
Rubens after Caravaggio: The Entombment

THOMAS L. GLEN

McGill University

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine, sur le plan de style et de l'iconographie, la copie qu'a réalisée Rubens de la *Mise au tombeau* du Caravage. En même temps, nous tenterons d'assigner une date plus précise au panneau, entre 1611 et 1613.

La Mise au tombeau de Rubens à Ottawa, d'après le tableau du Caravage, aujourd'hui au Vatican, semble démontrer la volonté du maître flamand d'en clarifier l'iconographie et partant d'en faire un icône plus consistante de la Contre-Réforme. Au moyen de changements subtils et de procédés d'illusion, Rubens traduit de manière plus dramatique l'idée que ce sont le corps et le sang du Christ qu'on est en train de descendre du

monde bidimensionnel de la peinture jusque sur la table de l'autel au-dessous. Par ailleurs, Rubens redonne à la Vierge son véritable rôle de « Coredeptrix », tout en éliminant également la confusion qui règne dans l'oeuvre du Caravage en ce qui a trait à l'identification exacte des deux Marie à l'arrière-plan.

Nul doute que Rubens admirait fort le retable du Caravage. Nous en avons la preuve dans l'attention toute particulière qu'il lui a réservée dans la version qu'il en a tirée après son retour d'Italie; version qu'il est loisible de reconnaître comme étant le prototype d'une série de tableaux de la *Mise au Tombeau* qu'il a peints peu de temps après.

The recent travelling exhibition *Vatican Splendour* has once again confirmed the importance of Sir Peter Paul Rubens's version of Caravaggio's *Entombment*. In terms of its style, iconography, and value as a document of the Counter Reformation, it is one of the real treasures of Canada's National Gallery collection (Fig. 13). It took its place gracefully in the show among such stunning examples of Counter-Reformation art as Domenichino's huge *Last Communion of Saint Jerome*, several clay *bozzetti* by Bernini, and Nicolas Poussin's altarpiece of the *Martyrdom of Saint Erasmus*, which, mounted alongside its sketch or model, afforded the viewer the unique opportunity of learning something about the great French master's artistic process. Unfortunately similar comparisons could not be made between Rubens's Ottawa panel and its inspiration, since Caravaggio's altarpiece could not be part of this exhibit. Nonetheless the accompanying catalogue contributes a number of brief though informative general remarks concerning these two pictures. It also elucidates the significance of the Chiesa Nuova in Rome for which Caravaggio's canvas was originally painted and

where Rubens would have seen it when, in 1607, he was busy providing the revolutionary tripartite altarpiece for the high altar of the same church.¹ But why Rubens made his copy of Caravaggio's work after his return to Antwerp in 1608 and why he made the changes he did are questions that remain unanswered. Moreover, the precise date of his version is still to be resolved.

It is well known that Caravaggio produced his altarpiece, now in the Vatican, towards 1603 for the Altar of the Pietà in Santa Maria in Vallicella (the Chiesa Nuova), and it is clearly one of the most striking monuments of early Counter-Reformation art in Italy (Fig. 14). Georgia Wright has demonstrated the true significance of this canvas *in situ* and Caravaggio's intention of creating a unity between the sacrificed body of Christ and the celebration of the Mass by the priest at the altar table directly below.² Through persuasive realism

1 *Vatican Splendour, Masterpieces of Baroque Art* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1986), 54-55.

2 G. Wright, "Caravaggio's *Entombment* Considered *in situ*," *The Art Bulletin*, LX (1978), 35-42.

and the convincing illusion of Christ's body being lowered out of the two-dimensional realm of the painting onto the actual altar, Caravaggio successfully illustrates some of the basic doctrinal formulations of the Fathers of Trent: that "by the conversion of the bread and of the wine, a conversion takes place of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood," and that further, "the very body of the Lord and his blood together with his soul and divinity exist under the species of bread and the blood under the species of wine . . . but the body itself under the species of wine and blood under the species of bread."³ In other words, in either element of the Host, all the properties of Christ's body and blood may be found. With this in mind, Wright correctly proposes that the painting's action is "incomplete until the priest stands ready to receive the body that is being lowered to him."⁴ She continues by relating the activity in the painting to a specific moment in the Mass, the moment after the words "This is my body" when the priest raises the newly consecrated Host for the faithful to worship.⁵

Rubens's *Ottawa Entombment* apparently represents not only his respect for Caravaggio's *concelto* but also his attempt to improve upon what must be recognized as a number of fascinating innovations designed to elicit maximum viewer involvement. Rubens clarified Caravaggio's iconography and rendered it more meaningful by making subtle changes to pose, gesture, and distribution of characters in his work. He understood Caravaggio's attention to dramatic immediacy and verisimilitude in making the offering of Christ's body to the priest at the altar below both bold and shocking. He admired the manner in which Caravaggio used directed glances and forceful gestures to persuade the spectator or communicant, at least psychologically, to enter into the picture and to assume a specific role as an assistant both at the Mass and at the grave of Christ.⁶ Caravaggio has dissolved the barriers between real and fictive space; the illusion of the painted action taking place in our world actually works. Even the pointing finger of Christ's limp right hand helps to create this impression of Christ's body being lowered forward and down. Moreover, when considered in conjunction with the way St. John seems

inadvertently to expose with his fingers the bloodied wound in Christ's side, this hand, dangling as it does over the projecting corner of the stone slab, seems subtly to reinforce the idea that the *Corpus Christi* is the "cornerstone" or essential ingredient of the Eucharistic ritual that happens at the altar table below.⁷

But the changes Rubens made in his version are indicative of both the complex iconography and viewer participation that he first developed in his altarpieces of the *Raising* and *Descent from the Cross* and would make the main features of all his altarpieces painted during the years 1609-20. In this *Ottawa Entombment*, the Caravaggesque concepts are made more poignant. Rubens has enhanced dramatically the illusion of Christ's body being lowered forward and down beyond the limits of the two-dimensional world of the panel. Here Rubens does away with Caravaggio's narrow lead-in space at the bottom of the picture; he omits the large plantain plant in the lower left foreground of the Italian composition. He has eliminated the sense of stage. St. John is no longer behind Christ, but has been moved forward in such a way as to create the impression that his toes curl over a lip of stone which demands that the viewer understand it as representing the immediate forefront of the picture plane. Consequently, the projecting cornerstone together with the activity of the burial seems to jut well out into the space of the spectator. Indeed, the illusion is complete in Rubens's panel. Furthermore, St. John's action can only be visualized as one of lowering forward. There is no longer the ambiguity of supporting or carrying as in Caravaggio's canvas. The viewer is convincingly persuaded that the action is immediate and happens directly before him, not in a created world but in his own space. This sort of psycho-spatial involvement is analogous to the poignancy of image in the *Raising of the Cross*, where the foot of Christ's cross is cropped in such a way as to suggest that it exists outside the limits of the picture plane (Fig. 15). Furthermore, the cross can be conceived of fully erect only by understanding it as standing well in front of the right section illustrating the preparation of the thieves for crucifixion by the Roman troops.⁸

In the literature devoted to Caravaggio's altarpiece, the man supporting Christ's legs is tradi-

3 T. A. Buckley, trans., *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 1851, session XIII, Chapters III and IV.

4 Wright, "Caravaggio's *Entombment*," 35.

5 Wright, "Caravaggio's *Entombment*," 35.

6 T. L. Glen, *Rubens and the Counter Reformation: Studies in his Religious Paintings between 1609 and 1620* (New York, 1977), 32-34.

7 There are numerous examples of Christ's body being laid out on a "cornerstone"-type altar that suggests the importance of His sacrifice for the Mass. One might cite such major examples as Annibale Carracci's *Pietà* in Naples, Rubens's *Christ à la Paille* in Antwerp or Van Dyck's *Entombment* in Munich. For more on this, see W. Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (Princeton, 1955), 127ff., and Glen, *Rubens and the Counter Reformation*, 90-93.

8 Glen, *Rubens and the Counter Reformation*, 39.

tionally recognized as Nicodemus. In Rubens's panel, however, a similar identification would likely be inaccurate. Julius Held has most recently addressed this question with regard to several of the Flemish master's oil sketches and other religious pictures treating Christ's passion.⁹ Following the ideas of Wolfgang Stechow, he notes that in such paintings Rubens usually includes another male figure wearing a turban who, it has been argued, accords more with the personage of Nicodemus as based on an interpretation of certain passages in John's gospel, where it is suggested that he was a man of some wealth and position. A richly turbaned gentleman in Rubens's mind was an appropriate visual manifestation of St. John's text, and since we may recognize such a figure in the right background of the Ottawa *Entombment*, we may surmise that the artist intended him to be Nicodemus. It is, therefore, Joseph of Arimathaea who carries Christ's lower body in Rubens's version.

Rubens is also more definite than Caravaggio in several other passages of his work. With respect to Catholic message, truth to biblical narrative, and Counter-Reformation ideology, he has more clearly indicated a cave setting, even in this unfinished panel, while at the same time eliminating the confusion in Caravaggio's altarpiece about which mourning woman in contemporary seventeenth-century dress is the Magdalene. Caravaggio gives the viewer a choice but in Rubens's picture she can only be the woman directly above Joseph of Arimathaea, who wipes tears from her eyes. She is a "modern" sinner, whom Rubens surely means to represent the spectator in the painting.¹⁰

But it is in the pose of the Virgin that Rubens has rendered his most telling alterations. Unlike the Virgin Mary of the Vatican canvas, the Virgin in the Ottawa *Entombment* makes no overt gesture of grief. As in the *Raising of the Cross*, she is calm, her hands simply clasped in prayer. In keeping with specific Counter-Reformation dicta, she is an image of strength; she was long aware of the sacrifice that both she and her Son would make.¹¹ She is dressed, too, in the deep blue quasi-biblical, quasi-liturgical habit she wears in all of Rubens's religious pictures from the period 1609-1620. Her

reserve and courage are enhanced through the foil of weeping Magdalene on her left and the obviously distraught woman on her right, whose expression of anguish is entirely reminiscent of one of the women in the left panel of the great *Raising*. She may be identified as Mary the mother of Joseph (Mark 15:47), as only she and Mary Magdalene, according to the gospel literature, were present at the entombment.

In commenting on the nun-like Virgin of Caravaggio's canvas, Georgia Wright proposes that to interpret her as *Ecclesia* blessing the sacrament diminishes the importance of the dramatic narrative. In attempting to find a liturgical meaning in the substitution of St. John for Nicodemus, the obvious reason for it is missed—that St. John's proximity to Christ is more poignant.¹²

Significantly, however, these arguments do not apply to Rubens's *Entombment*. Nicodemus is, of course, present in the background; having St. John, the chief authority for characterizing Christ's divine nature and the Eucharistic implications of his sacrifice, expose Christ's lance wound *emphasizes* the spilling of his blood and the water out of which is born the Christian faith and the Roman Church (John 19:34).

The Virgin, meanwhile, should perhaps not be thought of so much as representative of *Ecclesia* as of the *Virgo Sacerdos*, Co-Redemptrix, who shares the work of redemption with her Son. *She* consecrates the Host and offers the sacrifice as does the Priest at the altar of the Mass. This pious tradition of the Virgin Priest or *Virgo Sacerdos*, born in the Middle Ages and especially popular among the Flemish, was revived during the Catholic Reformation by such men as Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629) and later Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657).¹³ Surely Rubens has meant to suggest this meaning in the Virgin's clasped hands and her minimal demonstration of grief. In this respect, too, the pointing finger of Christ's limp right hand emphasizes the sharing between Christ the Divine and the Virgin Mary of the priestly duty of the offering and consecration of the Host.¹⁴

These Eucharistic implications are perhaps further enhanced by some evidence that Rubens intended to include flower symbolism. In the upper right corner of the cave entrance above Nicodemus, Rubens seems to have blocked out and indicated a plant not of plantain but of tum-

9 J. Held, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens* (Princeton, 1980), 1, cat. #365, 499-500. See also W. Stechow, "Joseph of Arimathaea or Nicodemus?", in *Festschrift für L. H. Heydenreich* (Munich, 1964), 289ff.

10 J. Bialosticki, "The Descent from the Cross in Works by Peter Paul Rubens and his Studio," *The Art Bulletin* XLVI (1964), 521-522.

11 Glen, *Rubens and the Counter Reformation*, 37-38 and 192 (note 63).

12 Wright, "Caravaggio's *Entombment*," 38-39.

13 Glen, *Rubens and the Counter Reformation*, 73-78 and note 126.

14 The sharing of the priestly duties between Christ the Divine and the Virgin Mary is an important, consistent theme in virtually all of Rubens's altarpieces from the period 1609-20 that include Christ and the Virgin.

bling ivy. If this passage can be viewed as ivy, it may then be observed that it is the same as the foliage in the middle of the composition above the heads of the figures in a *Lamentation* in Antwerp, which is signed and dated 1614 (Fig. 16). In this panel, and by extension in the *Entombment*, the vine of ivy probably symbolizes the Eternal Life, mentioned in the Gospel of St. John, that is gained through participation in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.¹⁵

In light of the above treatment of the iconography in Rubens's panel, it seems inconceivable that the Flemish master would have painted this unfinished *Entombment*, this working model, after he had produced finished pictures and altarpieces that contain the precise iconography that he seems to be exploring in his version of Caravaggio's picture.

From this standpoint alone, it seems that the date of "1617?" proposed by Wright is entirely out of the question, since this would place the Ottawa *Entombment* later than Rubens's more classical and more celebrated *Christ à la Paille* (Fig. 17), which, it can be shown, is clearly dependent on many of the same things that are being thought out in the *Entombment*.¹⁶ Nor does it seem possible that the Ottawa panel should be assigned a date of 1614, since this is the same year as the finished and iconographically more sophisticated *Lamentation* in Antwerp.

The altarpiece that began Rubens's tremendous run of commissions for scenes of Christ's Infancy and Passion was, of course, the *Raising of the Cross*. It was because of the success of this triptych that Rubens was soon after asked to produce, for instance, several Crucifixions, the Antwerp triptych of the *Descent from the Cross* of 1612-14 (Fig. 18), and a number of *Entombment* pictures all dating to well before 1620. Surely it must be in connection with these Passion scenes that the Ottawa panel came into being.

A subsequent development of the Caravaggesque theme is the *Entombment* in the collection of Count Seilern (Fig. 19). Most notably, the women relate to those in both the Ottawa and Vatican paintings, as does the activity of lowering and burial. The cave entrance is also obviously dependent on Rubens's version of Caravaggio's work,

15 On the symbolic value of ivy in religious art, see I. Bergström, "Disguised Symbolism in 'Madonna' Pictures and Still Life," *Burlington Magazine* (1955), 345. The reference to eternal life through Communion is found in John 6:53-54.

16 For a thorough discussion of the *Christ à la Paille*, see Glen, *Rubens and the Counter Reformation*, 88-96.

but the overall classicism and the Virgin's gesture suggest a date shortly after the Antwerp triptych of the *Descent from the Cross* (1612-14). Seilern dated his picture to 1616, but Held correctly proposed this to be at least one year too late.¹⁷

A pen and ink and wash drawing in the Amsterdam print room (Fig. 20) seems in style to predate the Seilern composition as the receiving pose of St. John is similar to his pose in the Antwerp *Descent*. It is moreover dated by Jaffé to 1612, though the year 1613 seems more plausible since this would put it after the completion of the central panel of the Antwerp triptych.¹⁸

The *Entombment* altarpiece in the Church of Saint Géry, Cambrai, and its *modello* in Munich provide solid evidence of a *terminus ante quem* for the Ottawa panel. The picture is, again, a development on the Caravaggesque theme. In the 1977-78 Catalogue of the Exhibition *Le Siècle de Rubens*, this Cambrai altarpiece is convincingly documented as having been offered in 1616 to the Capuchins of Cambrai by Sebastian Briquet.¹⁹ This would thus place the Ottawa *Entombment* several years earlier.

Whatever approach or combination of approaches is chosen in attempting to establish a date for the Ottawa panel, whether it be style, iconography, or circumstantial evidence, one always arrives at a time somewhat after the *Raising of the Cross* (that picture that started Rubens's run of Passion altarpieces and is stylistically the most similar to the Ottawa *Entombment*) and somewhat before the other *Entombment* paintings and the 1614 *Lamentation* in Antwerp, all of which demonstrate a fully developed iconography and a more classical style.

We are thus left with a period between 1610 and 1613, and my inclination would be to think that the Ottawa *Entombment* must have been painted just earlier or at about the same time as the central panel of the great *Descent from the Cross*, which is to say about 1611 to 1613.²⁰

17 See A. Seilern, "An *Entombment* by Rubens," *Burlington Magazine* (1953), 380-383; J. Held, *Rubens, Selected Drawings*, 1, cat. 4; and J. Held, *Oil Sketches*, 499.

18 M. Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy* (New York, 1977), 57-58.

19 *Le Siècle de Rubens dans les Collections Publiques Françaises* (Paris, 1977), 161-162.

20 It should be said, finally, that J. Held (*Rubens, Selected Drawings*, #37, also page 53) indicated a date of "no later than 1609-10" because of stylistic similarities with works presented at the very end of Rubens's stay in Rome. This, however, seems to me to be about one year too early, and indeed, I find greater similarities between the Ottawa *Entombment* and the central panel of the *Raising of the Cross*.

Department of Art History
McGill University
Montreal, Quebec H3A 2T6



FIGURE 13. P. P. Rubens, *Entombment*, 1611-13. Ottawa, National Gallery (Photo: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa).

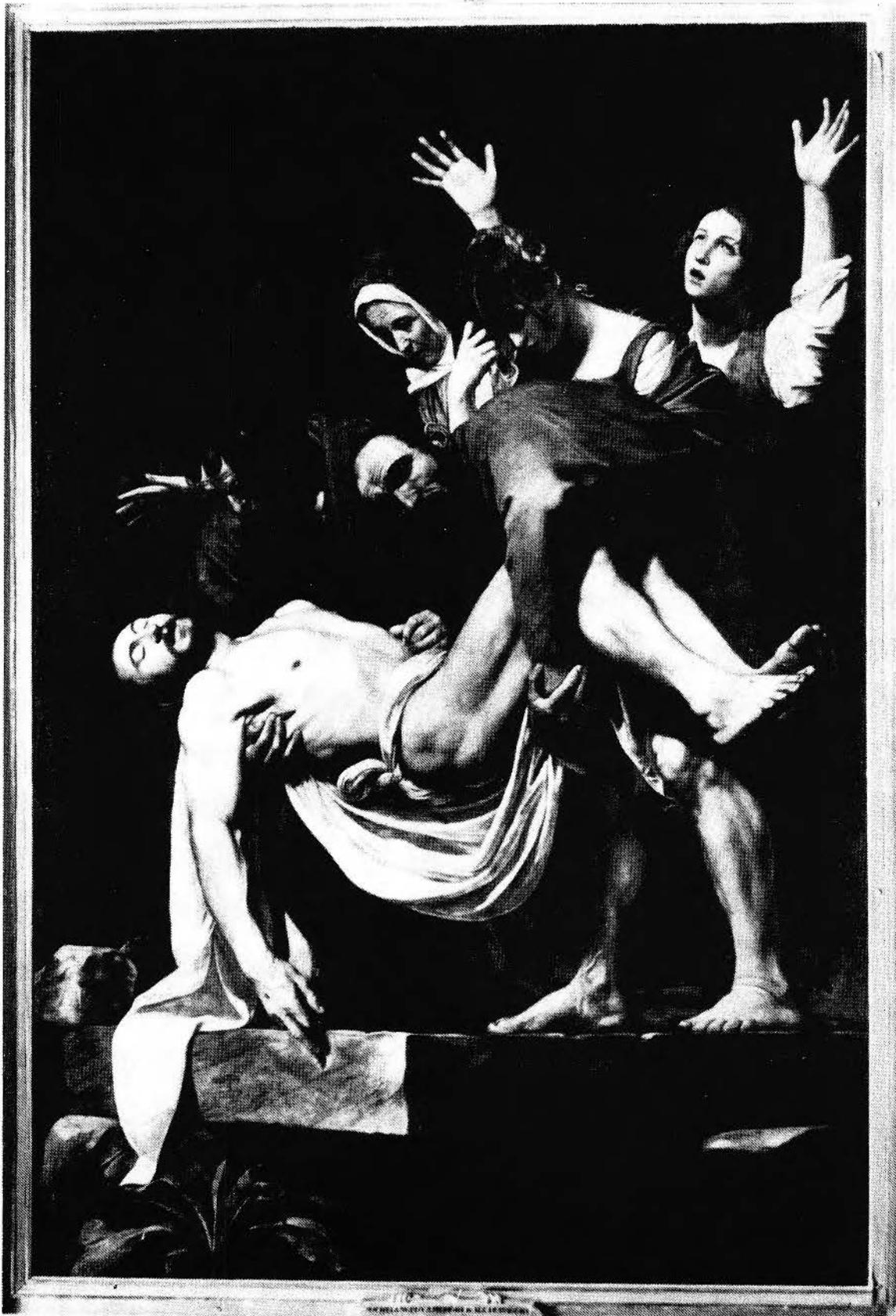


FIGURE 14. Caravaggio, *Entombment*, ca. 1603. Rome, Vatican (Photo: reproduced from M. Kitson, *The Complete Paintings of Caravaggio* [New York, 1967]).

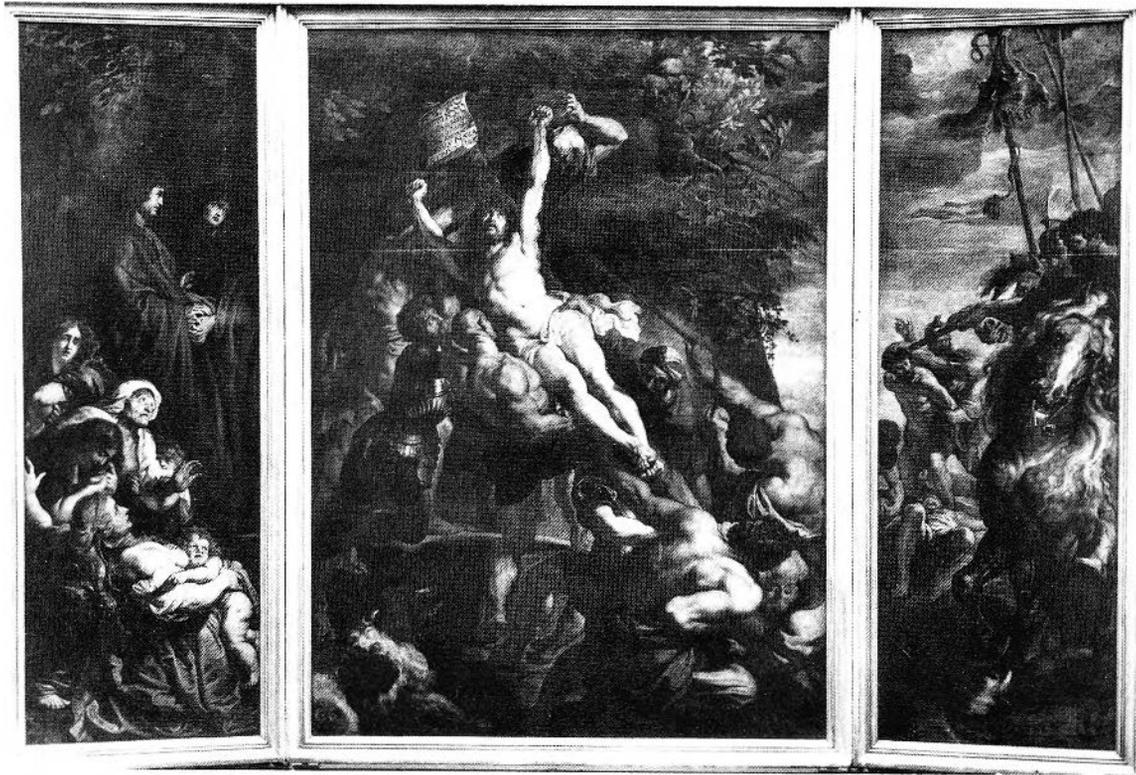


FIGURE 15. P. P. Rubens, *Raising of the Cross*, 1610-11. Antwerp, Cathedral of Our Lady (Photo: Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Brussels).



FIGURE 16. P. P. Rubens, *Lamentation*, 1614. Antwerp, Royal Museum (Photo: reproduced from F. Beaudouin, *Rubens et son Siècle* [Antwerp, 1972]).



FIGURE 17. P. P. Rubens, *Christ à la Paille*, 1617-18. Antwerp, Royal Museum (Photo: reproduced from F. Beaudouin, *Rubens et son Siècle* [Antwerp, 1972]).



FIGURE 18. P. P. Rubens, *Descent from the Cross*, 1612-14. Antwerp, Cathedral of Our Lady (Photo: reproduced from F. Beaudouin, *Rubens et son Siècle* [Antwerp, 1972]).



FIGURE 19. P. P. Rubens, *Entombment*, ca. 1615. London, Coll. Count Seilern (Photo: reproduced from J. Held, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens*, I [Princeton, 1980]).

FIGURE 20. P. P. Rubens, *Entombment*, 1612-13. Drawing. Amsterdam, Print Room (Photo: reproduced from J. Held, *Rubens, Selected Drawings*, II [London, 1959]).

