Press release
Exhibition
22 May - 23 September 2013
Temporary exhibition gallery

Born near Cologne, living in Antwerp after a long period in Italy, and active in the courts of Spain and England, Rubens (1577-1640) was an artist of European dimension. A renowned artist but also a diplomat, letter writer and entrepreneur, his work was very much determined by the European context in political, social, religious and economic terms.

The first international exhibition at the Louvre-Lens aims to shed light on Rubens’ time through over 170 works by the artist, by his models and by some of his contemporaries, from the Louvre’s collections and from leading European and American museums.

Reflecting the European artistic culture that mattered to Rubens, the exhibition includes paintings, drawings, sculptures and decorative arts. It aims to reproduce the dynamism of Rubens’ creative output and conveys the spectacular nature of his inspiration. It also offers a few intimate moments, revealing a more personal side to Rubens.

For the sake of clarity, the exhibition is organised into themes.

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THE EUROPE OF COURTS

In 1600, Rubens was invited by the Duke of Mantua, Vincenzo Gonzaga, to go and work in Italy. Rubens’ time in Italy, where he stayed until 1608, was the major phase in his artistic maturity and creative development on which he was to continue to draw subsequently.

Rubens’ first diplomatic mission was probably the one he had to fulfil in 1603. It involved travelling to Spain to deliver a set of sumptuous gifts to King Philip III. This mission reflects the importance in Rubens’ career of the world of the Habsburgs. Rubens was a pure product of the Southern Netherlands under Spanish rule, and the Duke of Mantua was himself a vassal of the Emperor Rudolf of Habsburg. Rubens returned to Flemish lands on the death of his mother and he then settled in Antwerp, where he developed a busy studio with connections all over Europe. In the 1620s, he worked in the service of Marie de’ Medici and also of Isabella Clara Eugenia, sovereign of the Spanish Netherlands.

This section of the exhibition boasts an impressive gallery of portraits of the powerful of the time. It illustrates the intricacy of the network of Europe’s dynastic families: the Medicis, Habsburgs, Stuarts and Bourbons. Rubens worked for Europe as a whole, for that which was most powerful within it.

RELIGIOUS EMOTION AND BAROQUE FAITH

Rubens was the archetypal painter of large Catholic compositions. A past master at orchestrating the pomp and ceremony of the Counter-Reformation, he gave shape as a person to the triumph of the Roman Church. It was a commitment in direct line with a life spent in the service of the Habsburg princes. It would nevertheless be wrong to imagine the religious works of the Flemish painter as great machines devoid of sentiment. In fact in Rubens’ work there is freshness in his reproduction of biblical episodes, emotion in his account of Christ’s Passion, and grandeur in his figuration of Christ and the saints that are astonishing. It is remarkable that his most devout creations are...
always graceful or heartbreaking. Evoking the passions of the Christian soul, Rubens’ paintings are supposed to be universal. They are made for a wide audience which has to be both impressed and beguiled.

EPHEMERAL MONUMENTALITY

The spectacular and striking aspect of Rubens’ religious art is matched by his civic and royal compositions. Rubens became famous for his grand, usually ephemeral, settings in line with the civilisation of secular ceremonies pursued and developed in the 17th century. A famous example is the Joyous Entry of the brother of the King of Spain, Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand into Antwerp in 1635: for the occasion, Rubens and a whole team of Flemish artists had decorated the town along the route of the royal procession with large paintings. Some of these Baroque masterpieces have survived and in this exhibition they give an idea of the extraordinary scale, as well as the imagination at work in such celebrations.

RUBENS, EMULATION AND COMPETITION

Unlike the art of the 20th century, which has defined itself very much as breaking with tradition, Rubens did not think of his creation outside of any reference to the past. His great models were antiquity and the Renaissance: Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Titian, etc. His close and immediate contemporaries, for their part, entered into dialogue with the Flemish painter.

The example of anatomy is emblematic: the great model to whom Rubens turned was Michelangelo, but an investigation had to be made around écorchers and sculpted figurations of human bodies in motion. A drawing by Michelangelo, an écorché by Cigoli, a drawing by Rubens showing the muscles of the shoulder and arm, in an anguished pose... It is in a game of mirrors that the artist imagines, invents and reflects, drawing on canonical sources which he wishes to surpass.

Pierre Paul Rubens
La Paix étreignant l’Abondance
New Haven
© Yale Center for British Art

Titian Vecellio, dit Titien
La Femme au miroir
Musée du Louvre
© Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN-GP / Martine Beck-Coppola
RUBENS AND THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

Rubens’ interests ranged remarkably far and wide. This open-mindedness and curiosity was nourished by a European network of correspondents. Rubens understood Dutch, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Latin. He wrote to friends, relations, scholars and artists, scattered throughout Europe. The thirst for information and images that can be seen from reading this correspondence illustrates Rubens’ eminent place among the elite of his time: when he drew an ancient cameo, he did not just reproduce it, he contributed to penetrating the secrets of its imagery.

THE PATHS OF GENIUS

In these days of infinite reproducibility of personal pictures, the portraits of Rubens’ children or wives might not seem to us what they actually were: creative advances. Never before had anyone mingled personal sentiment with a desire to keep hold of memories and domestic charm. The private world of Rubens, in the way he had of portraying it, joins that of the great artists. He painted his friends and family like princes, like artists, and at the same time he instilled a personal dimension into his depictions of his colleagues.

At the heart of the exhibition is a room devoted to screening a film about Rubens’ travels, co-produced by the Louvre-Lens and Le Fresnoy - the National Studio for Contemporary Arts (in Tourcoing). Made by Alain Fleischer, it gives a sense of the multiplicity of places that Rubens knew, by comparing old and contemporary views of European cities. And finally, a last room evokes the artist’s correspondence through a system of sound and visuals, to which visitors are invited to contribute by reading extracts from Rubens’ letters.
The exhibition is curated by Blaise Ducos, curator at the Department of Paintings of the Louvre Museum, a specialist in Flemish and Dutch paintings.

The scientific committee is chaired by Marc Fumarroli, of the Collège de France, and includes:
- Paul Huvenne, Antwerp Royal Museum of Fine Arts
- Jeroen Duindam, Leyde University
- Arnout Balis, Antwerp Rubenianum

Exhibition design by Studio Adrien Gardère (Paris).

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Louvre-Lens museum
99, rue Paul Bert - 62300 Lens
Open daily from 10 am to 6 pm, closed on Tuesdays. Late-night opening until 10 pm on Fridays 7 June and 6 September.

Admission to the exhibition
€9 / €8 (for 10 tickets and over, for works councils, businesses and associations).
Free of charge for under 18s, school groups, recipients of social welfare, job seekers, civil or war disabled, members of ICOM or ICOMOS, holders of Louvre-Lens cards.

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