

# Rubens and the Emergence of High Baroque Style at the Court of Madrid

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The importance of seventeenth-century Flemish art for the development of painting in Spain has largely been acknowledged. The influence of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) is often cited as a contributing factor in the transformation of Spanish painting during the second half of the century. This transformation involved a gradual shift away from a hard-edged drawing style, static compositions, and a predominantly tenebrist palette. The new style featured an optical approach in which a lighter palette and a more painterly handling of the brush were key. In addition, a new dynamism and increased movement emerged. A growing familiarity with the art of Rubens, who was well-represented in the royal palace and other local collections, was possibly the single most important catalyst for this renovation of painting in Madrid.<sup>1</sup> In *Renaissance und Barock* Heinrich Wölfflin stated “It is self-evident that a style can only be born when there is a strong receptivity for a certain kind of corporeal presence.”<sup>2</sup> The aim of this paper is to evaluate Rubens’s significance for changing aesthetic values at the court of Madrid, the primary artistic center in seventeenth-century Spain. Central to this discussion is the painterly response to Rubens by mid to late seventeenth-century artists including Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) and his contemporaries and successors Francisco Rizi (1614-1685), Francisco Carreño de Miranda (1614-1685), and Claudio Coello (1642-1693). The phrases “Rubensian style,” “Rubensian form,” and “Rubensian spectacle,” are often used in the literature to describe the dynamic altarpieces of Rizi, Carreño, and Coello whose works best illustrate the fully developed high baroque style in Spanish painting.<sup>3</sup>

The term “high baroque” generally refers to the dominant style of European art dating to the years about 1625 to 1675.<sup>4</sup> Rubens is generally named as one of the most exemplary painters of this period since many of the characteristics generally associated with high baroque style are reflected in his oeuvre. The Spanish art historian César Pemán called him “the baroque painter par excellence” and stated that Rubens best reflected the “spirit” of the age.<sup>5</sup> For Wittkower, the transmission of “emotive experience” was one of the main objectives of baroque art, especially high baroque art.<sup>6</sup> This spirit is strongly evoked in Rubens’s series of over 60 large mythological compositions, painted between 1636 and 1638, for Philip IV’s hunting lodge known as the Torre de la Parada. In Rubens’s *Rape of Deidamia* (or *Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs*, Figure 1), for example, the emotionally-charged rhetoric of the High Baroque is conveyed in the heightened facial expressions and theatrical gestures of the figures. The complicated and tight groupings of figures in attitudes of bending, twisting, and straining, were favorite motifs of the Flemish painter. The picture also demonstrates Rubens’s interest in theatrically-staged composition, his preference for sharply receding diagonals, and his ability to integrate a multitude of figures into a unified composition. Wittkower observed in the “agglomeration of plastic forms and their ebullient energy,” the “quintessence of the Baroque.”<sup>7</sup>

Another primary concern of Rubens’s aesthetic, and of high baroque style in general, was the painterly handling of the brush. There was a new consciousness of the brushstroke and a greater concern with the expressive qualities of paint

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Brown, *The Golden Age of Painting in Spain* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Trans. Kathrin Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1964) 78.

<sup>3</sup> A.E. Pérez Sánchez notes the “Rubensian spectacle” of Rizi’s large altarpieces executed during the 1660s and observes “Rubensian form” in his *Expolio de Cristo* (1651, Museo del Prado). *Pintura barroca en España, 1600-1750* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1992) 283, 285. Enrique Valdivieso points to “the dynamic pictorial spirit of Rubens” in Herrera the Younger’s *Apotheosis of Saint Hermenegild* (Museo del Prado), *Historia de la pintura sevillana. Siglos XIII al XX* (Seville: Ediciones Guadalquivir, 1986) 204.

<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Wittkower divided the Baroque into three phases; early (c. 1600-1625), high (c. 1625-1675), and late (c. 1675-1750). See his *Art and Ar-*

*chitecture in Italy, 1600 to 1750*, ed. Nikolaus Pevsner, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Great Britain: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1958). Nikolaus Pevsner designated the boundaries of the Early and High Baroque as between 1590 and “soon after” 1650. See “Early and High Baroque,” *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design*, v. 1, *From Mannerism to Romanticism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968) 35.

<sup>5</sup> “El puesto de Alonso Cano en nuestra pintura barroca,” *Centenario de Alonso Cano en Granada*, 2 vols. (Granada: Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 1969-1970), I, 260, 263.

<sup>6</sup> Wittkower 92.

<sup>7</sup> Wittkower 167.

and with atmospheric effects. Rubens's late pictures such as the *Garden of Love* and the *Judgement of Paris*, both in the Museo del Prado, are prime examples of what Tapié called "the art of baroque sumptuousness."<sup>8</sup> Here, Rubens's outlines dissolve into the atmosphere, his range of color is soft and harmonious, and his brushwork had reached the heights of painterliness in its nervous and loose quality.

Velázquez's unique position as *Pintor de Cámara*, allowed him to enjoy certain privileges such as the opportunity for travel abroad. His visit to Italy in 1629-30 had a profound impact upon his artistic development. Most of his contemporaries and successors at court, however, did not travel abroad. Instead, their exposure to the new dynamic style of painting was limited to the study of pictures in the vast collection of Philip IV which highlighted Rubens as the king's favorite contemporary painter. In fact, a general awareness of Rubens and his style pervaded Spanish culture beginning in the early seventeenth century. Philip IV's enthusiasm for the Fleming was loudly echoed by Spain's leading writers including the poets Lope de Vega and Francisco López de Zárate who dedicated poems to the Flemish master's allegorical equestrian portrait of Philip IV, painted in late 1628.<sup>9</sup> In the poem "Al cuadro, y retrato de su majestad" (1629), Lope de Vega glorified the painter and his ability to create a surprising image of verisimilitude so successful that it fooled Nature herself.<sup>10</sup> In the poem, she awakens from sleep only to find that Rubens has stolen her brushes. The writer Juan de Piña also praised the allegorical portrait in his popular court novel *Casos prodigiosos* in which he called Rubens a great "poet of the eyes," and a glory to Flanders.<sup>11</sup> This familiarity with the art of Rubens intensified in the late 1630s with the arrival in Madrid of Rubens's designs for the Torre de la Parada.<sup>12</sup> Another important group of pictures reached Madrid following Rubens's death in 1640, when Philip IV purchased 21 pictures from the artist's estate. By 1665, Philip IV had acquired at least 149 works by Rubens and his studio dealing with a wide range of subjects including devotional images, triumphant religious compositions, mythologies, and state portraits.

The export of paintings and prints from the Spanish Netherlands by Antwerp art dealers further contributed to Rubens's strong presence in Spain.

There is some evidence to support the view that Rubens influenced the art of Velázquez. The Spaniard's *Equestrian Portrait of the Count-Duke Olivares* (c. 1634, Museo del Prado) is often described as "Rubensian," and his *Coronation of the Virgin* (c. 1636-44, Museo del Prado) may owe its composition to a print by Alexander Voet, the Elder (c. 1613-1673/74) after a painting by Rubens.<sup>13</sup> Yet Rubens generally followed an entirely different aesthetic from that of Velázquez whose approach to composition and figure style share more affinities with Italian baroque classicism (such as the work of Guido Reni or José de Ribera) than with the dynamic language of high baroque style. In fact, Velázquez's paintings for the Torre de la Parada actually show a clear rejection of Rubens's models.<sup>14</sup> In Velázquez's *Menippus* (Figure 2), painted for the Torre about 1640, the ancient philosopher emerges from the shadows of an ambiguously defined background focussing our attention on the brightly illuminated head. This dark columnar figure forms a sharp contrast to Rubens's *Heraclitus* (Figure 3), completed by 1638 for the Torre. In Rubens's "portrait," the figure's muscular anatomy and intense facial expression, as well as the dynamic quality of the *contrapposto*, convey a greater sense of energetic dynamism.

The style commonly associated with the art of Rubens and with the High Baroque in general, did not fully emerge in Spanish painting until the second half of the seventeenth century. One crucial factor in this transformation toward high baroque style was the increasing familiarity with the art of Rubens. The continued acquisition of Rubens's paintings by Philip IV, as well as Velázquez's activities as palace decorator in the 1650s, were crucial for expanding Rubens's influence to a wider Spanish audience. The impetus for remodeling the royal palace was the desire to make it a reflection of the new "modern" aesthetic of the Baroque.<sup>15</sup> As a result of Velázquez's redecoration, Rubens's pictures hung in the major rooms of

<sup>8</sup> Victor-L. Tapié, *The Age of Grandeur: Baroque Art and Architecture*, trans. A. Ross Williamson (New York: Praeger Publishers: 1960) 54. This book was originally published under the title *Baroque et classicism* (Paris: Librairie Plon: 1957).

<sup>9</sup> The painting, now lost, is known through a copy in the Galleria della Uffizzi. See Francis Huemer, *Portraits* (London: Phaidon, 1977), I, no. 30, 150-154. On the poems by Lope de Vega and Francisco López de Zárate dedicated to the portrait, see Larry L. Ligo, "Two Seventeenth-Century Poems Which Link Rubens's Equestrian Portrait of Philip IV to Titian's Equestrian Portrait of Charles V," *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 85 (1979), 345-354.

<sup>10</sup> From *Laurel de Apolo con otras rimas*, 1629. Cited in Ligo.

<sup>11</sup> *Casos prodigiosos y cueva encantada*, 1628. Cited in Ligo.

<sup>12</sup> The documentation of Rubens's paintings in Spain in the seventeenth century has been given serious attention by Alexander Vergara, *Rubens and His Patrons* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Enriqueta Harris suggested the possible influence of Rubens on Velázquez's

portraits immediately following Rubens's stay at court but found that "any resemblance was, however, short-lived." *Velázquez* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1982) 90. Also, see Allan Braham's comments in The National Gallery, *El Greco to Goya. The Taste for Spanish Paintings in Britain and Ireland* (London: The National Gallery, 1981) 18. Kurt Gerstenberg observed Velázquez's debt to Voet's print, *Diego Velázquez* (Munich-Berlin, 1957) 94-96.

<sup>14</sup> The suggestion that Velázquez's *Menippus* was painted in response to Rubens's pair of philosophers for the Torre, *Heraclitus* and *Democritus*, was made by Jonathan Brown who noted that initially, the dimensions of *Menippus* closely approximated that of Rubens's pair of philosophers. Velázquez subsequently altered the format of the composition. See Jonathan Brown and Carmen Garrido, *Velázquez: The Technique of Genius* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998) 159, 162.

<sup>15</sup> This was observed by José Miguel Morán Turina and Fernando Checa in "Las colecciones pictóricas del Escorial y el gusto barroco," *Goya* 179 (1984): 254-256. On Velázquez's activities as palace decorator, see Steven Orso, "In the Presence of the Palace King: Studies in Art and Decoration at the Court of Philip IV," diss., Princeton University, 1978.

the palace alongside those by sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italian artists, including Titian, Tintoretto, and Ribera. Rubens's paintings were thus in exalted company "which automatically conferred upon him the authority of those unquestioned masters of the past."<sup>16</sup>

Court artists including Francisco Carreño de Miranda, Francisco Rizi, and Claudio Coello, found in engravings after Rubens's designs a model for baroque composition while his paintings in the Royal Collection were instructive for color and painting technique. The most compelling evidence of Rubens's impact in Spain is the diffused presence of his style and motifs in painting at court in the 1650s and '60s. Countless instances of borrowing from Rubensian sources are found in the work of Madrid artists of this generation.<sup>17</sup> For example, Carreño's *Assumption of the Virgin* (Figure 4), painted in 1657 for a church in Alcorcón (Madrid), was surely inspired by the prints of Paul Pontius (1603-1658, Figure 5) and Schelte à Bolswert (c. 1586-1659) after Rubens's designs.<sup>18</sup> Yet in Carreño's *Assumption*, only the poses of the Virgin and the apostle in the left foreground can be traced directly to Rubens's composition, indicating that the print was utilized by Carreño only as a point of departure. Another court painter whose work clearly shows knowledge of Rubens, is Francisco Rizi. This is evident in works such as his monumental altarpiece dedicated to St. Peter at Funete el Saz (*in situ*, 1655) and his scenes for the Capuchin convent, in Toledo (dispersed), in which Rubensian passages and figure types can be found.

Claudio Coello's *Annunciation* in the Benedictine church of San Plácido in Madrid (1668, Figure 6), was probably based on Rubens's oil sketch of the same theme for an altarpiece never completed.<sup>19</sup> Another possible source may have been Rubens's *Holy Family Surrounded by Saints*, painted in 1628 for the Antwerp Church of St. Augustine. Rubens's small copy of the altarpiece (c. 1628, Figure 7) was in a private Madrid collection since the early 1640s.<sup>20</sup> Coello may have based his theatrical arrangement of figures around a staircase, as well as the upward spiralling movement of the composition, on this reduced copy of Rubens's monumental altarpiece. Artists who never gained court appointments but who were active in court circles, also made frequent references to Rubens's models in their work. For his *Conversion of St. Paul* (Figure 8), the Madrid painter Francisco Camilo (c. 1615-1673) drew inspiration from Bolswert's print (Figure 9) after a lost painting by Rubens (formerly in the Kaiser Friedrich-Museum,

Berlin).<sup>21</sup> In Camilo's liberal interpretation of the print, the fallen saint and the soldier who comes to his aid, are strongly indebted to Rubens's composition. The Madrid painter Juan Antonio de Frías Escalante (1633-1669) also relied on the print for his version of the theme in the Museo Cerralbo (Madrid).

Painting in Madrid after 1650 reflected many of the concerns commonly associated with baroque style in general. Altarpieces such as those by Carreño, Rizi, and Coello exemplified Rubens's taste for spiral movement, diagonal composition, and theatrical rhetoric. They also revealed a knowledge of Rubens's corpulent figure style, his taste for figures caught in the action of bending and twisting, and his complicated and dynamic composition. The point of departure for Spanish painting of the second half of the seventeenth century was Rubens's unique and personal style in which this baroque vocabulary was combined with the painterly tradition of sixteenth-century Italian painting, most notably the art of Titian. Rubens assimilated Titian's broad and fluid manner of painting with his own exuberant dynamism and expressive energy. Rubens's bold foreshortenings, strong diagonals, and his heroic human proportions were effective vehicles to convey the physical power and heightened emotion so characteristic of his oeuvre. The swirling movement and carefully orchestrated groups of figures that often seem to burst the limits of the canvas were new to the Spanish audience.

The direct response to Rubens by seventeenth-century art theorists in Spain, demonstrates that Rubens was viewed as the greatest practitioner of a new and revolutionary style of painting that was gradually gaining acceptance among Spanish artists. Although the painter-theorists Vicente Carducho (c. 1578-1638) and Francisco Pacheco (1564-1644) promoted the highly finished mode in their treatises, a new appreciation was emerging for the method of *pintar de colores*, or painting through color. Contemporary art-theoretical writings, such as Carducho's *Diálogos de la pintura* (1633) and Pacheco's *Arte de la pintura* (1649), reveal changing attitudes toward two modes of painting referred to in these texts as *acabadísimo* (highly finished) and *pintura de borrones* (sketchy painting). Through the early 1630s the *borrón*, or paint that is applied in blobs or slashes and not smoothed over, was criticized as unfinished, sloppy, and an artifice to disguise one's shortcomings in *disegno*.<sup>22</sup> Yet by the 1650s, the technique was much admired and viewed as requiring a special intellect in order to

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Brown, "Velázquez and the Evolution of High Baroque Painting in Madrid," *Princeton Art Museum Record* 41 (1982-83) 11.

<sup>17</sup> See for example, the article by Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez, "Rubens y la pintura barroca española," *Archivo español de arte* 140-141 (1977). Also, the exhibition, *Carreño, Rizi, Herrera, y la pintura madrileña de su tiempo [1650-1700]* (Madrid: Museo del Prado, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> Pérez Sánchez, "Rubens y la pintura" 101.

<sup>19</sup> The relationship between the two works was suggested by Julius Held in *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens*, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1980). Rubens's oil sketch, *The Incarnation as Fulfillment of all Prophecies* is at the Barnes Foundation, Merion Station, Pennsylvania.

<sup>20</sup> The small painting on panel was given by Rubens's heirs to Don Francisco de Roches in appreciation for his assistance with the sale of the artist's possessions to Philip IV. It was probably given by Don Francisco to the king soon afterwards. See Vergara 146-47.

<sup>21</sup> Edward J. Sullivan, *Baroque Painting in Madrid. The Contribution of Claudio Coello* (Columbia, Missouri: U of Missouri P, 1986) 22.

<sup>22</sup> Gridley McKim-Smith traced the changing attitudes toward the *borrón* in "Writing and Painting in the Age of Velázquez," Gridley McKim-Smith, et.al., *Examining Velázquez* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1988) 1-33. Her discussion focuses on the role played by Titian in the gradual acceptance of the sketchy technique in Spain.

appreciate its power in creating relief and light effects.

The existing literature on the changing attitudes toward the *borrón* in Spain, focuses primarily on the role played by the art of Titian.<sup>23</sup> Yet, seventeenth-century Spanish theorists also invoked Rubens in this debate concerning the relative merits and pitfalls of the highly-finished and sketchy brush techniques. Art theorists, including Pacheco, emphasized the revolutionary aspect of the new *pintura de manchas* or *de borrones* and the idea that both Velázquez and Rubens were practitioners of it. Similarly, the poet Lázaro Díaz del Valle invoked Rubens as an example of the method of painting through color and compared him to Titian whom he called the “prince of color.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Rubens may have played a role in the gradual acceptance in Spain of the painterly technique. Rubens was also invoked by contemporary Spanish writers with reference to the status of painting as a liberal art which was still in question in Spain at this time. In *Arte de la Pintura*, Francisco Pacheco included Rubens’s biography in a chapter on famous contemporary artists.<sup>25</sup> Pacheco and other contemporary writers viewed Velázquez as a worthy successor to both Rubens and Titian in his artistic accomplishments, his status at court, and his attainment of titles of nobility. Rubens’s status as an exemplar for the nobility of painting and his supposed descent from the school of Titian may have furthered the acceptance of his painterly style.

Thus, by the 1650s, the technique of painting *a borrones* was associated with the courtly taste of Philip IV and, to a certain extent, this mode was regarded as a foreign style. Contemporary sources indicate that Spanish painters and art theorists recognized that painting styles in other parts of Europe differed dramatically from local style. In his lengthy diatribe on painting, the *Diálogos*, Vicente Carducho stated that Rubens’s pictures in Flanders bestowed much greatness upon his “nation” and were a source of envy to others.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Francisco Pacheco and José Martínez (*Discursos practicables* [1676]) discussed European painting in terms of “schools” belonging to specific “nations.”<sup>27</sup> The inventories of seventeenth-century collectors demonstrate a similar use of labels to identify works as belonging to specific schools. These in-

ventories include countless mythologies, allegories, and still lifes which were designated simply as “de Italia” or “de Flandes.”<sup>28</sup> The prestige value of pictures from Flanders and Italy was decried by Spanish artists including Jusepe de Ribera who reportedly claimed “I judge Spain to be a loving mother to foreigners and a very cruel stepmother to her own sons.”<sup>29</sup> These examples demonstrate that there was an awareness of distinct regional styles and that the arts of Italy and Flanders were upheld as superior to that of Spain.

Rubens’s special status as Philip IV’s favorite foreign painter may have furthered the respectability and valorization of the sensual and physical properties of the painterly approach. In emulation of Rubens, painters at court wished to distance themselves from painter artisans who simply produced formulaic pictures that could be painted by workshop assistants. As a result, painters in Madrid aligned themselves with the greatest artists patronized by the king (*i.e.* Rubens and Titian). By the 1650s, a new aesthetic had emerged which favored lighter color, greater intensity of emotion, and pictures that were more decorative, theatrical, and illusionistic. Changes in technique responded to these new demands and resulted in pictures that were more painterly. Eventually, the “new” style became the dominant mode associated with the younger generation of artists of the Madrid School.

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<sup>23</sup> See note 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Origen y ilustración del...arte de la pintura*, 1656, cited in McKim-Smith.

<sup>25</sup> Ed. Bonaventura Bassegoda i Hugas (Madrid: Cátedra, 1990) 192-202.

<sup>26</sup> “... las obras de Pedro Pablo Rubens, y de otros, buelven por su nacion en grandeza, y valentia, y dan materia a la embidia en las demas.” *Diálogos de la pintura. Su defensa, origen, esencia, definición, modos y diferencias*, ed. Francisco Calvo Serraller (Madrid: Ediciones Turner, 1979) 95.

<sup>27</sup> See Pacheco’s comments in *Arte de la pintura*, on the “Italian school” (414-415) and his discussion of Rubens “whose praise is in charge of those of his

Nation” (193). For a similar use of the terms “school” and “nation,” see Martínez’s comments in *Discursos practicables del nobilísimo arte de la pintura, sus rudimentos, medios y fines que enseña la experiencia, con los ejemplares de obras insignes de artifices ilustres* [1676] (Madrid: Real Academia de San Fernando, 1866) 24, 193.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see the inventories published by Mercedes Agulló y Cobo, *Más noticias sobre pintores madrileños de los siglos XVI al XVIII* (Madrid: Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 1981) 15-16, 213-17.

<sup>29</sup> Translation by Jonathan Brown, in Robert Enggass and Jonathan Brown, *Italy and Spain 1600-1750: Sources and Documents in the History of Art* (Englewood Cliffs, 1970) 179-180.



Figure 1. Peter Paul Rubens, *Rape of Deidamia (or Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs)*, oil on canvas, 182 x 220 cm, 1636-1638. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 2. Diego Velázquez, *Menippus*, oil on canvas, 179 x 94 cm, c. 1640. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 3. Peter Paul Rubens, *Heraclitus*, oil on canvas, 181 x 63 cm, 1638. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 4. Juan Carreño de Miranda, *Assumption of the Virgin*, oil on canvas, 320 x 225 cm, 1657. Muzeum Narodowe, Poznan.



Figure 5. Paul Pontius, after Peter Paul Rubens, *Assumption of the Virgin*, engraving, 65 x 44.5 cm, 1624. Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of Belinda L. Randall from the Collection of John Witt Randall.



Figure 6. Claudio Coello, *Annunciation*, oil on canvas, 750 x 366 cm, 1668. Benedictinas de San Plácido, Madrid.



Figure 7. Peter Paul Rubens, *Holy Family Surrounded by Saints*, panel, 79 x 64 cm, c. 1628. Museo del Prado, Madrid.





[left] Figure 8. Francisco Camilo, *Conversion of St. Paul*, oil on canvas. 215 x 178 cm, 1667. Museo de Bellas Artes, Segovia.

[below] Figure 9. Schelte à Bolswert, after Peter Paul Rubens, *Conversion of St. Paul*, engraving, 43 x 60 cm, c. 1621. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©2000 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

