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Studying the Studio: the Art Gallery of Rubens Depicted?

Introduction

The Salotto della Regina in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence, exhibits a painting called *The Studio of Rubens* (1645–1650 (?), Ill. 107) that is attributed to the Flemish artist and art dealer Cornelis de Baellieur (1607–1671) [3, p. 266]. This painting shows us a room filled with artworks: the walls are covered with paintings of different genres, the floor is strewn with sketches, precious objects and musical instruments, and the cupboard and tables are adorned with statuettes, scientific apparatus and curiosities of nature. Large windows illuminate the grand space, whereas an oculus illuminates a semi-circular side room decorated with antique statues and busts, seen through an arched opening. People are present at the edges of these rooms, interacting with each other in pairs. In the foreground we see a group of three persons, dressed in black and looking out to the viewer, to whom a large painting is being presented, of which we only see the back. All these visual stimuli make one wonder: is the studio of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) indeed represented in this painting?

First of all, it is necessary to establish which of the artworks on display were once parts of the art collection of Rubens, which he kept in his house in Antwerp (nowadays the Rubens House museum). Luckily several scholars have already conducted detailed research on the contents of Rubens' art collection [1; 4; 6; 8]. Furthermore, we need to find out if the interior as depicted in the painting attributed to De Baellieur is similar to the actual studio or gallery of Rubens. By comparison, as well as by examining which of the paintings on display we can still recognise, we might already find some clues as to what is represented in the painting. Other hints can perhaps be found in the people that crowd *The Studio of Rubens*, and by looking into the provenance and the dating of this particular painting. The latter will urge us to consider how the painting fits within the tradition of depicting art galleries in general, and the oeuvre of De Baellieur in particular. If *The Studio of Rubens* indeed depicts the art gallery of Rubens, it would be the only depiction of it we know today. If not, we might ask ourselves what is depicted, and why?

Rubens' collection of paintings

In 1932, J. Denucé published over a hundred inventories of art collections from 16th- and 17th-century Antwerp [10, p. 41]. Of interest to us is the “Specificatie der Schilderijen gevonden in het Sterfhuys van wylen Messire Petrus Paulus Rubens Ridder etc.”¹, which was originally writ-

¹ In English: “Specification of the Paintings found in the House of the deceased Sir Peter Paulus Rubens Knight etc.”

ten by Joannes van Meurs in 1640, shortly after the death of Rubens [4, p. 56–71]. In this inventory 314 paintings are listed, all of which Rubens' widow and heirs intended to sell. The posthumous account of the art collection of Rubens might only be partly representative of the works of art he possessed throughout his life. It is known, for example, that Rubens had to sell part of his collection during the financially difficult years from 1626 to 1628 [6, p. 134]. S. Speth-Holterhoff, who was the first to write extensively on the Flemish painters of art galleries from the 17th century, already used the publication of Denucé in order to identify the paintings represented in *The Studio of Rubens* [10]. Subsequent publications concerning Rubens as collector, by J. M. Müller as well as K. L. Belkin and F. Healy, have rendered his art collection substantially more insightful [1; 8].

Initially, Speth-Holterhoff thought to recognise four paintings from the posthumous inventory of 1640 in the painting attributed to De Baellieur. These four are listed as paintings by Sebastiaan Vrancx (1573–1647), Alexander Adriaenssen (1587–1661), Jan Porcellis (1583–1632), and Adriaen Brouwer (1605–1638) [2, p. 50–52; 10, p. 120]. A closer look at the suggested paintings and a comparison with *The Studio of Rubens* revealed that actually none of these works are depicted on the latter. Moreover, the art collection of Rubens was known for the paintings by Titian (1485–1576), Paolo Veronese (1528–1588), and Tintoretto (1518–1594), none of which are depicted on *The Studio of Rubens* [10, p. 120]. With regard to the painting by Sebastiaan Vrancx, Müller notes that “[t]here is no evidence for this identification beyond a general agreement between the picture within the picture and Vrancx’s style and the unjustified assumption that the Gallery in which the picture is seen documents Rubens’s collection” [8, p. 135–136]. As far as Müller is concerned, *The Studio of Rubens* is rather a free variation on, than a literal documentation of, certain elements of the art gallery of Rubens [8, p. 136 (note 2)]. In order to understand this view, we need to focus on Rubens’ house and the rooms in which he kept his collection of art.

The rooms for art of Rubens

Regarding the rooms where Rubens displayed his art collection, most is known about his semi-circular sculpture gallery [1, p. 12]. This room was conceived on the basis of the Pantheon in Rome, and had, just like its model, an oculus in the centre of the half-dome to illuminate the space underneath. In addition to written sources, Rubens’ ‘Pantheon’ is visually handed down to us through two images; the painting *The Studio of Apelles* (ca 1628) by Willem van Haecht (1593–1637), and the engraving *Views of Rubens’s House* (1692) by Jacobus Harrewijn (1660–1727), after a drawing by Jacques van Croes (late 17th – early 18th century) [1, p. 47]. These images were realized independent of one another, causing their similarities to allude to their inherent documentary value. On both we see a curved wall divided into nine bays, provided with niches that contained ancient statues and busts [1, p. 47]². Several Antwerp masters subsequently adopted this type of semi-circular room with sculptural decorations in their paintings of art galleries, as is the case in *The Studio of Rubens* [1, p. 50]³. The

² The engraving shows the ‘Pantheon’ approximately fifty years after the death of Rubens. By this time, the new owner of the house had turned the semi-circular space into a chapel, using the niches to display his collection of sacred relics.

³ Besides paintings of art galleries by Frans Francken the Younger (1581–1642) and Hendrik Staben (1578–1658), K.L. Belkin and F. Healy show as one of the examples *The Studio of Rubens*, but attribute this painting to Willem van Herp (ca 1614–1677), for no apparent reason [1, p. 50].

latter shows the curved wall divided into nine bays, equipped with niches containing statues and busts (Ill. 107), but in comparison with the aforementioned two images this seems to be a rather free interpretation of the semi-circular room, instead of an accurate depiction. Therefore, we could place *The Studio of Rubens* within the pictorial tradition of depicting the idealised sculpture gallery of Rubens.

Reproduced works of art

In 1977, the first and only attempt was made to identify all of the 29 paintings that are depicted in *The Studio of Rubens* [2, p. 51]. This resulted in a list, which is reproduced in the legend to Ill. 107. Based on a quick analysis, it proved impossible to recognize specific paintings by these Antwerp masters, but one⁴. The exception is the central and largest painting that is represented in *The Studio of Rubens*. This is a replica of a painting by Rubens himself, entitled *The Entombment of Christ* or *Descent from the Cross* (1616), commissioned by the canon Sébastien Briquet and donated to the new Capuchin Church of Saint-Géry in Cambrai⁵. We can also identify another painting by Rubens: his portrait of *Philip IV* (ca 1625) in an unfinished state. It is remarkable, however, that the head of the King of Spain as well as his collar of the Golden Fleece are strikingly similar to the painting within *The Studio of Rubens*, whereas his dress is altogether different [10, p. 120]. Instead of the black velvet coat Philip IV wears in the finished portrait, the sketch shows him clad in armour. On the basis of the “Specificatie” we actually know that Rubens kept a portrait of the King of Spain, made by himself, in his home at the time of his death [10, p. 120, 213]. This sketch might be a depiction of that portrait, although the palette and brushes positioned on a cushioned stool next to the unfinished painting in *The Studio of Rubens* seem to suggest that this portrait is still being worked on.

Interestingly, it was possible to identify one more painting, namely the *Tavern Scene* or *The Village Fiddler* (1634–1638, Ill. 108) by Brouwer, nowadays in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, just like the aforementioned portrait of *Philip IV*⁶. On the cupboard underneath the depiction of *The Entombment of Christ* a small statuette shows *Hercules and Antaeus*, perhaps referring to an imitation of the one by Giambologna (1529–1608). Next to the statuette of *Hercules and Antaeus* we presumably find a copy of a statue of *Flora*, on the right. This statuette of *Flora* possibly derived from the one at the time on display in the Palazzo Farnese in Rome, as was the *Farnese Hercules* that we see in the central niche of the ‘Pantheon’ in *The Studio of Rubens*. It is known that copies of both the Farnese Hercules

⁴ Several online search engines were used, for instance: RKD Explore. Available at: <http://explore.rkd.nl/nl/explore/>; Web Gallery of Art. Available at: <http://www.wga.hu/>; WikiPaintings. Available at: <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/artists-by-nation/flemish> (Accessed March 1, 2015).

⁵ A sketch of this work is part of the collection of the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. The painting on display in *The Studio of Rubens*, however, is more reminiscent of the finished work by Rubens in the Church of Saint-Géry in Cambrai. Rubens in Noord-Frankrijk (Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren, 1989). Available at: http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_vla016198901_01/_vla016198901_01_0005.php (Accessed February 27, 2015).

⁶ In 1977, this painting could of course have had another name, the one suggested in [2] for instance. For the sake of clarity, I treat them as two different paintings. Furthermore, another version of this painting is nowadays part of the collection of Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence, according to the description on the website of The State Hermitage Museum.

and the Flora Farnese, albeit a slightly different variation on the only partly antique *Flora Farnese*, adorned the garden adjacent to Rubens' house [8, p. 31–32, 34]. Furthermore, the arched opening that allows us to get a glimpse of the room filled with antique sculptures features a globe on top, flanked by the reclining statues of Hercules and Minerva. A statue of Minerva was most certainly present in the garden next to Rubens' house, and it appears that the decoration of Rubens' house promoted Hercules as the god of honour [8, p. 26–31]. Thus, the painter of *The Studio of Rubens* could have been familiar with the statues on display in Rubens' garden.

Portraits?

We now turn our attention away from the works of art that were reproduced on *The Studio of Rubens* and towards the people that are present on it. It has been suggested that we can identify some of these on the painting. For instance, Speth-Holterhoff assumed that we might recognise Rubens himself in front of the window, conversing with an old man and pointing at a globe that stands on the table with a red tablecloth [10, p. 120]. D. Bodart tried to substantiate this assumption by referring to an etching by Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), who was once the principal assistant of Rubens, representing a portrait of this master [2, p. 52]. Supposedly, the painter of *The Studio of Rubens* was inspired by this print. As is mentioned in a notarial deed, De Baellieur was designated to appraise the works of Van Dyck in 1661, which would mean that he was well acquainted with the works of this artist [10, p. 116]. We will return to this issue later on, once we deal with De Baellieur in detail.

The three sitters, the seated man and woman accompanied by a standing younger woman, have been identified as Philippe Le Roy together with his wife, Marie de Raet, and an elderly woman [10, p. 120]. This identification was established based on the portraits of Le Roy and his fiancée by Van Dyck, made in 1631 and 1630, respectively. Although Speth-Holterhoff acknowledges that especially the likeness of De Raet's portrait leaves much to be desired, she believes, and other researchers have followed her, that the connoisseur Philippe Le Roy and his wife are visiting Rubens in *The Studio of Rubens*, since it is known that Le Roy and Rubens were friends, as well as that Le Roy acted as one of the mediators between the heirs of Rubens and Philip IV, when the latter bought part of the collection after the death of the Flemish master [2, p. 52; 4, p. 71; 5, p. 20; 10, p. 120–121]. This brings us to the question whether or not *The Studio of Rubens* was painted during the lifetime of Rubens? But before we delve into this question, we might consider if the identification of the sitters is correct or that they represent other persons, by means of looking into the provenance of the painting.

Provenance

Bodart recounts the provenance of *The Studio of Rubens*; the painting was presented as a gift from Louis Antoine de Cambray-Digny (1751–1822), uncle of the architect Luigi de Cambray-Digny (1778–1843), to Ferdinand III, Grand Duke of Tuscany (1769–1824), in 1819 [2, p. 50, 52]. The father of Louis Antoine de Cambray-Digny was a gentleman of Picardy, one of the northern regions of France, to which Louis Antoine returned at a young age to own Picardy family land [2, p. 52]. After *The Studio of Rubens* came into the possession of Ferdinand III, the painting remained in Florence in the Palazzo Pitti, which was the chief residence

of the ruling families of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, and became part of the Galleria Palatina. However, what is interesting for us is what happened to the painting before it was given to Ferdinand III. No accounts of *The Studio of Rubens* have survived from before 1819, but the family name Cambray-Digny and the fact that this family owned Picardy land might reveal something to us.

Picardy is adjacent to the most northern region of France, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, in which the city of Cambrai is situated. The family name of Cambray-Digny seems to indicate that this family originated from Cambrai, and more or less stayed in that region up to the 19th century. Since the painting of *The Entombment of Christ* by Rubens takes central stage in *The Studio of Rubens*, and since this painting was made for the Church of Saint-Géry in Cambrai, it is conceivable that the painting attributed to De Baellieur was created on behalf of the ancestors of Louis Antoine de Cambray-Digny. This might explain the prominent display of *The Entombment of Christ*, which the sitters could have encountered in the Church of Saint-Géry, and their desire to associate themselves with its artist — Rubens⁷. With this in mind we will continue to examine the dating of *The Studio of Rubens*.

Dating *The Studio of Rubens*

Concerning the dating of *The Studio of Rubens*, we can use a number of starting points. First and foremost, we should take into account the dating of the recognized depicted paintings. As a comparison between *The Entombment of Christ* (1616), *Philip IV* (ca 1625), and the *Tavern Scene* (1634–1638) points out — if indeed their dating is correct — the latter provides us with a *terminus post quem* for the dating of *The Studio of Rubens* (i.e. after 1634). This does not account for the portrait of *Philip IV* in a still unfinished state, with brushes and a palette depicted next to the canvas: its presence could either entail a dating of ca 1625, or allude to the imaginative nature of the depicted scene. Although this does not provide us with an accurate dating of *The Studio of Rubens*, a dating after 1634 seems obvious. Nevertheless, it might be useful to briefly consider how this painting relates to the tradition of depicting art galleries in general, and the oeuvre of De Baellieur in particular.

Several Antwerp masters painted both real and imaginary art galleries, or rooms entirely decorated with paintings, statues and other precious objects, almost exclusively in the 17th century [1, p. 16]. This phenomenon coexisted with the emergence of the art market and art lover, or connoisseur, who collected works of art [10, p. 9]. Rubens was one of the first such collectors, as well as one of the few artists able to collect a vast amount of impressive artworks [8, p. 41]⁸. Van Haecht's *The Studio of Apelles* (ca 1628) is believed to be the first painting to include a depiction of Rubens' 'Pantheon' and thus to initiate this pictorial formula [8, p. 71]. An impetus to paint art galleries may have been given in 1604 by Karel van Mander's praise for connoisseurs, who were responsible for the revival of the private ownership of paintings [9, p. 29, 51]. Nowadays, several theories exist as to why art galleries were actually painted, which can be summarised as follows: "(1) as an allegory of Pictura's primacy in Antwerp

⁷ Regrettably, I have neither been able to establish the pedigree of the family Cambray-Digny, nor their relationship (if there is one) with Rubens. Therefore, at this point I am only able to suggest this possibility.

⁸ Because of a lack of space, Rubens' art collection was spread out over multiple rooms.

culture, (2) as an advertisement of the rich diversity of genres available on the Antwerp art market, and (3) as the acknowledgement of the growing importance of connoisseurship in the person of their owners, whose conversations about the pictures invite the viewer to engage in similar activities” [9, p. 47].

Cornelis de Baellieur was one of the Antwerp painters of art galleries as well as an art dealer, just like his father⁹. Furthermore, both his nephew Guillam Forchondt (1608–1678) and his brother-in-law Matthijs Musson (1598–1678) were well-known art dealers. The former employed De Baellieur several times to produce paintings intended for export, whereas the latter shipped numerous paintings to Spain and Portugal together with De Baellieur [5, p. 46; 10, p. 116]. In addition, De Baellieur is sometimes referred to as a connoisseur, based on the aforementioned appraisal of the works of Van Dyck in 1661 [10, p. 116]. We now know three signed works by De Baellieur depicting art galleries. First, there is the *Interior of a Gallery of Pictures and Works of Art* of the Louvre, dated 1637. We also know of the *Connoisseurs Visiting a Painter in his Studio* (1635–1640), whereas the third signed work by De Baellieur, *A Picture Gallery* (ca 1635–1640), is a part of the collection of the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, Winchester (VA). There is another painting of an art gallery that was made by Hans III Jordaens (ca 1595–1643) in collaboration with De Baellieur, namely the *Cabinet of Art and Curiosities* (ca 1630) of the Kunst Historisches Museum in Vienna, of which De Baellieur painted the figures [7, p. 294]. Three other paintings, including the one in the Palazzo Pitti, were attributed to De Baellieur. The other two are: the *Gallery of Art Objects* (?) of the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, and the *Gallery of a Collector* (ca. 1635) of the Residenzgalerie, Salzburg.

It is remarkable that on all three signed works by De Baellieur the painted art galleries are constructed in a similar way. The glass windows through which we see an arcade and cypress trees are all of the same type, the floors are all built up in the same manner and have roughly the same colour scheme, and the back and slanted walls are all laden with paintings. Furthermore, dozens of precious objects, scientific apparatus, curiosities of nature, as well as different kinds of dogs, are present in the painted galleries. The painting by both Jordaens and De Baellieur is actually quite similar to these signed works. Since only the dating of the Louvre painting is known (1637) it is hard to establish where *The Studio of Rubens* would fit in the oeuvre of De Baellieur. It is striking, however, that on the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley painting the same work by Brouwer is depicted, namely the *Tavern Scene* (Ill. 108), as in *The Studio of Rubens*. It is easy to notice that the former renders a far less precise depiction of Brouwer’s painting; the painting is stretched out to fit in its rectangular frame and the figure in the back is standing alone in front of a fire, instead of being seated in the company of another person. This leads us to another question: was it the same artist that painted both reproductions of Brouwer’s *Tavern Scene*? Either way, this falls outside the scope of this study.

⁹ Cornelis de Baellieur (Netherlands Institute for Art History). Available at: <http://explore.rkd.nl/nl/explore/artists/3485> (Accessed February 27, 2015).

Conclusion

It has become clear that it is not the art collection of Rubens himself that is on display on *The Studio of Rubens*, although the décor does demonstrate some similarities with the ‘Pantheon’ in which he kept his antique sculptures. The depicted sculptures have up to now simply been ignored, while they may provide us with a link between the painter of *The Studio of Rubens* and his knowledge of Rubens’ garden. Whether or not Rubens himself is depicted, I leave open for debate. Based on a comparison with the portrait by Van Dyck, however, I do not think that the characteristics of Rubens were stressed in the alleged portrait. The same applies to the supposed portraits of Le Roy and De Raet, whose identification fails to explain the presence of the elderly woman. I would argue that the three sitters in the foreground of the painting are related to the family of Cambrai-Digny, based on the provenance of *The Studio of Rubens* in general, and the depiction of *The Entombment of Christ* made for the Church of Saint-Géry in Cambrai in particular, although this argument is still in need of further substantiation.

The three paintings signed by De Baellieur bear striking similarities, which seem to allude to a sort of standard formula used in all of them. Additionally, it could have been common practice to collaborate on such paintings. These observations do not only give rise to the question whether or not the attribution of *The Studio of Rubens* to De Baellieur (who, as an art dealer, had indeed access to a large amount of contemporary Antwerp artworks) is correct, they also reveal that this painting was not devised according to the same formula, the most significant difference being: the presence of sitters. This assessment puts extra emphasis on ascertaining their identities, in order to better understand what is depicted on *The Studio of Rubens*, and for what reason. If, at last, we try to embed this painting into the tradition of depicting art galleries in 17th-century Antwerp, it does most certainly express the knowledge of art of the connoisseur and his familiarity with certain artists, to impress and ignite discussion, then and long after.

So, in conclusion, does *The Studio of Rubens* depict Rubens’ art gallery? The painting displays a certain first-hand knowledge of two paintings by Rubens himself, as well as a, presumably second-hand, knowledge of his sculpture gallery and the statues that decorated his garden. This explains why the painting bears its title; however, in my view this is not sufficient to justify the implications of this title for the interpretation of this remarkable work of art. That is why I think a revision of the title would be in place, while further research may shed light on the many issues that still deserve to be resolved.

Title. Studying the Studio: The Art Gallery of Rubens Depicted?

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Abstract. Paintings of art galleries do not only represent works of art, they also provide us with a visual understanding of the context in which they were once displayed. Of special interest is the art gallery of Rubens, an artist who himself owned a reputed collection of antique sculptures and paintings that is presumably depicted in the 17th-century painting *The Studio of Rubens*. However, is it indeed Rubens’ studio that is represented? If *The Studio of Rubens* indeed depicts the art gallery of Rubens, it would be the only depiction of it we know today. If not, we might ask ourselves what is depicted, and why? In this paper, the diverse aspects of the painting, such as the represented works of art, the staffage, and the provenance, as well as the placement of *The Studio of Rubens* within the tradition of depicting art galleries in seventeenth-century Antwerp, are examined. As a result, the study of *The Studio of Rubens* has been made clear that it is not the art collection of Rubens himself that is on display in the painting, although the décor does demonstrate some similarities with the ‘Pantheon’ in which the great artist kept his antique sculptures. Finally, it is important that though the author of the article suggests that a revision of the painting’s title would be in place, research on the work of art itself draws connections between creators, patrons, dealers, and connoisseurs — of art.

Keywords. Rubens; collections; reproduction; antiquity; décor; Antwerp.

Название статьи. Художественные галереи в живописных произведениях: что изображено на картине «Студия Рубенса»?

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Аннотация. Картины с изображением художественных галерей интересны не только тем, какие именно произведения искусства на них представлены. Такие картины позволяют зрителю понимать тот контекст, в котором они были некогда показаны посетителям. Особого внимания заслуживает художественная галерея Питера Пауля Рубенса, обладателя прославленного собрания произведений живописи и античной скульптуры. Возможно, эта галерея изображена на хранящемся в Палаццо Питти во Флоренции полотне XVII в., предположительно кисти фламандского живописца и арт-дилера Корнелиса де Бельера (1607–1671), носящем название «Студия Рубенса». Автор статьи задается вопросом, действительно ли на картине изображена именно она, и предпринимает попытку исследовать вопрос с разных точек зрения: рассматриваются все показанные на полотне произведения искусства и стаффаж, обсуждается происхождение самой картины и ее место в ряду подобных памятников, представляющих художественные галереи Антверпена XVII столетия. Если на картине де Бельера действительно изображена галерея Рубенса, то следует признать, что это единственное известное на сегодняшний день ее изображение. В противном случае следует выяснить, что же представлено на картине и почему. В результате изучения «Студии Рубенса» автор приходит к выводу, что лишь некоторые особенности убранства роднят изображенное помещение с «Пантеоном», где хранились античные скульптуры из собрания Рубенса. Автор статьи считает, что в свете проведенного исследования было бы предпочтительно изменить название картины. Немаловажно, однако, что уже проделанная работа позволила выявить связи, существовавшие между художниками, их покровителями, арт-дилерами, знатоками и ценителями искусства.

Ключевые слова: Рубенс; коллекции; воспроизведение; античность; декор; Антверпен.

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