting female mythological figures. Both belong to the series of over 60 sketches for mythological subjects made by Rubens in 1636 for Philip IV's hunting lodge, the Torre de la Parada. Nudity is certainly not a dominant feature of either work: one shows a very modest Dejanira being abducted by Hercules (cat. 36), the other, a hauntingly moving image of Clytie grieving her unrequited love of Apollo, depicts an

exposed breast (cat. 35). The parameters of Wieseman's essay did not permit her to reflect on the taste of American collectors, but if the choice of subjects in the exhibition is anything to go by, any subject with a whiff of sensuality that was not sanctioned by the Bible - as in the two beautiful and erotic *Samson and Delilah* sketches (cats. 2, 3) - was avoided.

Each of these exhibition catalogues is to be recommended for the insights it provides into Rubens's creative potential and artistic mastery. Together they provide a compendium that shows how these two areas of invention and design developed, interacted and changed over the course of his long career.

#### Notes:

[1] Julius S. Held: Rubens. Selected Drawings, 2 vols. London 1959. 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition: 1986 (1 vol.).

[2] Martin Royalton-Kisch: Van Dyck, The Light of Nature. Landscape Drawings and Watercolours by Van Dyck and his Contemporaries. Exhibition catalogue Antwerp, Rubenshuis 1999 / London, The British Museum 1999.

[3] Klaus Albrecht Schröder and Heinz Widauer (eds.): Peter Paul Rubens. Exhibition catalogue, Vienna, Albertina 2004.

[4] Julius S. Held: The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens. A Critical Catalogue, 2 vols. Princeton 1980.

Redaktionelle Betreuung: Dagmar Hirschfelder

#### **Empfohlene Zitierweise:**

Fiona Healy: Rezension von: *Anne-Marie Logan / Michiel Plomp: Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). The Drawings. Ausstellungskatalog Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 2005, New Haven / London: Yale University Press*, in: **sehepunkte** 7 (2007), Nr. 6 [15.06.2007], URL: <<http://www.sehepunkte.de/2007/06/8091.html>>

Fiona Healy: Rezension von: *Peter C. Sutton / Marjorie E. Wieseman: Drawn by the Brush. Oil Sketches by Peter Paul Rubens, New Haven / London: Yale University Press 2004*, in: **sehepunkte** 7 (2007), Nr. 6 [15.06.2007], URL: <<http://www.sehepunkte.de/2007/06/8091.html>>

Bitte setzen Sie beim Zitieren dieser Rezension hinter der URL-Angabe in runden Klammern das Datum Ihres letzten Besuchs dieser Online-Adresse ein.

Diese Rezension erscheint auch in KUNSTFORM.

