
Rubens and the Book

Rubens and the Book: Title Pages by Peter Paul Rubens. Catalogue of an exhibition held at Chapin Library, Stetson Hall, Williams College, 2–31 May 1977. Prepared by students in the Williams College Graduate Programme in the History of Art. Edited and introduction by Julius S. Held. Williamstown, Mass., 1977. 307 pp., 82 illus. (paper).

In his famous letter to William Trumbull of September, 1619, Rubens wrote: 'Regarding the hall in the New Palace, I confess that I am, by natural instinct, better fitted to execute very large works than small curiosities.' This seems to be borne out by Rubens's works – by the vast altarpieces which are found throughout most of his career, and by the big decorative schemes, such as that for the Whitehall ceiling in London, referred to in the letter, but not executed until the 1630s. But in fact, we must take Rubens's statement with more than a grain of salt, for by the very year of his letter to Trumbull he had been engaged on the design of book illustrations for some eight years for the printer Balthasar Moretus, of the famous Plantin Press; and he was to continue this activity until the end of his career.

Professor Julius Held and his students in a graduate seminar at Williams College have prepared a publication which deals with much of this part of Rubens's output – though not all since he did some 'internal' illustrations as well. The publication served as a catalogue of an exhibition held in May 1977 and is a permanent record of that event. It gathers together a great deal of useful documentation and opinions. Together with the catalogue *P.P. Rubens als Boekillustrator* prepared by J. Richard Judson for the May–July 1977 exhibition at the Plantin Museum in Antwerp, it adds greatly to our knowledge of this aspect of Rubens's activity.

How is Rubens's activity as a maker of title pages, so inconsistent with his own declared ambitions, to be explained? In part it was the result of his friendship with Moretus, who was well aware of the additional value which Rubens's illustrations would give to the

productions of his press. A peculiar system was worked out between the artist and the printer. The former was to be given at least three, preferably six, months' notice of the latter's requirements. Rubens could then work on holidays, and charge only a fraction of his normal rates; otherwise, the process would not have been financially viable for artist or printer. The fact that Rubens was willing to cater for Moretus in this way shows his regard for him. It also shows his deep commitment to books and learning, and that he was fascinated by the artistic problems involved, or, as Professor Held puts it, by 'the necessity, owing to an established tradition, of presenting in allegorical terms, and in a severely limited space, a condensation of the contents of a given book or at least a pictorial equivalent of its basic message' (p. 5).

This publication not only catalogues each of the works (whether it be one of Rubens's drawings, an engraver's drawing, or the finished printed title), but also includes essays on 'Compositional Types and Developments,' 'Allegorical Personifications in Rubens' Title Pages,' and 'Objects and Animals: A Study in Rubens' Allegorical Method.' These essays make the publication valuable for students of Rubens and of the seventeenth century in general, since allegory remained so important for the period. Rooses said (*Oeuvre*, III, p. 311) about Rubens's allegories: 'On ne les comprend pas aisément.' But as Held observes, this was probably not intentional; for 'this failure is more a manifestation of our ignorance and obtuseness than the result of an intentionally obscure and concealing manner of representation' (p. 6). Rubens is a Baroque, not a Mannerist, artist.

One of the fascinations in studying Rubens's title pages is to see how the great changes in style, which one is used to observing in large canvases or panels, occur in this small-scaled form: the calm, balanced, classical forms of the title page for F. Aguilonius's *Opticorum libri VI* of 1613 give way to the more agitated baroque of C. Scribianus's *Politico-Christianus* of 1624; and the extremely fluid (yet 'classical') Baroque style of the 1630s is seen in H. Goltzius's *Romanæ et Graecæ*

Antiquitatis Monumenta, which was published five years after Rubens's death, in 1645. Yet the figures and their actions are always subordinated to the printed title.

Rubens used various forms to carry the title page inscription – pedestals, urns, epitaphs, altars, even books themselves – all elements 'whose normal function,' as Held points out (p. 12), 'is to carry inscriptions.' 'The text of several titles,' he goes on to say, 'is inscribed on hangings either suspended from architecture or held aloft by the angels. The first time Rubens used the motif, if indeed he is the author of the title of the *Vita Ignatii* of 1609 (cat. no. 49), it clearly alluded to the curtain that covered the tabernacle, since the curtain hangs in the center of a structure resembling a sacred shrine. And when he used the skin of the ox of St. Luke to carry the title of Corderius' collection of commentaries by Greek fathers on Luke's gospel (cat. no. 14; Fig. 1) he was surely aware of the connection between skin (pellis) and the traditional carrier of written texts, parchment' (p. 13).

One certainly sees the connection between the curtain and the tabernacle, as applied to the title page of the *Vita Ignatii*. But it is more difficult to follow the argument about the ox skin in the Corderius volume. *Parchment*, strictly speaking, is sheepskin, while *vellum*, the other animal skin used for writing or book-binding, is made from calfskin, the very finest coming from the unborn calf, the so-called *uterine vellum*. Hence it seems unlikely that Rubens or his contemporaries would make any strong connexion between a full-grown ox and the inscription, since its skin would have been too coarse and inflexible for use as a normal writing material.

On the other hand, there may be in the Corderius title one of those links between Christian and antique imagery which are so common in Rubens's works. The ox is a traditional symbol of patience and strength. To learned contemporaries, a flayed animal skin hung up in this fashion might easily recall the skin of the Nemean lion, killed by Hercules, the great antique exemplar of virtue and strength. (In his *Antwerp Sketchbook* [ed. M. Jaffé, f. 69 verso] the young van Dyck actually made drawings comparing the physiognomy of the head of an ox with that of the Farnese Hercules – drawings which apparently derive from Rubens himself.) Is Rubens perhaps suggesting on the Corderius title that St. Luke is a Christian parallel to Hercules, just as centuries before the illuminator of the title of the *Gospel Book of Otto III* had portrayed Luke as an Atlas figure?

With Rubens, of course, such ideas were not simply meant as witty analogies. They were part of a deeply felt view of the world – animal and human, past and present – as a unified creation. In this context, the gesture of the lion holding the ox's leg may take on meaning, as tender fellow-feeling.

Rubens's love for antiquity and all its aspects was enormous. One of his most exciting title pages is the 1645 Goltzius publication referred to above whose title may be translated as 'The Monuments of Ancient



FIGURE 1. B. Corderius. *Catena ... in S. Lucam*, Antwerp, 1628. *Rubens and the Book*, fig. 36.

Rome and Greece, reconstructed from Ancient Coins.' The composition is oval in form. To the right Time pushes down to a cavern the personified monarchies of Media, Persia, Macedonia, and Rome. To the left, however, Mercury, Hercules (wearing his Nemean lion skin), and Minerva help to recover the remains of antiquity, in the form of coins and statues. There is a simple cyclical quality in the continuous oval composition, which seems particularly appropriate for the character and grandeur of the subject. And just as he so often relates his ideas on Christian subjects to those of antiquity, so here, in what is virtually an encapsulated history of the ancient world, its fall and rediscovery, Rubens interpolates a Christian idea. As the catalogue points out, the composition has 'unmistakable and hardly accidental similarities with the traditional pattern of the *Last Judgment*, where the damned go to Hell at the right while the blessed rise from their graves and ascend to Heaven at the left.'

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