

7 | Rubens the Designer, or the Social Life of Books

Rubens's designs for title pages are not acknowledged as works of art in their own right, but his lifelong occupation with title pages has intrigued many scholars over the past century. Especially from the 1970s onwards, this artistic output was studied more closely, mostly because of the production of a *Catalogue Raisonné* of Rubens's vast oeuvre, but also because art historians became more interested in media other than painting. However, even then the title pages were perceived as a "marginal artistic area".¹

In previous research, Rubens's designs have been studied to trace his stylistic development, and have thus been researched in a chronological way with a strong focus on the artist. This focus is explained by the fact that previous scholarship had mainly catalogued the title pages in the context of the *catalogue raisonné*, providing a wealth of sources and a good framework for the present thesis, but it did not consider the book-historical aspects connected to Rubens's contribution to this field. Additionally, the focus on Rubens's oeuvre did not allow for a deeper look into the wider context of title-page production and the historical development of this genre. This means that the title pages were seen as singular events in the artist's oeuvre, rather than an individual event in the history of the works for which he designed them. A shift of the focus was thus deemed necessary, and I decided to put the books into the centre of this work. The aim was to show the title pages and the books in their context: how they were produced, by looking at the book history with the many editions that often existed of the books for which Rubens provided a title page, and also by looking at the possible interpretations a contemporary reader might have gleaned from the title pages.

What was not visible from previous scholarship on Rubens's title pages was the reason why he would be involved in these particular book projects. The prevalent explanation so far had been his relationship to one of the most successful publishers of his days, but Rubens collaborated with

¹ Cf. Held 1977, p. 3.

Moretus for only about half of his designs, which suggests reasons other than the social relationship with one printer. However, not much evidence remains from other publishers, and research about these is still scarce; this means that the relationship between Rubens and Moretus, as the only tangible one, was put into the foreground. As the Moretus's correspondence was included in earlier research, there are many available interpretations and, more importantly, transcriptions of the letters. Because Moretus's correspondence with authors and engravers is the only source so far that might tell us about the process and attitudes of the agents within the process, I decided to re-examine the letters. Especially the letter from Moretus to the Jesuit Balthasar Cordier saw a close reading, as the past interpretations of this letter were increasingly used to show that Rubens produced title pages only in his leisure time. The letter was written by Moretus to refuse an author's proposal to print his work with a Rubens title page, rather than to deliver an account of Rubens's working hours.

A close reading of the letters, mostly written by Moretus, showed him to be fully responsible for the book and its contents. He decided whether a book would receive a title page and by whom this would be designed. Not every book was given an illustrated title page, and not every illustrated title page was by Rubens. Moretus can also be seen to discuss the visual content of the title pages, which suggests that the authors had little say in what was depicted on their title page or who designed it. However, Moretus routinely asked the authors what they wanted to see on their title pages, and he sent the finished title pages to the authors or their intermediaries to have them check the outcome, and would only print the title page after their input.

Looking closely into the production process revealed the necessity to look at the material aspects of the production and their meaning in Rubens's time: the costs of producing a title page, the print run of the edition, and the formats of the books. All of these give hints as to the potential customers, and the intended market, and with this the expectations readers could have had when buying a specific book. Often especially the ideal readers, i.e. the dedicatees of books such as current rulers, are mentioned in the correspondence where the expectations and the *decorum* of the images are discussed. The way in which authors and intermediaries sometimes insisted on changes to the title page reveals the importance of such a title page for those involved. The changes, however, are always minor changes to do with the physiognomies of dignitaries on the title pages, or the representation of coats-of-arms. That these questions occurred for title pages by Rubens is certainly no coincidence. During the research it became apparent that Rubens was commissioned by Moretus especially when he was printing for important dedicatees or authors.

This question of the intended readers made it necessary to look into the social relevance of books and their value for Rubens and his contemporaries. While their market value at one point in time is visible from the price that Moretus asked, it is more difficult to estimate that for other printers. From various other sources, it became clear, however, that books had a great relevance not

only in the education of painters, but also in the education of young gentlemen. Their education was often reflected in the libraries these gentlemen started to collect and that were part of a nobleman's conspicuous consumption. If seen in the light of a gentleman's library, Rubens's library is not the exceptional library it had been considered to be in comparison with a typical artist's library of his time. Just as for his peers in Antwerp's elite, the library was a social marker for Rubens, a claim that is bolstered by his self-portraits and his conduct in society. Thus, when Rubens designed title pages for some of the most important books of his time, he knew perfectly well what he did and who would read or at least collect these books.

This contextualisation of the production of title pages revealed that, although the title pages were only a small part of the enormous oeuvre of Rubens, they nevertheless were very relevant for him, not only as an artist, but also as a gentleman and diplomat. The title pages and the books carried his name into the best-known libraries and to many courts all over the world, providing exactly the kind of advertisement an artist like Rubens would wish for. If the work was printed in the *Officina Plantiniana*, it was Moretus who chose Rubens as a designer, usually as a distinction for authors and books that were already significant, culturally, socially or politically.

In order to deal with the title pages and to be able to ask questions that had nothing to do with Rubens's stylistic development, I had a fresh look at the corpus of Rubens title pages. Rather than dealing with the title pages in a chronological way, I decided to deal with them in clusters that were determined by a shared context. In order to define the categories, Grounded Theory Method was used; this means that the categories developed during the research and from the work with the visual material itself rather than using modern organisational principles. For the study of title pages a qualitative method was found to be preferable as each title page is dependent on a huge variety of factors which a quantitative method distorts out of necessity.

In order to limit present-day assumptions in my interpretation, I progressed from a close reading of the material at hand to the media's historicity and arrived at more abstract concepts that were complemented by theoretical reading. A constant reflection of my assumptions, by continuously taking notes, and a constant comparison of the title pages with other contemporary title pages within one book class proved to be necessary in order to contextualise the title pages.

The best way to structure the material was found to be the historical book classes as they presented themselves in seventeenth-century catalogues of libraries, in the inventories drawn up on the death of a bibliophile, and in the contemporary literature on the organisation of a library. Most importantly, the inventory of Rubens's son Albert allowed me to find some of the books Rubens had illustrated into the book classes in which Albert would most probably have sorted them in his library. I was only able to find clusters through the use of these book classes and by doing so investigate the relationships between books. These had been invisible before this categorisation, due to the fact that Rubens designed title pages throughout his professional career in Antwerp and

that there is no obvious pattern visible: he designed for a great variety of authors with various affiliations writing about a great variety of subjects for a variety of printer-publishers, and for books with varying success. Using the historical book classes, a fundamental methodological problem was solved: the books and their title pages have become comparable.² However, by looking at the books through the lens of the historical book classes patterns are suddenly visible that have been obscured by the previous chronology.

A striking new insight is that the numismatic books were all connected to each other, as they all have to do with Rubens's numismatic network in Antwerp and beyond. The same can be said about the neo-Latin poetry that was published by Moretus and received title pages by Rubens. This small corpus revolves around Pope Urban VIII and his interest in this kind of literature. The class containing the books on history seems to have been filled with either patriotic works or works of Counter-Reformatory content, while the theological works often contain important authors from Antwerp and the surrounding universities, or the liturgical work that was so important to the *Officina Plantiniana*. These developing clusters also show different motivations for Rubens to design title pages. Certainly, a different motive can be attributed to Rubens when he designs a title page for a group of friends who are all as interested in the collecting of coins as he was, than when he designs title pages for books that are all intended to be seen by the then current Pope who was a patron of the arts.

For the case studies the history of the books Rubens designed was crucial. Often the works for which Rubens was commissioned had been exceedingly successful in their earlier editions, which was read as a reason for his commission in the first place. On the one hand, the precursors to these commissions can be used in order to compare Rubens's design, and find out what Rubens did differently. On the other, later editions often copy Rubens, so that these can also be interesting as comparative material in order to see what in Rubens's designs was seen as particularly noteworthy. Looking at the various editions often printed for those works reveals that Rubens usually knew about the previous title pages, and that he recognised the reader's expectations concerning the genres of the works. Sometimes this look at the book history of a particular work also reveals that Moretus and Rubens had found an older title page to be insufficient, as with Lessius's *De iustitia et iure*; Rubens could have left the main allegorical invention as it was on the old title pages, something he did for the *Annales sacri* by Torniello.³ Of especial interest was the fact that even when Rubens designed title pages for his Jesuit friends and acquaintances, he did not use the IHS sign that is usually seen on every Jesuit book production, but advertised their work in a highly humanistic way. While Rubens often changed the title pages of works in their later editions, his designs

² The chronological approach made it very difficult to compare the title pages to each other; the title page of a Bible in folio is hardly comparable to a title page in a small format, introducing the work of a poet, for example.

³ L. Lessius 1617; Tornielli 1620.

for title pages were reused and often copied throughout all Europe. Through this repetition and through the work of his assistants who tried to copy their master, his way of designing title pages was consolidated for a period of time in the seventeenth century.

By using the historical book classes, three categories could be developed from the visual evidence and the evidence provided in the secondary sources: there is Rubens the antiquarian who not only used these books professionally, but also made sure that his son was introduced into this international network from early on; there is Rubens the humanist who showcased his knowledge with these intellectual conceits for mainly humanistic works, although often produced by Jesuits; then there is Rubens the patriot, who is actively involved in the fight for his country, and seems to contribute in any way he can, be it with his network or by illustrating title pages.

The antiquarian network in which Rubens firmly established himself was not only a one of people with shared interests. It extended from early on into his family: many of his antiquarian friends were also in his brother's network, and his brother's friend and fellow student of Lipsius later became his son's teacher, for instance. Of course, as the correspondence between Rubens and De Peiresc shows, Rubens had a deep interest in antiquarian matters. This was not only a personal interest in history, but also a professional one; all of his designs use the imagery found on classical coins. Throughout his life he was known as being especially knowledgeable in this field, and this was certainly also because his viewers recognised the references in his designs and paintings. A letter of introduction from Sweerts, a tapestry merchant, shows that these contacts were not only family contacts, but were also part of a bigger network in which being an antiquarian could guarantee trustworthiness and education.

The humanistic allegories Rubens provided for the Jesuits could all be read in a deeply religious way, but were full of references to classical mythology and learning. The Society of Jesus had been Rubens's patron from early on in his career, and he was an active member of one of their sodalities; the social network provided easy access to the artist. However, it was rather the publisher who commissioned Rubens. Moretus's correspondence shows that Rubens rarely had contact to the authors. Additionally, there is some reason to think that the publisher had reason to obtain important patrons himself, such as to receive a papal privilege for printing liturgical work. Rubens's designs for the Jesuit authors are among the more intricate and beautiful title pages he designed, title pages that were inherently open and which have since then received various, often differing interpretations. Maybe designing humanistic title pages for Jesuit authors made it necessary to have such inherently ambiguous title pages. It was the intention of this work to not explain these ambiguities away; after all there is not one single correct interpretation of a title page, the interpretations differ with each reader.

Rubens's work for the designs of historical books is less ambiguous. The title pages for several books were used in decidedly Counter-Reformatory works after Rubens's death. This shows that

Rubens's designs were mainly understood in that way. Over the course of several years, Rubens designed title pages that featured mainly a triumphant Church with chained or shackled adversaries depicted at the bottom of the title page. With these title pages Rubens connects a bulwark of Counter-Reformatory ecclesiastical historiography, the *Annales ecclesiastici* by Baronius, with the more contemporary Dutch compendia of this work and the intended uses for these works. Again, Rubens uses his numismatic knowledge in order to represent the triumphant Church and its eternal domination of the world, a typical feature of the work of Rubens who usually finds the sources for his visual designs in classical art.

In the context of book production, Rubens's work as a book illustrator turns out to be anything but marginal. His designs are an introduction to the books they adorned; they advertise them and summarise their contents often in elaborate allegories; they give the books they adorned their lives as commodities, as heirlooms, as gifts or as collectibles; they enhance their monetary value; they are missionaries; they advertise a victorious Catholic country, and contribute to a political discussion that, throughout Rubens's life, was discussed with weapons in the Eighty Years' War. In contrast to the earlier assessment, Rubens appears to be on the forefront of book production, having illustrated many prominent works. He was also employed for the production of books for several important and influential patrons. His designs often also had a considerable afterlife as they were re-used for different works or copied in many parts of Europe for other editions of the same title or different works in the same book category.

For the further study of title pages, be they by Rubens or other designers, the consideration of the historical categories is necessary, as it is very likely that other designers were also sensitive to the requirements of each book category and its traditions. For other designers this would need to be adjusted and refined, as Rubens's production was limited to the seven book classes mentioned above. However, a broader, diachronic study of the categories themselves would probably be more useful than a study of a specific designer; most designers of title pages are unknown and do not offer such a deep well of information as Rubens's case does. Such a study could help identify traditions that had been developed within the single categories.⁴ This should be made from a broader point of view than has previously been possible not only including the well-known designers and publishers. With the help of the growing digital collections, a truly international study of book illustration could be made that also includes lesser-known designers and books.

Another point several case studies made clear was that the nationalist perspective, often prevalent in studies on book design, is a severe problem, especially for the seventeenth century. As could be seen, the printing world gravitated around a few printing centres, and the prints from these cen-

⁴ In the past two decades some studies and exhibitions focussed on single book categories and investigated the scientific or historic title page, for instance. Cf. Vital-Durand 2011, Elmqvist Söderlund 2010, Breyll 2006, Remmert 2005, Kuechen 2002, Kintzinger 1995.

tres were delivered into the whole of Europe via the big book fairs, and the networks of printers and literati. Rubens could be shown to be influenced by title pages created in other countries, just as he would influence engravers in other countries. Not only were most books considered here written in the *lingua franca* Latin and were sold all over Europe, but engravers and publishers often migrated from one printing centre to the next, and they, too, would have been able to spread new ideas and designs all over Europe. Thus Rubens's designs were not only influenced by the various book categories and their traditions, but also by the books he himself received via Moretus from Cologne, Venice, Rome, and other European cities, apart from the fact that he lived in Italy for almost a decade in which he would have been exposed to great libraries.

By including the social, historical and media-historical context as the background for an investigation into the production process and the design of title pages by Rubens, the title pages were re-evaluated and interpreted. The collaboration of Moretus and Rubens was certainly more than help between friends; this collaboration helped all parties involved, as the title pages function as advertisements not only for the books, but also for the authors, the publishers and those whose names were also inscribed on the title page, the designer and the engraver within a finely tuned system of patronage, and, not least, the artist himself. Considering the social relevance of the books for which Rubens designed the title pages and the involvement of so many influential individuals in the production, not to mention the patrons he acknowledged on his title pages, the design of these title pages should not be seen as a recreational activity of Rubens. On the contrary, with the title pages Rubens showed himself to be in the midst of the intellectual world, up-to-date with recent publications, and capable of producing intelligent designs which were then produced and copied in the thousands and sold all over Europe. For Rubens the contribution to a book meant that with his title pages he could publicly participate in scholarly discourses otherwise relegated to his letter writing. And the title pages contributed considerably to his growing fame: the distribution of the books and the often many editions meant that his inventions were transported all over the world. The circulation of some books must have been enormous, especially if all the copies are included in the counting. With their many references to classical literature and art, it would not be surprising if the title pages were to a large extent responsible for his reputation as a learned artist.