

1. Introduction

To date, Peter Paul Rubens is one of the most successful artists to have ever lived. Born to an influential family, Rubens was highly educated and besides his main profession as a master painter, he had numerous scholarly interests and corresponded with the intellectual elite of his time. Partly due to his large private and professional network, he was temporarily in diplomatic service to the Habsburg Governors of the Southern Netherlands, Albert VII, Archduke of Austria and his wife Isabella Clara Eugenia. Despite these interests and obligations, Rubens's main profession was that of a master painter for the larger part of his life: he was a master of the Guild of Saint Luke for a little over 40 years, from 1598 until his passing at the age of 62 in 1640. His artistic oeuvre is extensive, comprising hundreds of paintings, as well as drawings, oil sketches and prints. His designs not only prepare paintings but also architecture, sculpture and applied arts, such as title pages.¹ The works show a wide variety of subjects, transformations of style, and to some degree inconsistencies in what can best be paraphrased as "quality". As was self-evident for a successful master of painting during the 17th century, and indispensable in view of the sheer amount of his artistic output, Rubens ran a large workshop. Given the vital role that this workshop played in his art production, the subject of his studio and the organisational aspects behind the artistic powerhouse have not been studied as thoroughly as one might anticipate. This disproportionate discrepancy is owed to a number of circumstances. One reason is the fact that – unlike other aspects of Rubens's life – his workshop is poorly documented. When Rubens returned from his travels to Italy, he was appointed court painter to Albert and Isabella Clara Eugenia. This prestigious appointment exempted him from having to register his pupils with the guild. Consequently, the guild's ledgers reveal very little about Rubens's teaching activities or his employees.² Other, less reliable sources associate a number of painters with Rubens's studio, although they rarely offer a decisive argument or proof.³

1 The different media have more recently been awarded more scholarly attention. For a long overdue study on Rubens's title pages, see for instance: Bertram 2018.

2 During Rubens's lifetime, artists and other craftsmen were traditionally organised in guilds, for protection and for the propagation of common interests and Rubens also became a master of the Guild of Saint Luke after his apprenticeship. Guilds kept books that made notes of who became a master when and who took on which pupil, and which are a great source of information for scholars.

3 Arnout Balis states that a list of all the painters connected with Rubens's studio in some way would easily include over one hundred names. For an in-depth study on the subject of Rubens's pupils and their identities, see: Balis 2007, p. 30–51.

A further reason why Rubens's pupils and employees may not have received as much scholarly attention over the past centuries is the radical change that has taken place in the cultural perception of art, as the modern understanding of art strongly differs from the perspectives of the 17th century. The roots of this development lie in Romanticism and the idolisation of the genius artist during the 18th and 19th centuries: the underlying principle of this unprecedented worship of the artist as a "genius" was the idea of an innate disposition (or a God-given gift) that originates from the innermost part of the soul. This development shaped the modern understanding insofar that today the prevalent understanding of art prioritises its implementation and creation. Prime importance is attached to the artist's creative idea, rather than merely the depicted subject itself. To the conventional present perception, "art" is imperatively linked to the imaginative and inventive "artist" and consequently a copy can merely be a lesser imitation of the "real thing".⁴ The extent of the distinction between original and copy becomes clear when these parameters apply even though artworks no longer require manual implementation. This development culminated at the beginning of the 20th century with the *ready-made*, which shows the detachment of the original work of art from the artist's manual intervention. Art is no longer exclusively dependent on a pre-specified skillset, but rather it more strongly relies on the artist's creative idea. In other words, a modern artwork's value not only lies in its mere appearance, but importance is generally also attached to its conception and origination.

This modern understanding of art is completely disrupted when facing 17th-century practices such as the schematic reproduction of paintings, excessive copying activity, obscure attributions or an outright disregard for an artist's identity. Especially in the case of celebrated old masters such as Rubens, the existence of a workshop creates a maximum of conflict for the present perception, as Rubens's autograph works are sold at substantial sums. His paintings lead the list of most expensive old master paintings on the market. In July 2016, Christie's sold "*Lot and His Daughters*" for over £44 million, reflecting the highest price ever achieved for an Old Master painting at the long-established auction house. Today, the monetary value of a painting attributed to Rubens versus a painting connoted with his workshop significantly differs, being strongly disproportional to the historical difference in price at the time of their creation.⁵ Evidently, the appeal of artistic genius is still instilled in today's consciousness to some degree.

4 In this context, Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" can be mentioned. See for instance: Bratu Hansen 2008, p. 336ff.

5 A work done by one of Rubens's pupils was worth approximately half as much as a work done by the master himself, according to a letter that Rubens wrote to William Trumbull in 1621. See: Magurn 1955, p. 76.

Even outside of the art market, works “by the studio” simply do not evoke the same enthusiasm and interest as their (apparently) single-handedly-executed counterparts.⁶ This applies to almost all parties involved with art, from non-specialists such as museum visitors to academics conducting research. Questions of attribution invariably hold serious consequences for the painting’s owner, regardless whether private or institutional. As a result of this, paradoxical situations arise, such as the fact that two similar versions of a composition are often both classified as works by Rubens.⁷ For instance, the *New Hermitage Museum* in St. Petersburg housed an exhibition titled “*Rubens’s Ceres: Two original Versions*”.⁸ This not only applies to paintings but also to Rubens’s preparatory material. For example, two nearly identical sketches of Nicolas Trigault are both classified as works by the master himself. Neither the *Metropolitan Museum of Art* in New York nor the *Nationalmuseum* in Stockholm care to officially declare their respective version as a copy by the studio.⁹ However, with consideration of the socio-historical context in which the works were done – namely the existence of Rubens’s large workshop and his aforementioned passions and obligations – it can safely be assumed that he neither had time nor leisure to independently make copies of his own work. Making copies was traditionally one of the main tasks assigned to pupils and employees during the 17th century. Consequently, when faced with two versions of a composition, one of the two works should be attributed to his workshop. However, decisions like these are often met with reluctance from both parties involved. No private owner wants to see his/her own works excluded from the esteemed realm of originals – not to speak of the monetary loss – and curators generally feel the same way about the collections entrusted to them. It is therefore not entirely surprising that disagreements concerning the origin and production of a painting have caused frictions between even the most prestigious of institutions.¹⁰

6 Peter van den Brink points out an interesting fact, namely that copies after Pieter Brueghel the Elder by his son Pieter the Younger have a much higher monetary value in the modern market than anonymous copies after Rubens, Rembrandt or other celebrated artists. These were by no means loose adaptations of subjects, but rather faithful imitations. Evidently, the market is less reluctant towards copies when they can be associated with a famous name. Van den Brink 2001, p. 14.

7 The reasons for assuming that Rubens would not ever have made copies of his own work will be discussed in more detail in the following.

8 See: Cat.-St.Petersburg 2007.

9 For illustrations of both sketches see: Cat.-NewYork 2004, p. 41/43.

10 A recent example is the open dispute between the *BRCP* (*Bosch Research and Conservation Project*) and the *Museo Nacional del Prado* in Madrid, following the BRCP’s disattribution of paintings such as “*The Temptation of Saint Anthony*” or “*The Table of the Seven Deathly Sins*”.

Questions concerning Rubens's workshop production (which are linked to the issue of authorship) are invariably associated with the problem of how the viewer perceives and values the "historic" artwork. For instance, research from the 19th century exposes the cultural perceptions of that time from the way in which scholars dealt with art, the way in which questions were asked and certainly from the way in which they were answered.¹¹ In short, reading about what a 19th century scholar wrote about Rubens will predominantly reveal the views and beliefs of that time, while not necessarily offering a credible illustration of historical contexts. Rubens's "legacy" was appropriated in numerous ways, including – for instance – the exploitation of his fame in connection with Belgian nationalism.¹²

In the context of research on Rubens's workshop practices, the powerful narrative of favouring single-handed old master paintings has had the greatest impact, whereby pioneering art historians such as Max J. Friedländer attached anachronistic concepts to 17th-century art as a way to deal with this issue. For instance, in his earlier publications, Friedländer denied the existence of Rubens's workshop and stated that his oeuvre could have only been the work of a true genius.¹³ He trusted in the existence of a large number of autograph paintings and thus strongly focused on the question of attribution. Other attempts at dealing with this conflict lie in categorising the workshop member's artistic efforts as substandard. Consequently, all works that show a high level of "quality" could be categorised as autograph. According to this concept, the master's hand was inimitable and painting's that show stylistic weaknesses were in turn the product of his less talented employees or pupils. The foundation for this assumption was already laid very early onwards, shortly after Rubens's death, as Roger de Piles sought to defend Rubens's status by explaining the fluctuations in his oeuvre with the shortcomings of his employees.¹⁴ This is conceivable to some degree, as Rubens was undoubtedly a very talented painter and when – for instance – bodily proportions are not plausibly depicted, it is reasonable to assume that

11 This most notably includes a strong shift in how "the artist" was perceived, and the emerging idea of the artistic "genius". It comes as no surprise that Rubens's workshop production was not highlighted during this time and the workshop's existence was sometimes even completely denied. However, invariably 19th-century views contributed to shape our contemporary understandings.

12 For example, in 1904 Max Rooses described Rubens with the following words: "*He is the greatest of the sons of his city and his country, one of the two or three greatest ever produced by his race. [...] Privileged to be the heir of a long succession of masters of the brush, he possessed the most precious gifts of the Flemish genius to an incomparable degree. [...] He transformed our national school, and dominated it*" (see: Rooses 1904, p. 7.).

13 See: Friedländer 1922, p. 9–10. This is not to say that there were no contrary positions. Scholars such as Hanns Floercke had incredibly progressive views on workshop structures as early as 1905. However, next to academic powerhouses such as Friedländer, too little notice was taken of these relatively marginal opinions (see: Floercke 1905, for details on Rubens's workshop, see p. 137–138).

14 See: Teyssèdre 1958, p. 134.

his hand was not involved in their making. However, assuming that Rubens therefore completed all paintings of high quality on his own is a false conclusion. As will be shown, Rubens himself was interested in ensuring that his workshop produced works of consistent quality and he would not have profited from strong fluctuations in his staff's painting style.

Although the existence of Rubens's workshop is universally accepted today, few studies exist on Rubens's workshop practice and painting technique, and they are surprisingly scarce in relation to the extensive amount of literature on Rubens. This is partly due to the fact that the inclusion and analysis of Rubens's painting technique – naturally fuelled during recent decades by current technological developments – has hardly ever been subject to mainstream art historical research.¹⁵ Of course, it is determined by interdisciplinary collaborations between art historians and conservators. For instance, innovative research on Rubens's painting technique has been conducted by Arnout Balis, often in correlation with exhibitions, such as the catalogue for the exhibition at the *National Museum of Western Art* in 1993. The accompanying catalogue was published by Toshiharu Nakamura and it mainly dealt with the issue of numerous versions of one composition.¹⁶ However, Rubens's workshop and studio practice has rarely ever been the main focus of publications.

On the other hand, media such as oil sketches or drawings that illustrate the design process have been subject to extensive research. In light of Rubens's workshop, the preliminary works are often seen as the direct and untarnished testimonies of his autograph hand. Rubens's drawings were famously researched by some of the most influential Rubens scholars, such as Ludwig Burchard.¹⁷ Leo van Puyvelde made a first attempt to catalogue Rubens's oil sketches in 1940.¹⁸ The catalogues by Julius Held dedicated to Rubens's drawings and oil sketches respectively stand out in this context.¹⁹ They remain the most comprehensive publications in the field, although further artworks have appeared over the intervening years. Additionally, Anne-Marie Logan's research

15 Rare, distinct studies on the subject include: Wadum 1996; Wadum 2002; Gepts 1954-60.

16 Toshiharu Nakamura's goal was to shed more light on the production of copies in the Rubens workshop. He argues that copies were primarily made by Rubens's staff, while the production of the first "original" version was done by the master himself. In this publication, Arnout Balis mainly dealt with the question of which students were working in Rubens's studio at what time. See: Cat.-Tokyo 1993. Other publications that focus on Rubens's painting technique and studio practice include: Balis 2007; Balis/Van Hout 2012.

17 In 1928 Glück and Haberditzl published "*Die Handzeichnungen von Peter Paul Rubens*" and the aforementioned publication by d'Hulst and Burchard was published in 1963. See: Glück/Haberditzl 1928; Burchard/d'Hulst 1963. Of course, the drawings have also been subject of research within the Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard series, although in this case they are discussed according to subject.

18 See: Van Puyvelde 1940.

19 See for instance: Held 1986; Held 1980.

on Rubens's drawings warrant mention.²⁰ Friso Lammertse and Alejandro Vergara published the most recent work on oil sketches in the context of an exhibition at the *Museo Nacional del Prado* in Madrid.²¹ The general assumption in the context of preparatory works is that of the sequential creative process, in which each step builds upon the previous one. For instance, typically the oil sketch is preceded by the drawing and succeeded by the finished work. A number of exhibition catalogues over recent decades have focused on Rubens's preparatory material.²² Accordingly, the focus is usually placed on a specific accumulation of Rubens's works. Moreover, research in this form has most generally focused on specific aspects of Rubens's production.

The aim of the following work is to deliver a strategy or approach seeking to define and examine Rubens's preparatory process, continuously from the first draft of a composition to the finished work. In this respect, it is taken into account that the preliminary works not only served a creative purpose but were also important mediums for the workshop. This includes the work's utilisation as a means of communication between Rubens and his staff, as well as their function in connection with teaching activities.

Firstly, in order to provide the reader with an overview of the subject matter, the socio-historical backdrop against which Rubens's artworks were produced will be briefly assessed. This will include thoughts on the contemporaries' estimation of authorship and single-handed execution. In the following, details of Rubens's workshop structure will be examined with the help of contemporary sources, whereby sources such as letters or contemporary reports offer relevant insights. However, often these documents are predominantly telling regarding the author's agenda and have to be critically analysed. Thereafter, the evidence of a general "standard" creative process comprising ongoing steps that increasingly worked out compositions until culminating in the finished painting will be assessed. The subsequent two chapters will deal with the issue of connoisseurship, whereby – among others – the connoisseur's dependency on an artist's single-handed core œuvre will be questioned and assessed.

With respect to Rubens's process, the artworks themselves can offer insights and one goal was to evaluate what can be said about Rubens's creative approach, studio practice and methods of workmanship based on the available material. This will be exemplified with a case study, which was chosen as a telling example of a high-ranking commissioned work: the altarpiece "*Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saints*". The extensive amount of associated preparatory material made

20 See: Cat.-NewYork 2004.

21 See: Cat.-Madrid 2018.

22 See for instance: Cat.-Antwerp 1977; Cat.-NewYork 1995; Cat.-Rotterdam 2003; Lammertse 2003; Cat.-Cincinnati 2004; Cat.-New York 2004; Cat.-Madrid 2018.

this a telling example and the varying works are evaluated in respect to their informative value concerning Rubens's creative process and working method. The works will be discussed regarding the context of their origin with full deference to contemporary sources. The socio-historical contexts as well as investigations of the materials are taken into consideration to widen the attribution process. After an analytical and critical analysis, selected comparative examples are used to further investigate the painting process and illustrate the tools of the workshop's creative production. In this context, the question of which other factors besides stylistic and qualitative criteria can be taken into consideration when looking to attribute Rubens's artworks will be addressed. Finally, the issue of whether the task area of Rubens's employees was strictly defined or if Rubens ran a more flexible corporate structure will be examined.

The consciousness of the fact that a scholar's view of history is invariably linked to previously existing categories and his/her subjective outlook is associated with a radical methodological change in the human sciences, which has fundamentally determined the methodical discourse over the last 50 years.²³ As will be shown in the following chapters, research questions similar to those that will be addressed in this dissertation have previously been criticised for being anachronistic, meaning that Rubens's working methods (as well as searching for the executing "hand") would not have held interest to the contemporary viewer and are thus inappropriately applied.²⁴ However, the contemporary viewer's alleged perception – irrespective of whether the "original" was valued or not – can in no case be equated with the present-day understanding of the term "original", even if they should superficially overlap in certain aspects. The art market aside, the question of the extent to which the master's own hand was involved in making an artwork remains central to those scholars whose study depends upon the integrity of the physical artwork. Consequently, the contemporaneous significance of a subject can hardly be set as the determining factor for present-day research, insofar as any consideration is inherently linked to the scholar's preconceived assumptions or circumstances due to the historicity of the subject matter. In other words, while the objective was to obtain and maintain a strong awareness of the multi-layered contexts (social, historical, economic etc.), it was never an attempt to reconstruct the past.

23 This process can be summarised under the term of "*New Art History*". The development brought a boost of "scientification" to the subject of art history, which was based on a number of new theoretical approaches.

24 For instance, Ernst van de Wetering – head of the Rembrandt Research project – held the opinion that if contemporary viewers would have found it natural to regard all works produced in a studio as works by the studio's master, even if they were not done by his own hand, then the idea to isolate works of a master's hand from that of his pupils and assistants would be a complete anachronism, a wrongly-applied projection of the 19th-century cult of genius to everyday 17th-century workshop practice. See: Wetering 1993, p. 627–630.