



“Rubens” and the Passion. Composition on the Basis of a Brainstorming Session?¹

We have an idea of how Rubens’s workshop operated from the Danish physician Otto Sperling, who visited the artist in 1621. He found himself in a “large hall, which had no windows but was illuminated through a large opening in the middle of the ceiling. Sitting in this hall were numerous young painters, all working on different pieces, which had been pre-drawn in chalk by Mr. Rubbens, and on which he had made a splash of paint here and there. The young people had to execute the whole of these pictures in colour, before finally Mr. Rubbens himself completed the whole with lines and colours.” Sperling was surprised that any of these works should count as a “Rubens”.² And yet this brief “first-hand account” doubtless reflects only part of the reality. Rubens’s business model must have been far more complex than that of a traditional hierarchically organised workshop. The output of the Rubens studio suggests an enterprise of quite different dimensions, in which different “designers”, each with his own team, worked under the supervision of the artistic director, who made corrections, or had them made, in order to ensure the required quality. After all, it was trust in the “Rubens” brand that brought in major commissions.

In this context, it is worth casting our gaze south of the Alps, where Lodovico Carracci (1555–1619) and his cousins Agostino and Annibale ran their Accademia degli Incamminati in Bologna not on a purely hierarchical basis, but on the foundation of a lifelong learning process of revision and refinement, known as *aemulatio*. They recruited young, already trained artists such as Guido Reni, Francesco Albani and Guercino, correcting sketches and drafts in group discussions in order to achieve more convincing results. In concurrence with the heads of the studio, the assistants would develop projects that were regarded as “Carraccis” even though the Carraccis themselves had not worked on them in person.³ It is not inconceivable that the development of the concept, or *inventio*, in the Rubens workshop went hand in hand with comparable brainstorming sessions. Things are basically no different in today’s leading architectural offices, fashion houses or rock bands.

Unfortunately, the Rubens literature of the twentieth century never took seriously the possibility that in a very busy workshop not only the execution, but also the invention might be delegated to a team. Art historians assumed that Rubens himself was always the only begetter of “his” compositions. Connoisseurs regarded the earliest drawings by assistants such as Jacques Jordaens (1593–1678) or Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) as finger exercises for their own oeuvre, even though a link with the great Rubens projects of these years is more likely. The form of this interaction between the artists involved is still unclear.⁴ So let us analyse the surviving material against a broader background.

From 1615 until the early 1620s, the commissions for the new Flemish Capuchin churches on which Rubens and his team were working included a number of altarpieces depicting St Francis

Detail from cat. 90: Peter Paul Rubens,
The Entombment, after Caravaggio

(Brussels, Ghent, Cologne, Antwerp, Lille),⁵ various *Adorations of the Magi* (Aachen, Tournai, Soissons)⁶ and *Depositions from the Cross* (Lille, Lier, Kalisz, Arras, Valenciennes, St Omer),⁷ as well as a *Washing and Anointing the Body of Christ* for Cambrai (fig. 1).⁸ It must have been a major undertaking to come up with so many variations on, and aesthetic solutions for, the Passion story while retaining an uplifting and penetrating mise-en-scène for the handling of the lifeless body of Christ by those close to Him.

Jordaens and van Dyck were to be involved in this huge project. In 1615/16, at the age of twenty-three, Jordaens became an independent master. It is possible that he was commissioned by Rubens with copying work, and collaboration between the two on one and the same painting is documented.⁹ Jordaens's model studies and *tronies* turn up in Rubens compositions, providing evidence of a close working relationship.¹⁰ I have myself already tried to show that Rubens's composition and execution of the *Deposition* for Lille were largely entrusted to Jordaens, and the same is presumably true of various other projects.¹¹ A series of study drawings by Jordaens soon came to be regarded as copies made freely after Rubens, even though they, together with autograph studies by the master, are obviously part of the same project.¹² The very sparse evidence does not do justice to Jordaens's invisible activity as subcontractor for Rubens.¹³ In the five years between his attainment of "master" status and the establishment of his own studio, Jordaens must, after all, have created more than just the three signed and dated works we know about from this period.¹⁴ In around 1614/15, after a brief training under Hendrick van Balen (1575–1632), van Dyck, too, entered service with Rubens. It may be that to start with, he was deputed by Rubens to draw models for copper engravings, as Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1613–1696) asserts.¹⁵ He evidently also made drawings of motifs from nature, which Rubens could then process and incorporate into his landscapes.¹⁶ Just like Jordaens, from 1618 Van Dyck was given the responsibility for particular projects such as the *St Martin* in Zaventem,¹⁷ the *Coup de lance* for the Antwerp Franciscans¹⁸ and the *Michielsen Triptych*.

In Rome, Rubens was much impressed by the *Entombment* painted in 1573 by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610) for the Chiesa Nuova (fig. 2). He recognised the potential of this masterpiece, as simple as it is spectacular, for breathing new life into the pictorial culture of the Counter-Reformation. Around 1614 he painted a smaller version of the altarpiece (cat. 90).¹⁹ A copy of the equally famous *Entombment* by Titian (c.1485/90–1576) also probably circulated in his workshop.²⁰ Rubens incorporated Titian's figures of the Virgin and of Mary Cleophas into his copy after Caravaggio, as Michael Jaffé noted long ago.²¹ That a busy painter would find time to make such a copy may seem surprising at first, but modern Italian masterpieces were regarded at the time as *the* models to study. By freely interpreting and reformulating such exemplars, one could, after all, arrive at new pictorial inventions of one's own.

As is evident from a series of individual drawings and a few pages of the "Antwerp Sketchbook", van Dyck studied Titian's compositions.²² Rubens and Jordaens in turn were interested above all in Caravaggio, who, more than any other artist, knew how to use eloquent gestures and dramatic light management to sway the feelings of beholders. Rubens took the composition as his point of departure for a wash sketch with searching pen strokes in brown ink on paper (fig. 3).²³ By placing the figures diagonally in the picture, he suggested more movement. For the pose of John, who is supporting the body of Christ with his knee, Rubens used the mirror image of the figure of John in the Antwerp *Deposition*. He shifted Caravaggio's expressive figure of Joseph of Arimathea into the background. Jordaens answered Rubens's brilliant study with an alternative proposal (fig. 4).²⁴ Unlike Rubens, Jordaens left the characteristic, vertically hanging arm of Caravaggio's Christ figure unchanged, placing it in the exact middle of his composition. To enhance the emotional effect, he turned Christ's head to face the beholders. The idea of having a strong man occupy the foreground was possibly borrowed from Rubens's *Elevation of the Cross*. In the darkness, the body of Christ, the shroud and the figure of Mary stand out like a luminous Y. The

Fig. 1. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Washing and Anointing of Christ's Body*, 1616, oil on canvas, 398 x 280 cm, Cambrai, Saint-Géry, Réunion des Musées Nationaux



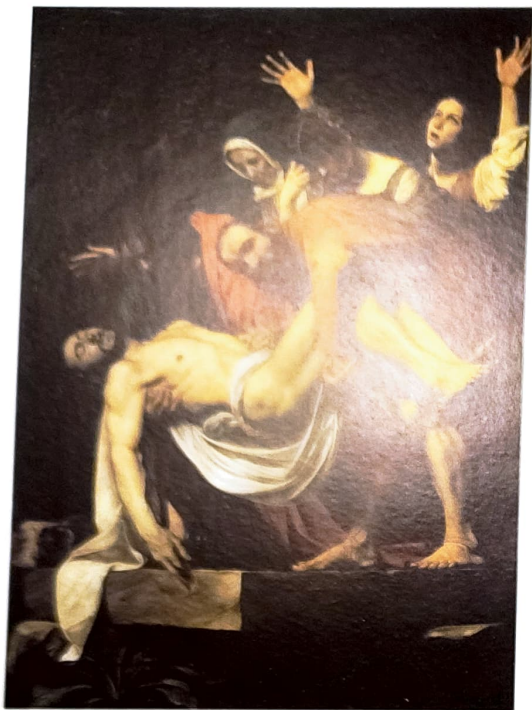


Fig. 2. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Entombment of Christ*, 1604, oil on canvas, 300 x 203 cm, Vatican, Musei Vaticani, Pinacoteca Vaticana

Fig. 3. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Entombment*, 1615–17, pen and wash, 222 x 153 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



figures on the right were taken by Jordaens from Rubens's pen-and-ink sketch. The next step in the development of the concept was taken in an oil sketch which, in spite of atypical brushwork, is traditionally attributed to Rubens (fig. 5 and cat. 91).²⁵ In the sketch, the diagonal movement from bottom left to top right is emphasised and the number of figures increased. As in the previous proposals, the head of Christ is once more shown in profile and falling back. John raises Christ's left arm, aligning it thus with the hanging right arm. As a result, the corpse forms a recumbent cross. As in Caravaggio's original composition, Joseph of Arimathea is back in the foreground. This proposal was presumably also rejected, as no large-format painting with this composition is known, or mentioned in any document.



Fig. 4. Jacques Jordaens, *The Entombment of Christ*, 1st half of the 17th century, pen with brown ink, brown wash, 192 x 176 mm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

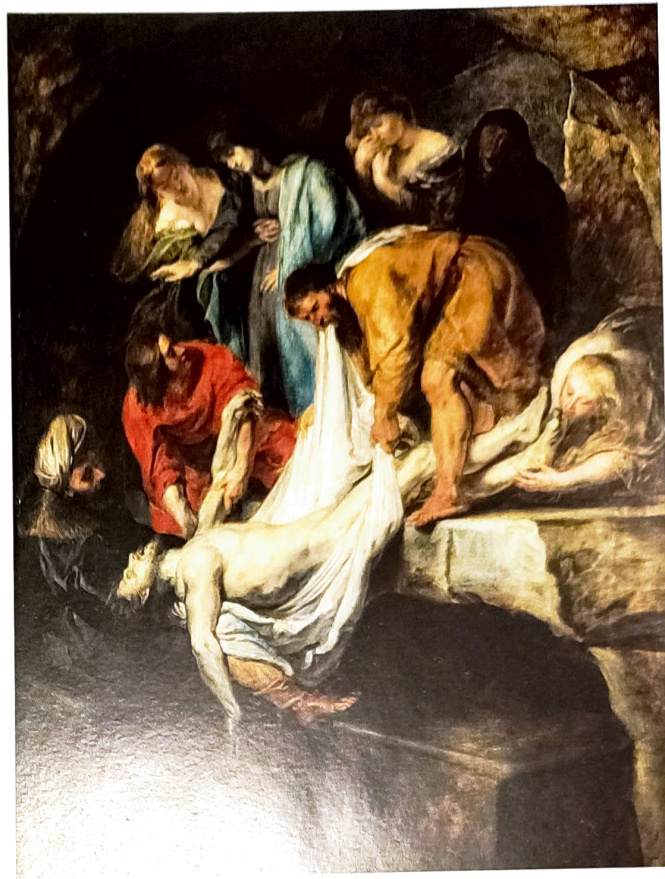


Fig. 5. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Entombment*, 1615/16, oil on panel, 114.7 x 92.6 cm, London, The Courtauld Gallery (see also cat. 91)

It is possible that the client eventually chose a different episode from the Passion story. A rapid pen-and-ink sketch with wash in Jordaens's hand points in this direction (fig. 6).²⁶ In this sketch, the *Deposition* has become a *Washing and Anointing the Body of Christ*. The idea for the new composition seems to have arisen when the oil sketch was turned clockwise through 90 degrees. In the pen-and-ink sketch, the corpse is laid out in the line of sight. Christ's right leg in the oil sketch has become his hanging right arm in the pen-and-ink sketch, and the shroud has turned into Christ's outstretched left leg, while the rounded contour of Joseph of Arimathea has become the silhouette of Mary Magdalene. Jordaens has, however, taken the knee posture of the figure of John from Rubens. The list of paintings delivered by Rubens to the Capuchins included an altarpiece with this theme. Sébastien Briquet had commissioned the large work for the order's church in Cambrai, where it was delivered in 1616 (fig. 1).²⁷ It is easy to make a connection between the pen-and-ink sketch and the preparatory oil sketch for this painting (fig. 7).²⁸ In the latter, the body of Christ, supported by John and the Virgin Mary, is depicted lying on the Stone of Anointing. In contrast to the pen-and-ink sketch, here his thigh and calf adopt the highly artificial but no less highly symbolic posture of a Greek cross.²⁹ The Capuchins must have taken offence at the bared shoulder of Mary Magdalene, which they discovered in the right foreground, for Rubens drew as an alternative a fully clad version of the sinner saint, which we now see on the altarpiece.³⁰ With the altarpiece for Cambrai, Rubens & Co. realised a vigorous depiction that unites all the Caravaggesque stylistic features within itself and whose narrative dynamism gives it qualities that are positively filmic. The reticent pathos of the depiction must surely have



Fig. 6 Jacques Jordaeus, *The Washing and Anointing of the Body of Christ, pen and wash, location unknown, most recently Christie's London (Lot 195, 15 Dec. 1999)*

Fig. 7 Here attributed to Jacques Jordaeus, *The Washing and Anointing of Christ's Body, c.1616, oil on panel, 85.7 x 66.2 cm, Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek*



reinforced the empathy of the Capuchins of Cambrai for the sufferings of Christ. It does not seem to have bothered the friars that the price paid for the painting caused outrage in Rome.³¹

It is highly likely that the chronology sketched out above is incomplete, that we have overlooked some material and that studies have been lost. On the other hand, the links between the above-mentioned examples are hardly to be denied. That three artists working together should be occupied in one and the same city at the same time on the same theme, and that their studies intercommunicate, can mean almost nothing else than that they were thinking about one and the same project. All of which goes to show that Rubens's talents were not limited to the creative side, but that he was at least equally brilliant at organising and delegating.

- 1 I would like to thank Reinhold Baumstark, Robert Wald, Joost Van der Auwera and Koen Bulckens for inspiring conversations concerning the workings of the Rubens workshop.
- 2 Seidlitz 1887, p. 111.
- 3 Faigenbaum 1993. My thanks are due to Koen Bulckens for drawing my attention to this article.
- 4 Billeter 1993, p. 11.
- 5 Devisscher/Vlieghe 2014, no. 70; Vlieghe 1972, nos. 94, 95, 102.
- 6 *Ibid.*, nos. 15, 39, 19.
- 7 Judson 2000, nos. 48, 52–57.
- 8 *Ibid.*, no. 74.
- 9 Balls 1994, pp. 112–13.
- 10 Van Hout 2012.
- 11 Van Hout 2013. Here, Jordaens's very probable involvement in the Decius Mus series and the triptych of the Mechelen fish merchants is mentioned.
- 12 Thus Jordaens's drawing of an *Adoration of the Shepherds* (d'Hulst 1974, vol. 1, no. A31 recto; Devisscher/Vlieghe 2014, no. 29, copy 8, fig. 105) in the London V&A should be regarded not as a copy but as a search on the artist's part for a pre-concept alternative formulation. Jordaens's early (c.1617) pen-and-ink sketch of a *Deposition* (d'Hulst 1974, vol. 1, no. A32 recto) in Rotterdam from c.1617 was not made "for an unknown painting". It can be linked to an oil sketch attributed to Rubens (Judson 2000, no. 51) in St Petersburg, which precedes the *Deposition* in Valenciennes (*ibid.* no. 52).
- 13 One must also beware of a few fake studies. Thus the forger Eric Hebborn has turned out to be behind an early "Jordaens" *Entombment* (d'Hulst 1974, vol. 1, no. A7); Hebborn 1991, p. 252 and fig. 58. Another fake Rubens study after Caravaggio's *Entombment* has recently come to light in Antwerp.
- 14 *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1616 (New York, MET, inv. 67.187.76), *The Daughters of Cecrops Discover the Infant Erichthonius*, 1617 (Antwerp, KMSKA, inv. 842), *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1618 (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, inv. NM488).
- 15 Wohl/Wohl/Montanari 2005, p. 215.
- 16 Exhib. cat. London/Antwerpen 1999, pp. 12–26.
- 17 Van der Stighelen 2006.
- 18 Van Hout 2011.
- 19 Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, inv. 6431 (<http://www.gallery.ca/rubens/en/12.htm>). In 1955, Friedländer dated this piece to c.1614, pp. 186–88. See also Glen 1988.
- 20 Perhaps to be identified with the item in the collection of Sir Ian Rankin, 4th Bt, London; Wood 2010b, vol. 1, no. R23, p. 440: "ruinous condition ... once thinly painted in monochrome, or near-monochrome by a competent Flemish artist". The painting style of this work (in particular the shroud and the face of Joseph of Arimathea) reveals, however, that it was produced in the immediate circle of Rubens.
- 21 Jaffé 1977, p. 58.
- 22 See Vey 1962, nos. 4–6; Brown 1991, nos. 6–7, and Jaffé 1966, folios 9v, 10r and v. Over one of the sheets, incidentally, van Dyck wrote "vant inventeren" ["about inventing"].
- 23 Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. RP-T-1899-A-4301; Held 1959, no. 37; Held 1986, no. 98.
- 24 Madrid, Museo del Prado, inv. D02213; Ottawa 1968, no. 121 ("One of a group of composition trials, closely allied in style and technique, for an unknown and possibly never executed painting c.1616."); d'Hulst 1974, vol. 1, no. A3, p. 101 ("This composition, no painting after which is known, was first ascribed to Jordaens by M. Jaffé.").
- 25 London, Courtauld Institute, Princes Gate Collection, inv. P.1978.PG.365; Held 1980, no. 365; Jaffé 1989, no. 410.
- 26 Christie's, London, 15 Dec. 1999, no. 195; see Held 1959, vol. 1, p. 134 (as ?Rubens); exhib. cat. Ottawa 1968, no. 119 (as Jordaens); Held 1967b (as "unknown master"); d'Hulst 1974, vol. 1, no. A5 (as Jordaens: "This composition drawing, no painting of which is known, was first ascribed to Jordaens by M. Jaffé."). Billeter 1993 (pp. 57–58) regards this drawing (as he does Jordaens's *prima idea* for the *Crucifixion* in Lille) as a "free copy". We learn nothing, however, about the function of such studies.
- 27 Cambrai, St.-Géry; Judson 2000, no. 74.
- 28 Munich, Alte Pinakothek, inv. 59. Held 1980, vol. 1, no. 366. In view of the slack and poorly defined anatomical forms, the small role played by the streaky imprimitura in the figures and a really quite divergent coloration, any attribution of this *modellos* to Rubens is at least open to doubt; an attribution to Jordaens might be considered.
- 29 We find this posture also in Rubens's drawing of *Nero Contemplating the Dead Agrippina* (formerly known as the *Death of Creusa*) dating from c.1608–10 in the Musée Bonnat in Bayonne (Held 1959, no. 13; Held 1986, no. 59; McGrath 1997, no. 53).
- 30 For this, Rubens made a drawing in lost profile, in which the nose and mouth are visible, with dramatic incident light from the bottom right (Vienna, Albertina, inv. 8.297; Judson 2000, no. 74d, p. 243).
- 31 The painting cost 400 ducats. See Hildebrandt 1935.