

7. Conclusion

Considering the vast amount of literature on Rubens, there are relatively few studies on his creative process and workshop organisation. Although a number of publications have focused on the subject of his preparatory drawings and oil sketches, respectively, the question of how these elements of the design process interrelate – and what can be gathered from the existing material regarding Rubens's collaboration with his employees – has not been subject of much research. The disattribution of an artwork is a sensitive issue and it is generally met with reluctance from the owner or owning institution. Most likely, this has also contributed to the optimistic assumption that only the master himself would have pursued the creative task of designing compositions. In other words, if deemed authentic and categorised as preparatory material, a work can be accepted as single-handedly done by Rubens. Consequently, drawings and oil sketches are primarily seen as Rubens's creative outlets and as a means of communication between himself and his employees. While these purposes might indeed frequently apply, defining a preparatory process based on the existing material without considering a logical chronological progression or the historical contexts can be misleading. For instance, the socio-historical reasoning that Rubens would not have made copies of his own work must be accepted even if more than one version of a subject exists and even if both versions appear convincing as work's by Rubens's hand.

It was the main goal of this dissertation to further investigate Rubens's preparatory process and workshop practices. This was based on a careful analysis of written sources as well as an evaluation of how the available preparatory material such as drawings and oil sketches can offer clues to the working methods of the workshop, and vice versa. It was essential to assess the design processes from the very first drawing to the finished painting and this approach was exemplified by the presented case study, the design process for the composition of the "*Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saints*". In this respect, great consideration was given to the previously-established framework, which included the historical context as well as the circumstances specific to Rubens.

Initially, the context in which Rubens's œuvre was created was evaluated. This included an account of the cultural environment and the practises of the 17th-century, as well as the previous historical developments that had shaped the art market and production in Rubens's hometown. The relevance of authorship and single-handed execution to the 17th-century buyer was assessed, with the result that there is no trace of a preference for autograph work visible, beyond a more general demand for high quality. The importance of a substantiated awareness of socio-historical circumstances often becomes apparent in seemingly small details. This becomes especially obvious when a whole theory is based on an observation that can be relativised by taking into account the socio-historical contexts. For example, Rubens allegedly wrote a letter in which he

inquires for French women to pose as models. Based on this letter, it is often assumed that he regularly drew nude women from life. Portraying undressed women in his studio fits the picture of a man full of relish, an image that was wrongly imposed on Rubens on the basis of his works. As was shown, Rubens's cultural context makes the presence of nude female models (in his studio or elsewhere) utterly unlikely. A strong awareness of the historical context is also crucial when interpreting drawings or his paintings. Consequently, the assessment of 17th-century customs and practices preceded the evaluation of Rubens's particular circumstances.

In the following chapter, Rubens's workshop was discussed. In line with the custom of his time, Rubens employed a large workshop, which was necessary for many reasons, not least due to his social standing and his other occupations. Apart from these factors that pertain to Rubens's particular situation, only a large workshop could have generated such an extensive oeuvre. By evaluating written sources, it was possible to show key aspects of how Rubens ran his workshop. For instance, it was highlighted that a strong stylistic conformity between his own work and that of his employees was fundamental to Rubens. This insight is key for evaluating the single-handed status of his paintings, as it makes the practice of searching for the hand of one of his pupils in his paintings challenging. In this respect, the often-cited letter to Sir Dudley Carleton and similar material was examined, as was Rubens's attitude towards his high-standing public image, which would have kept him from placing emphasis on the carrying out of manual labour.

In the next chapter, Rubens's preparatory process for paintings was analysed and the works were discussed regarding their possible artistic purpose. One can distinguish between works made without a specific composition in mind – such as *ricordi* – and those works that were made on an ad-hoc basis in support of a particular painting. Although Rubens's preparatory process can be characterised as very heterogeneous, the most commonly-used materials and techniques were assessed, including – for instance – his distinctive, haphazardly-done *crabbelingen*. The details of Rubens's artistic procedures and the most commonly-chosen materials was outlined in preparation for the subsequent discussion to establish criteria against which works could be compared in specific cases.

The close look at Rubens's technique and procedure inevitably led to the issue of determining single-handed execution and the difficulties associated with this line of questioning were examined. This included a short assessment of the "method" (rather the "set of methods") of connoisseurship, which is often considered outdated in the present scholarly climate, despite the lack of real alternatives. Furthermore, the existence of Rubens's core autograph work was evaluated, with the result that for the vast majority of works a collaborative painting process must be accepted.

There are only very few criteria pointing towards single-handed executions: for instance, some paintings can most likely be considered autograph works due to their distinct private content. In any case, every work that left Rubens's studio should be seen as "a Rubens", irrespective of the master's personal involvement, if the historical dimension is to be taken seriously.

All of the above findings were eventually utilised to form a concrete method by which Rubens's preparatory process can be examined, and this approach was exemplified in the presented case study. Besides the usual emphasis on a work's overall stylistic conformity, special emphasis was placed on a preliminary work's capacity to find inclusion in the specific design process for which the work was created. For this purpose, the preparatory process of the "*Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saints*" altarpiece was chosen given that all steps of the preparatory process are preserved and should theoretically offer a continuous progression towards the finished composition. Furthermore, the details of the commission are roughly known: the altarpiece itself was made to order for important patrons for a public spot in a church, which indicates that the work was completed with the highest possible effort.

Contrary to common beliefs, the existing preliminary versions of the composition (both on paper and panel) cannot all be convincingly assembled into one coherent composition-finding process. For instance, the Stockholm drawing (Fig. 7) has previously been eliminated from the sequence in favour of the newfound drawing in the *Metropolitan Museum* (Fig. 19). Nonetheless, the Stockholm sheet is still informative insofar as that it shows a reduced composition. This process is very much in line with other reductions of the composition found in other versions of the subject, such as the M. Knoedler oil sketch (Fig. 25): both works show the same inclination of cutting out figures for the benefit of a less-crowded composition. In this respect, the M. Knoedler sketch can be ranked between the Frankfurt sketch (Fig. 20) and the Stockholm drawing, as it shows a less-crowded composition than the former, but more figures than the latter. The comparison between these works allowed for the insight that reducing existing compositions was an established procedure: in all probability, a task with which Rubens's pupils or employees were habitually entrusted. Furthermore, the numerous copies clearly show that Rubens's designs were openly accessible within the studio.

It was also established that the Frankfurt sketch can be categorised as a reduced version of the composition instead of a preliminary work. This claim was backed by numerous arguments such as a shift in image content, as well as existent stylistic discrepancies. The similarities between this sketch and the composition of the altarpiece are evident. However, based on the presented examination of the work, it was identified as an adaptation of the composition, done chronologically after the *modello* in Berlin.

The latter oil sketch was more convincing as a first design, not least due to its outstanding material quality. The Frankfurt sketch could have comprised of a demanding task for a pupil and was perhaps intended as a design for a further, autonomous work. The copies done after this sketch – such as the sketch found in Salzburg – further confirm that the compositions were openly accessible to the workshop as templates.

Overall, the study of the numerous copies after the different versions of the “*Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saints*” composition resulted in the reorganisation of the chronological succession of the existing works while simultaneously offering insights into Rubens’s production process, as well as his workshop organisation. For instance, what has been said about drawings – namely that they served as a teaching tool for Rubens’s pupils and were copied within the workshop – can also be extended to oil sketches. Copying oil sketches was possibly a further step in a pupil’s training, as they would have constituted an ideal teaching medium before a pupil was capable of accomplishing the important task of making large-sized copies after Rubens’s paintings independently. Moreover, designing variations of existing compositions that variegated the master’s figurative arrangements was convincingly part of the workshop’s practice and posed a more challenging task than copying existing material.

Some questions had to remain unanswered; for instance, a thorough technical investigation of the oil sketch in the *Salzburg Museum* would potentially shed additional light on its connection to the Frankfurt sketch, a link that can only be strongly assumed at this point. The two works show similar markings on the bottom of the panel and – for instance – a dendrochronological investigation of the Salzburg sketch could potentially reaffirm the assumed ties between the two works. Furthermore, in some cases missing artworks such as the lost work from the *Wallraf-Richartz-Museum* (Fig. 31) stood in the way of answering certain questions unconditionally.

It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of the methodology, which may have affected the results in the course of the study. First, the major weakness of any case study analysis has to be mentioned: although this study was based on a case that is strongly representative of Rubens’s work, additional cases would presumably be able to offer further insights into a wider spectrum of his practice and the general validity of the results could strongly benefit from further confirmation of the findings. A single example is limited by a reduced comparability and thus a limited generalizability, which is why further cases of preparatory processes – even those with a slighter variation of works – would be helpful. The abundance of Rubens’s preparatory material available would certainly allow for further comprehensive studies of specific design processes in this vein: the same approach presented in this dissertation could certainly be applied to a variety of examples. Increasing the number of cases with similar focus would reinforce the findings identified in this dissertation, and potentially allow for further insights into Rubens’s preparatory

work and workshop practice. It is also important to note that the case analysed was a successful implementation of the method, but not all preparatory works can be assigned to a specific process or a specific finished painting.

Finally, it should be emphasised that the research presented in this dissertation (most particularly in the case study) confirmed general principles that apply to all works by Rubens: the fact that Rubens employed a workshop has to factor into the evaluation of his work insofar as that single-handed execution cannot be considered a determining factor in establishing a work's attribution. An altarpiece designed by Rubens, executed by his employees and possibly touched up by the master himself has to be declared "a real Rubens", irrespective of the degree to which his involvement can be detected. When applying the same principle to the preparatory designs, it becomes clear that sketches such as the oil sketch in the *Städel Museum* cannot be regarded as lesser artworks due to their connection to the workshop. To the contrary, this particular work has to be considered an irreplaceable document of the workshop practices that took place in Rubens's studio. Inventions by the workshop have to be equally valued, especially since they are just as much a testimony to Rubens's talents: his talent as the master of a large workshop. The art historical perspective should be detached from the notion of the genius painter when evaluating what determines "a Rubens".