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DILIGENT POLITICAL AGENCY FOR BRANDING THE ART: RUBENS AND (CULTURAL) DIPLOMACY

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Abstract
Peter Paul Rubens' (1577-1640) agency as a (cultural) diplomat was characteristically interwoven not only with the extraordinarily intricate and troublesome historical and political contexts of his lifetime but also with his tremendous artistic ambitions and achievements. Considering the Flemish masters' diligent commitment to both politics and art, the immense quantity of biographical research dedicated to Rubens has marginally enquired about the preeminence of any domain of Rubens' engagement over the other. The present investigation attempts to find a plausible counterweight between Rubens' assiduous activism in the worlds of art and politics, respectively, as a key of acknowledging his agency as a (cultural) diplomat. Consequently, certain insights regarding Rubens' patriotism, the examination of his art within the intellectual tradition of Catholic humanism, and ultimately assessing the roles of diplomatic activism and artistic entrepreneurialism for branding his art could stand as persuasive arguments to illuminate on his (cultural) diplomatic agency at the puzzling crossroads between politics and art.
Keywords: *Rubens, art branding, Antwerp, humanism, art commissions, special envoy, cultural diplomacy.*

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THE FLEMISH PATRIOT FACING THE FRACTIOUS HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Rubens lived his entire life under the extraordinary inauspicious circumstances of the so-called Eighty Years War (1568-1648). Following the intractable outcomes for the Dutch provinces which resulted from both the 1555 Treaty of Augsburg and the 1545-1563 Council of Trent, a series of unfortunate, oscillatory and ominous events had marked the second half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century until the Westphalian peace treaties of 1648. As a young boy, after the death of his father, Rubens returned to his fatherland at the age of 10 and had remained inextricably committed to the political goals of Flanders till the end of his life in 1640. When he arrived in Antwerp in 1587, Rubens had to confront the troublesome consequences of the occupation of Flanders by Spain in 1585 and the consequent partition of the Netherlands in 1587. From that time on, Rubens had lived his life within a general atmosphere of belligerence, strife and bewilderment which had mainly resulted from the division between the Lower Countries of Southern Flanders and the United Dutch Provinces in the North. The division rule had turned operational under the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* and had instituted the reign of Catholic Spain in Southern Flanders and the Protestant confederate autonomy of seven Dutch northern provinces. In the context of the Vervins Peace Treaty between Spain and France (1598), Southern Flanders was ruled by the Habsburg sovereigns Archdukes Albert of Austria and his wife, Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia, between 1598 and 1621.[1] Especially after the death of Archduke Albert in 1621, Infanta Isabella had a providential role upon Rubens' career both as diplomat and artist. Apart from pursuing his artistic goals as (one of) the most prominent creators of his age, Rubens' entanglements with the world of politics had turned to be outstanding and meritorious considering momentous political intricacies and the overall diplomatic impasse after 1621. Out of genuine patriotism and pacificatory spirit, Rubens had incessantly pursued at least to restore the relative tranquil conditions of the 12 years truce between Spanish Flanders/ Netherlands and the Dutch United Provinces of the north (1609-1621) within an utterly unfavourable context for Flanders, prompted by the 1623 coalition between France, England,

[1] Constantin Suter, *Rubens*, București: Editura Meridiane, 1974, pp. 19-21; Wilhelm Ribhegge, "Counter-Reformation Politics, Society and Culture in the Southern Netherlands, Rhineland and Westphalia in the First Half of the 17th Century" in *Humanistica Lovaniensia*, vol. 49, 2000, p. 175.

United Provinces and Denmark against Spain. Notwithstanding Rubens' dutifulness and conciliatory efforts, a bellicose state of affairs between Southern Flanders and the Northern United Provinces had prevailed until the signing of the Peace of Munster,[2] eight years after the death of Rubens. Intricate political interests, mischievous political machinations, volatile and perfunctory political alliances, vacillatory strategic plans and compelling marital alliances – all had deemed Rubens' commendable efforts futile, so that, in June 1635,[3] after a lifetime spent in the service of his beloved Flanders, one could find the indefatigable Rubens exhausted and disenchanted with the political.

The last three secret missions that the governess of Flanders, Infanta Isabella, entrusted to Rubens – in December 1631, August 1632, and January 1633, respectively - failed and ruined Rubens' political ideal of peace between Spanish Flanders and the Dutch provinces along the way. By that time, the Flemish master and diplomat had tirelessly believed in cosmopolitanism, peaceful interactions, economic prosperity and a blooming space of ideas and

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[2] David Freedberg, "Rubens and Titian: Art and Politics" in Hilliard T. Goldfarb, David Freedberg (eds.), *Titian and Rubens: Power, Politics, and Style*, Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1998, pp. 38-39; Max Rooses, *Rubens*, London: Duckworth & Co., 1904, p. 394.

[3] Rubens consistently took action, both as diplomat and artist, to serve the political goals of Southern Flanders and, accordingly, had to promote the interests of Spain. Internal frictions and rivalries of competing interests, characteristic not only for Spain but also for France and England, further complicated the diplomatic missions and efforts. In the case of Spain, King Philip IV enforced an alliance with France in March 1627, against the political calculations of his aunt, Infanta Isabella, who was favorable to an alliance with England (Freedberg, *art. cit.*, p. 42). Following Rubens' diligent diplomacy in England (1628-1630) as a special envoy of Infanta Isabella to facilitate a diplomatic agreement with King Charles I, Cardinal Richelieu masterminded a treaty with the Dutch provinces against Spain in 1635 on behalf of the French King Louis XIII. Consequently, the war with Spain put an end to the Flemish hopes for peace (Suter, *op. cit.*, p. 76). However, as long as Rubens had foreseen any possibility to help his fatherland, he would never give up fighting for the cause; probably the only imprudent diplomatic letter of Rubens to the most important Spanish minister of King Philip IV, Duke of Olivarez, stands for a witty recommendation that Spain should help queen-mother Marie de Medici to end the conflict with King Louis XIII and Richelieu in order to divert France from signing a political alliance with the Dutch provinces against Spain and the Spanish Flanders (Rooses, *op. cit.*, pp. 510-512).

art flourishing, out of genuine patriotism and moral responsibility. Receiving his early education in the spirit of courtesy, deference and elegance in Antwerp, Rubens undertook his public duties in full responsibility and engaged citizenship, whilst his agency as a (cultural) diplomat was guided by professional reliability, moral clarity and individual integrity.[4] The frequent diplomatic dissimulations[5] of Rubens and the apparent versatility of his diplomatic agency stemmed not only from inextricable political vicissitudes, shifting alliances and machinations of his age, but also from a certain pragmatic outlook of the artist himself in dealing with unpropitious contexts, on the one hand, and conjunctural opportunities regarding art commissions, on the other. As the third section of the present study reveals, the Flemish master did not compromise the diplomatic missions entrusted to him for satisfying his artistic vanity; in a sense, his diplomatic agency was aggrandized due to his prestige as an artist and, conversely, Rubens cautiously took advantage of any occasion generated by his diplomatic encounters to brand his art and enter instructive conversations with learned and influent art afficionados.

The unfathomable patriotism of Rubens and his deep concern about Antwerp stand above all considerations regarding the relationship between art and politics. Rubens truly dreamed about the magnificence, prosperity and dignity of the southern provinces of Flanders, Brabant and Luxembourg - which composed the Spanish Netherlands - and committed himself to zealous political activism to the best of his intellectual abilities and artistic talent. For instance, he strived to enhance the Catholic fervor of Spanish Netherlands as a distinct mark of the region and "a badge of national identity"[6] and reputation in opposition to the Dutch Protestant ethos. Only in the period 1609-1619, following the eight years apprenticeship in Italy, the Flemish master was commissioned to execute 60 altarpieces, 39 ceiling paintings, and 3 specific altarpieces for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp.[7] The dominant cosmopolitan spirit of Antwerp during the 16th century, the flourishing commerce, the

[4] Mark Lamster, *Master of Shadows: The Secret Diplomatic Career of the Painter Peter Paul Rubens*, New York: Doubleday, 2009.

[5] Rooses, *op. cit.*, pp. 422-423. Rubens extensively used the tactics of 'diplomatic dissimulation' in the allegorical communication and transmission of art contents (see infra).

[6] Henry Adams, "Rubens Was Artist, Scholar, Diplomat and a Lover of Life" in *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 1993, pp. 58-69.

[7] *Ibidem*.

entrepreneurial impetus and ultimately conviviality and connoisseurship of fine arts had steadily informed Rubens' enthusiastic patriotism, loyalty and nostalgia under ill-fated circumstances. Aside from his lifelong love of the Italian artistic mastery, Rubens had never conceived to live in a place other than Antwerp. Probably not by accident, he brought artistic allegiance to the two cities he was very fond of, by contributing with public decorations for the festivities' protocol on the inauguration of the new Antwerp governor Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand in 1635 and designing the decorum for the palace of Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga in the city of Mantua, Italy, respectively.[8] In Antwerp, Rubens always found tranquility, composure and joy; the fact that he owned a house and a workshop in the city, and another manor in the rural Steen speaks volumes about his deep attachment to what he considered as his most intimate natural environment. One might seize the lifestyle dialectics between the urban Antwerp and the rural Steen by unveiling the binary traits of Rubens' quotidian habits: entrepreneurship and leisure, public engagement and private rest, decorative agenda of his public art and quietude of natural landscape/ private environment.

THE NEOSTOIC CHRISTIAN PACIFIST AND COSMOPOLITAN HUMANIST

The age of Rubens marked the pinnacle of the Renaissance humanism of Petrarca, Boccaccio, Erasmus and Montaigne; fascinated with both the artistic Italian Renaissance and the intellectual tradition of Latin classicism and stoicism, Rubens had also embraced the Catholic faith, so that the overall intellectual 'constitution' and mindset of the Flemish master could aptly be assimilated to Christian universalism.[9] Rubens had wittily adapted his fine classical erudition in Latin culture and his positivistic education for public life to the practical morality of Christian faith. Fine connoisseur of the subtleties of Latin culture, poetry and literature (especially of the works of Tacitus, Seneca, Horatio and Ovidius), rigorously educated in the spirit of elegance, etiquette, courtesy and aristocratic manners (of crucial importance for his future diplomatic career), Rubens epitomized the character and refinement of a bona fide Christian humanist. Specifically characteristic for the post-Renaissance

[8] Wilhelm von Bode, *Maeștrii picturii olandeze și flamande*, translated by Eugen Filotti, vol. 2, București: Editura Meridiane, 1974, pp. 10-13.

[9] Otto Georg von Simson, "Richelieu and Rubens: Reflections on the Art of Politics" in *The Review of Politics*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1944, p. 427.

mindset and beliefs of scholars and intellectuals in 16th century northern Europe was the movement of neostoicism which stood at the core of this symbiosis between secular erudition, practical sense of civic duty and Catholic teachings. Even if Rubens himself was not directly affiliated with the neostoic circles of Antwerp like his sibling Philip,[10] he had sincerely shared the neostoic outlook on public commitment to moral service, responsible citizenship, friendship and pacifism. Wittily combining linguistic fluency and dexterity in several modern languages besides Latin,[11] secularism and political action, aristocratic upbringing and unfettered Christian morality, Rubens pragmatically endorsed the teachings of neostoic humanism. With his addiction to art commerce, passionate adventures in transactions and exchanges of artistic objects, and open-minded cosmopolitanism, Rubens could be accurately considered one of the outstanding forerunners of international cultural relations and preservers of cultural heritage, while affinity for the modern humanistic endeavors in travelling[12] would render him as a herald of cultural tourism. In marked contrast with the realist, bourgeois and democratic artistic environment of Rubens' contemporary Rembrandt, whereby Biblical themes and the Protestant/ Calvinist ethos prevailed, the Baroque artistic depictions and ultimately lifestyle of Rubens mirrored aristocratic routines, classicality, luxuriousness and humanist proneness of Catholic Flanders.[13] The most expressive indicator of

[10] One of the most 'realistic' paintings of Rubens is considered a tribute to the mentor of Flemish neostoicism, philosopher Lipsius. *The Four Philosophers* painting (1611-1612) does not only illustrate the neostoic concept of eternal friendship in the spirit of "Renaissance humanistic mourning" (Justus Lipsius had passed away in 1606) and a public statement of intellectual allegiance, but also symbolically stands for an appraisal of the entire tradition of Stoic philosophy. Allegedly, the bust in the rear upper right is that of Seneca, the most important Stoic thinker (Simon Zurawski, "Reflections on the *Pitti Friendship Portrait* of Rubens: In Praise of Lipsius and in Remembrance of Erasmus" in *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1992, pp. 734-745).

[11] Rubens' multilingualism is aptly certified by his rich correspondence in four languages, other than Latin: Flemish/ Dutch, French, Spanish, Italian.

[12] Madeline Delbé, "Peter Paul Rubens in Florence: Between Art, Feasts, and Diplomacy" in Raffaella Morselli and Cecilia Paolini (eds.), *Rubens e la Cultura Italiana: 1600-1608*, Rome: Viella, 2020, p. 64.

[13] Weihong Yan, "Comparison Between Rubens and Rembrandt's Creative Thoughts" in *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol. 284, 2018, pp. 138-139.

Rubens' cosmopolitan humanism and neostoic pacifism is plainly visible in his vast correspondence[14] not only with statemen and high-level political officials, but also – and mostly illustrative – with outstanding intellectuals and secular scholars in Europe of his times (e.g., Palamède Fabri de Valavez and his brother Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, Pierre Dupuy, Jan Caspar Gevaerts, Thomas Howard, 2nd Earl of Arundel, among other scientists, philologists, and art collectors).

More than most, the figure of Rubens matters as the very embodiment of the painter-humanist, for whom artistry stands as a cultural code for translating mythological, religious and antique thematic paintings into public, aristocratic and moral values.[15] Even if Rubens enthusiastically embraced the canonical patterns of Renaissance Italian art and the great Italian masters[16], he nevertheless acknowledged a kind of natural bond with the pragmatic and positivist orientation specific to his homeland art tradition. The Baroque art of

[14] *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* is probably the most instructive and comprehensive archive collection of publications, documents, digital resources, and art history references (www.rubenshuis.be) about Rubens and his age, including his artistic collaborations with disciples, such as Anthony van Dyck and Jacob Jordaens, among others. Complementarily, one could have access to Rubens' letters at https://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/?catalogue=peter-paul-rubens.

[15] Otto von Simson, *Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640): Humanist, Maler and Diplomat*, Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1996.

[16] After eight years of assiduous artistic apprenticeship in Italy (1600-1608), Rubens returned too late to Antwerp to participate at the burial of his mother. In a letter to his good friend, Johann Faber, Rubens confessed that he would happily abandon his duties as a 'courtier' to focus exclusively on his fascination with the Italian art (Anne T. Woollett and Ariane van Suchtelen, *Rubens and Brueghel: A Working Friendship*, Los Angeles and The Hague: The J. Paul Getty Museum and Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, 2006, p. 21). In another letter to minister Annibale Chieppio, Rubens admitted that the Italian masters were both foundational and inspirational for his artistic evolution (see, for instance, Raffaella Marselli, *Tra Fiandre e Italia: Rubens 1600-1608. Regesto Biografico-Critico*, Rome: Viella, 2018, p. 276), with special acknowledgements for the Venetian school of Titian, Giorgione and Veronese, for Leonardo and Michelangelo, and for the Paduan and Parma art schools in the works of Mantegna and Correggio, respectively. Regarding contemporary Italian art, Rubens had cultivated a deep lifetime admiration for Caravaggio, the Italian master of Baroque painting. The Flemish master extensively copied the works of the Italians, creating "the greatest repertoire of forms ever" (Freedberg, *art. cit.*, p. 32).

Rubens is not only the expression of the Flemish master's most intimate artistic sensibility but also stands for a grand public statement of the artist, signifying the departure from his deep indebtedness to the great Italian tradition. Originally coined by Ernest Hemingway, the term 'Rubenesque' is the holistic epithet used to encapsulate painting features - such as grandiloquence, passion, force, vitality, theatrical choc and carnation – characteristically incorporated into the Baroque art of Rubens. Art critics have astutely observed the essential syncretism and dissimulation strategic undertakings within the Baroque vocabulary of the Flemish master. Velazquez, the master of Spanish realist painting, noted that syncretism in Rubens was the result of "mixture of genres" and "hybridization of portraiture"[17], while Rubens' own techniques of copying and retouching art works were consistent with his perspective of "selective imitation". In keeping with the methodological principle of *translatio, imitatio and aemulatio*, Rubens undertook the procedural steps from model to the copy of the model, followed by adaptation and interpretation, towards original invention.[18] Through this methodological technique, Rubens not only aimed to dissimulate and conceal the true meanings of his art and even diplomatic missions,[19] but it also stood for Rubens' strategic maneuvers for branding his art. To exemplify, Rubens used to conceal the true references regarding the strength and virtue of powerful rulers of his time by aestheticization and allegorical dissimulation of power politics. His painting *Landscape with St. George and the Dragon* stands for a symbolic pictorial representation of the reformer King Charles I of England fighting the antagonistic forces of both Calvinism and Elizabethan Puritanism;[20] moreover, his (mythological) hunting

[17] See Barbara Jouves, "Compte Rendu d'Exposition: 'Rubens. Royal Portraits'", *Groupe de Recherche en Histoire de l'Art Moderne*, November 22, 2017, https://grham.hypotheses.org/5172

[18] Jeffrey M. Muller, "Rubens's Theory and Practice of the Imitation of Art" in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 64, no. 2, June 1982, p. 244.

[19] The German contemporary artist and art critic Joachim von Sandrart, who accompanied Rubens during the 1927 artistic tour of Holland, doubted that Rubens was truly interested of being introduced to the newest tendencies of the Dutch art and suspected – alongside other diplomatic envoys – that Rubens concealed, in fact, his true intentions (Rooses, *op. cit.*, p. 419).

[20] Nicholas Grindle, "Rubens's *Landscape with St George and the Dragon*: Relating Images to their Originals and Changing the Meaning of Representation at the Court of Charles I" in *The Court Historian*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2020, pp. 142–157.

art could be approached as allegorical readings of confrontations between the forces of good and evil, (educated) culture and (raw) nature, benevolent hegemony and illegitimate domination, protectorate and abuse of power, etc.[21] Generally, modern art critics overlooked the present investigation's contention that the tactics of dissimulation and the symbolic distortions in the art of Rubens could be instrumentalized as artistic means for branding artistic productions.[22] Probably the most revealing occurrence of Rubens' diplomatic strategy of artistic dissimulation worked effectively between 1622 and 1625 when the artist was commissioned to execute 24 large paintings as decorations for the Luxembourg Palace of Marie de Medici,[23] in attempting to restore the damaged reputation of the French mother-queen and soften the tensed relation with her son, King Louis XIII.

The concoction between art and politics in Rubens had always subordinated the realist style of accurate historical portrayals to the Baroque mannerism of magisterial expression with a view to augmenting the art while domesticating the political and enhancing the Rubens brand to the detriment of obeying political constraints. Probably due to Rubens' persuasive skills and apparently fearing that limiting the artist's freedom of expression would diminish his monumental intuitions, there is almost no evidence that high-level political commissioners had imposed imperative artistic demands on Rubens. Following Erwin Panofsky's conceptual distinction, Rubens had fully developed his artistic genius through the iconological acumen of pictorial representation (i.e., using allusive and allegorical references of the political) rather than resorting to descriptive iconographic modes of expression (i.e., tantamount to representing historical, social and contextual connotations of the

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[21] Maurice Sass, "The Predatory Core: Peter Paul Rubens and the Hunt" in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 106, no. 4, 2024, pp. 8-13.

[22] Modern art critics, such as Giovanni Pietro Bellori and Roger de Piles, thought that *disegno* imperfections in the art of Rubens were the result of the Flemish master's exaggerated preoccupation with mechanical productivity in his workshop. At the end of the 18th century, in his *Discourses on Art*, Sir Joshua Reynolds rather eulogized deficiencies of drawing as the very signature of Rubens' brilliant inventions (Freedberg, *Peter Paul Rubens: Oil Paintings and Oil Sketches*, New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1995, pp. 10-11).

[23] Sara Galletti, "Rubens's Life of Maria de' Medici: Dissimulation and the Politics of Art in Early Seventeenth-Century France" in *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 67, 2014, pp. 878–916.

political).[24] The present study on the intersections between art and politics in Rubens maintains that his excellent *allegorical pictorial representation, as both the strategy of diplomatic dissimulation and the expressive tool of art branding, stands for a peculiar type of historical re-enactment of a glorious past and its transfer into present political contexts.*[25] The degree of Rubens' esoteric use of allegorical symbolism variously oscillates between the analogical[26] and the anagogical[27]. By and large, the overall diligence of the Flemish master's engagement with the political and the public realm reveals an "unique blend of learning, artistry and international diplomacy"[28] that renders unidimensional and non-correlative interpretations of his lifetime political activism incomplete and limitative.

THE DIPLOMAT IN-BETWEEN: POLITICAL LIABILITY AND ART BRANDING IN RUBENS

Peter Paul Rubens, the painter-diplomat, had been tactful, skillful and adroitly intelligent when it came to finding the right balance between his political duties and artistic endeavors; on the one hand, the diplomat had to be

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[24] Klaus von Beyme, "Why Is There No Political Science of the Arts?" in Udo J. Hebel and Christoph Wagner (eds.), *Pictorial Cultures and Political Iconographies: Approaches, Perspectives, Case Studies from Europe and America*, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2011, p. 16.

[25] See also other two suggestive studies: Kristina af Klinteberg, "The Divine Role of the Diadem in Rubens's Marie de' Medici Cycle" in *Journal of Art History*, vol. 93, no. 1, 2024, pp. 46-62 and Ianthi Assimakopoulou, *The Offspring of the Medici: A Visual Dialectic Between Myth and History*, Mantua: Editoriale Sometti, 2020.

[26] One might find the analogical use of pictorial allegory in Rubens' *Daniel in the Lions' Den* (ca. 1614-1618), whereby Daniel stands for the mighty protectorate of the Spanish kingdom and the ten lions symbolize the ten provinces of Southern Netherlands (see Rachel Aviva Pollack, *Peter Paul Rubens' Daniel in the Lions'* Den*: Its Sources and Its Political Significance*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Maryland, 2015).

[27] The rather cryptic convey of allegorical representation could be found, for instance, in one of Rubens' late works, *Conversatie à la Mode* (ca. 1632-1634), whereby the Flemish master synthesized his encounters with the diplomatic milieus by evoking gallantry, etiquette, social interactions, finesse, courtship, fashionable conversations and courtesy (see Elise Goodman, "Rubens's Conversatie à la Mode: Garden of Leisure, Fashion, and Gallantry" in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 64, no. 2, June 1982, pp. 247-259).

[28] Simson, *op. cit.*

careful not to compromise the political aims he had to pursue; on the other, the painter had always been keen on taking whatever arising opportunity to brand his art and increase his artistic prestige. In short, diplomatic tact, discretion and professionalism, on the one hand, and artistic inspiration, innovation and expertise, on the other. The present section explores the labyrinthine context of Rubens' agency as a painter-diplomat at the intersection between the tricky corridors of politics and the clever command of artistic commissions.

The correspondence of the Flemish master aptly illuminates his ability to coalesce the political intricacies of his age and the artistic ambitions he aimed to achieve. Educated as a page in the service of Marguerite de Lalaing, Comtesse de Ligne, in a general atmosphere of court pomp and etiquette, language skills, and formal learning for a career in public service at the Latin school of Rombout Verdonck,[29] Rubens had intermittently performed several important diplomatic duties, roughly between 1608 and 1636.[30] Apart from early entanglements with the field of diplomacy, such as the 1603-1604 first mission to Spain as emissary of the Duke of Mantua during his eight years apprenticeship in Italy (1600-1608),[31] Rubens' mostly substantial agency as a (cultural) diplomat was prompted by the death of Archduke Albert VII of Austria, husband of Archduchess Isabella Clara Eugenia, in July 1621. From that time on, Rubens had performed on-and-off duties as the very protégé of Infanta Isabella in the conjunctural, and sometimes perfunctory, roles of

[29] See Piet Bakker, "Peter Paul Rubens" in Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (ed.) *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, New York: The Leiden Collection, 2017; Woollett and Suchtelen, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

[30] Peter Paul Rubens, *Pictor și Diplomat (Scrisori)*, București: Editura Meridiane, 1970. In a letter to his good friend Peiresc, Antwerp, December 18, 1634, Rubens complained about the more and more tedious duties he had to fulfill as a special envoy, expressing his wish for the termination of his political commitments.

[31] In a letter to Annibale Chieppio, Mantuan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated April 2, 1603, Rubens provided useful information about his role both as a member of the Mantuan embassy at the court of Spanish King Philip III in Valladolid, and – more importantly – as a gift missionary for the most influential Spanish minister, the Duke of Lerma; the impressive *Equestrian Portrait of the Duke of Lerma* (1603) speaks eloquently not only about Rubens' talent as a young artist and his intention to present himself as a learned artist, but also about his early ambitions to brand his art (see Rubens, *op. cit.*, p. 9 and Alexander Vergara, *Rubens and His Spanish Patrons*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 7-16).

"diplomatic negotiator, covert intermediary, and spy".[32] The present study considers only three cardinal moments of the evolution of Rubens' diplomatic agency which are explanatory for the Flemish master's lucid and balanced peregrinations between politics and art with a view to comply with his diplomatic roles and to enhancing the artistic brand of his name.

Firstly, between 1622 and 1625, Rubens was commissioned to execute a monumental series of paintings honoring the French Queen-mother Marie de Medici. Veraciously suspected by the French officials of promoting the interests of his native land and the Spanish kingdom, Rubens had to operate cautiously, even more considering the failure of the 1623 maverick maneuvers of King Charles I of England to marry Infanta Maria Anna, daughter of Spanish King Philip III. Within the troublesome French context of political machinations, marital arrangements and covered actions and intentions, Rubens had to carefully pursue the unofficial peace negotiations with the English stateman George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham, and secure the interests of Spain along the way.[33] Additionally, the execution of the commission per se was a burdensome achievement, since the Flemish master had to cleverly conceal or disclose – as the case may have been – the authentic meanings of his works in order to avoid offenses or partisan interpretations. Secondly, in 1628, Infanta Isabella sent Rubens for a secret diplomatic mission to Spain, on the pretext of recommending him as the most skillful painter to her nephew, King Philip IV. Initially, even if Rubens managed to win the sympathy of the most influential Spanish minister, the Duke of Olivarez, the King himself did not share his aunt's confidence in the diplomatic abilities of the Flemish master. Shortly afterwards, highly impressed by the artistic mastery of the well-educated Rubens, King Philip IV personally consigned the Flemish to diplomatic affairs

[32] Freedberg, *art. cit.*, p. 38.

[33] *Ibidem*, pp. 40-45. At the end of his French diplomatic mission and artistic commission, Rubens kept up a detailed correspondence with friends and Infanta Isabella herself on both successes and frailties of his mediation efforts. In a long letter to Infanta Isabella, dated March 15, 1625, Rubens mentioned his perilous offices as confidant and/ or adviser of high-level officials entrusted with the difficult task of achieving a peace agreement between the Protestant Northern Provinces of the Netherlands and the Catholic Southern Provinces of Flanders (Rubens, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-82). Later, in a letter to his friend, the French scholar and humanist Pierre Dupuy, dated October 18, 1625, Rubens mentioned a detailed report he wrote for Infanta Isabella in conclusion of the negotiation process (*ibidem*, p. 89).

at the court of England.[34] Thirdly, the already famous Rubens was dispatched to England in 1629 to facilitate the strenuous treaty between Spain and England, following a long period of backlashes and antagonistic diplomatic relations between the two countries. The fact that the artist was entrusted with such a complicated assignment speaks volumes not only about his solid diplomatic background and expertise, but also about his notoriousness and prestige as an artist. Apart from the extensive research dedicated to Rubens' diplomatic agency and art commissions in England, three letters addressed by Rubens himself to the favorite Spanish minister of King Philip IV, the Duke of Olivarez, elucidate the backs and forths of this knotty business.[35]

In full complementarity with the landmarks of Rubens' diplomatic career, art branding stood as a steady preoccupation of the Flemish master. Plainly visible in his correspondence, the overall tone and mood of the artist towards the political wanes in comparison with the generally passionate and self-absorbed dedication to art innovations, commerce, collecting and communication. It is probably true to assert that Rubens' diligent agency in political diplomacy "bolstered his artistic commissions",[36] as it is probably equally pertinent to assume that precisely his artistic mastery and prestige paved the way for varying diplomatic encounters and expanding acquaintances. Moreover, even in situations of full-time diplomatic responsibilities, Rubens

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[34] Adams, *art. cit.* Fascinated with the art of Rubens, King Philip IV dispatched him to England "as a gift… to his art-loving English cousin" in attempting to ease the tensions between Spain and England, even more after King Charles I had declared war on Spain in 1625 (Michael Auwers, "The Gift of Rubens: Rethinking the Concept of Gift-Giving in Early Modern Diplomacy" in *European History Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2013, p. 422).

[35] Selectively chosen for the purpose of this investigation, the three letters of Rubens chronologically registered the achievements and shortcomings of his diplomatic agency in London. The first one, dated June 30, 1629, stands as a kind of preliminary report to inform the Duke of Olivarez about the preparations and the subdued course of events in anticipation of a possible treaty between Spain and England (Rubens, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-181). The second, dated September 2, 1629, reveals an already familiarized Rubens with the intrigues at the English court and informs the Duke of Olivarez about the sympathy of the English King towards Spain, despite dividing interests and opposition of the courtiers (*ibidem*, p. 193). Finally, the third letter, dated December 14, 1629, shows a regretful and resigned Rubens for failing to achieve more on the English issue (*ibidem*, pp. 197-198).

[36] Lamster, *op. cit.*

had never ceased to paint extensively and quite rarely abandoned his artistic projects and commissions. Infrequently, any time his diplomatic adversaries aimed to discredit him and doubted his real intentions, there were accusations pointing to the egotistic Rubens "acting solely from his own interest".[37] It is probably accurate to underwrite that Rubens had carried with him the personal artistic capital and prestige: his pictorial representations operated as mediums of diplomatic translations and transactions for various cultural codes and environments, as groundbreaking material instruments for troublesome negotiation processes, as means to bypass difficult "communication channels" and to transcend political and religious barriers.[38] By and large, the Rubens brand was a syncretic conglomerate of robust managerial skills, elitist social network, noble businessman circles, passionate collecting, artistic productivity and versatility. After 1610, the workshop art studio of Rubens – the very instrument of the Rubens brand – had incessantly functioned in the spirit of tireless industriousness and entrepreneurship, producing creative synthesis with the Italian art, drafting and printmaking, engraving and drawing, commissioning and bargaining.[39] Rubens had remained linked to his workshop until the end of his life, working in 'double harness' with his assistants and disciples to produce large paintings for public consumption – a professionalized and business-like approach to cultural entrepreneurialism. This artistic mass production is not consistent with a trivial marketing strategy for branding the Rubens name only; Rubens' workshop was genuinely an art school in the lofty acceptance of the term, which mission was teaching and practicing art techniques properly. Among his disciples and collaborators, one

[37] Rooses, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

[38] Toby Osborne, "Translation, International Relations and Diplomacy" in Sue-Ann Harding and Ovidi Carbonell-Cortes (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Culture*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018, pp. 517-532. See also Toby Osborne, "Anthony van Dyck: A Painter-Diplomat of the Thirty Years' War?" in Luc Duerloo and R. Malcolm Smuts (eds.), *The Age of Rubens. Diplomacy, Dynastic Politics, and the Visual Arts in Early Seventeenth Century Europe*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2016, pp. 181-196. When comparing Rubens and his disciple van Dyck, one could note that Rubens performed his diplomatic duties in the limelight in attempting to maximize his (artistic) influence (*ibidem*).

[39] Thomas Ruggio and Thomas Germano, *Peter Paul Rubens and the Flemish 17th Century: Masterworks from the Arnold & Seena Davis Collection*, New York: Iona College Arts Center, 2017.

could find names of future famous artists, such as van Dyck, Jordaens, Snijders, Brouwer and Jan Brueghel. Rubens was not only artistic mentor for his young apprentices but also played the role of a patron and/or an impresario.[40]

Infiltrating politics through art branding is ultimately an act of public statement in the field of cultural diplomacy. Since, after Giorgio Vasari, paintings were visual signatures of cosmopolitan artistry, and their authors' reputation, honor and prestige were measured precisely by the impact of their works upon foreign courts in early modern Europe,[41] branding the artist's name through his art works meant more than gaining temporary material benefits and/or winning political favoritism. International art branding truly was a broad exercise in cultural exchanges and the expression of the symbolic status of the artist as an influential agent in intercultural communication. Rubens' diplomatic agency - mostly as an unofficial envoy, mediator and facilitator - would have probably been insignificant outside his indelible role as a cultural pacificator stemming from his aura of artistic celebrity.

APPRAISING RUBENS AS A CULTURAL DIPLOMAT

Even in the absence of his bold activism as an unofficial/ special envoy, the resonance of the name Rubens in the field of cultural diplomacy could not be denied. The impact of the 'Rubens brand' outstrips artistic canons to embrace art commerce and public art, international cultural relations and exchanges (i.e., through a vast correspondence and cultural encounters for promoting art collections, literary, scientific and scholarly innovations), and ultimately art diplomacy (i.e., influencing and reforming hard-power politics by using the instruments of art gifts, art commissions, protocol decorum, art furnishing of royal buildings, etc.). This section briefly overviews Rubens' pioneering role in the field of cultural diplomacy by considering his outstanding art diplomacy, cultural entrepreneurialism and art commercialism, and ultimately his cultural legacy as an erudite art collector and philologist. Moreover, mentioning certain prestigious memberships he was devoted to during his lifetime and the most important royal distinctions which came in

[40] Michael Jaffe, "Rubens as a Collector" in *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 117, no. 5157, 1969, p. 659.

[41] Auwers, *art. cit.*, pp. 421-441. In his *Recollections from Rubens* (1898), art historian Jakob Burckhardt celebrated the international cultural recognition of the Flemish master as the very epitome of the "grand collective public art tradition" (English translation by Mary Hottinger, London: Phaidon Press, 1950).

recognition of his merits is demonstrative regarding Rubens' refined agency in cultural diplomacy.

Beyond Rubens' commitment to elevating the status of public art and art production in the city of Antwerp,[42] numerous royal and high-level political art commissions epitomize the notoriousness of the Rubens artistic brand and the growing popularity of the Baroque art jargon in 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. Only in the period 1620-1621, Rubens was commissioned to execute 39 ceiling paintings for the Antwerp Jesuit Church and 24 large decorative canvases for the Luxembourg Palace in honoring the former French King Henry IV and his wife, Queen Marie de Medici, not to mention Rubens' personal assurance to paint a series of large canvases for the Prince of Wales in 1621.[43] It goes without saying that Rubens could not have possibly carried out solitarily such industrious commitments, even if he was fully aware of royal patrons and noblemen' dissatisfaction with collective collaborations and art studio processes understood in terms of a suspect and "pernicious specialization".[44] After 1601, until his death in 1640, with or without involving apprentices and collaborators, Rubens delivered a large amount of high-level official commissions not only in the city of Antwerp but also in Italy, France, Spain and England, enhancing the impact of his art diplomacy upon the gloomy political milieus in the first half of the 17th century. Alongside allegorical paintings and portraits properly, the art diplomacy of high-level official commissioning included architectural decorations for palaces, churches, private residences and public buildings, and protocol decorum for inaugurations, weddings, burials and official visits.

The art diplomacy of Rubens also entails cooperations in the areas of international cultural relations and exchanges, cultural entrepreneurialism, cultural authorship and effervescence in collecting artifacts. Rubens truly persevered in upholding long-term (friendly) cooperations as a forerunner of international cultural relations and exchanges. His correspondence fully attests long-standing mutual exchange of thoughts and ideas, friendly guidance and consultation, sometimes patronage and advisement towards his collaborators, information and communication to - and from - statemen, cultivated scholars,

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[42] Nils Büttner, "The Hands of Rubens: On Copies and Their Reception" in *Kyoto Studies in Art History*, no. 2, 2017, pp. 41-53.

[43] Letter to the English envoy to Brussels, William Trumbull, September 13, 1621 (Rubens, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-58).

[44] Woollett and Suchtelen, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

art collectors, scientists and humanists of his age.[45] Entrepreneurship also stands as an indelible trademark of Rubens' entanglement with the field of cultural diplomacy. Initially acquired in the artistic workshop of his art educator Otto van Veen in Antwerp and later consolidated during his eight years autodidactic stage in Italy, the culture of art entrepreneurialism not only encompassed specific techniques in mechanical reproduction of art works (e.g., engravings) but also pointed to professionalization of public art production and commerce (e.g., management, acquisition and distribution of artistic goods). The flourishing of public art markets in early modern Europe had been inextricably linked to passionate art collectorship and exchange of art objects: Rubens had definitely promoted public art transactions and lived his entire life as a zealous art collector.[46] In the aftermath of his death in 1640, the inventory of his art collection registered 314 paintings (not including his unfinished works), sculptures, vases, rocks, medals, minerals and jewelry.[47] Lastly, appraising Rubens as an outstanding cultural diplomat is tantamount to assimilating his contributions to dissemination of scholarly knowledge, books popularization and his own auctorial efforts. In this last respect, three works are worth mentioning: his ambulant Pocket-Book which registered impressions from his travels in sketches and drawings,[48] the 1622 guide of the Genua Palace comprising architectural observations, drawings and plans,[49] and the more valuable art treaty *De Imitatione Statuarum*, dealing with Rubens' ruminations on the concepts of copies, replicas and imitations, derived from his aesthetic

[45] To exemplify, Rubens perpetuated a fertile long-time letters' conversation with his friend and adviser Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc on various topics, including books, scientific innovations, art commerce and artifacts, politics. At times, out of deference, courtesy and pragmatism, Rubens collaborated with unreliable high-level officials, such as Balthasar Gerbier, Anglo-Dutch diplomat, not only on political issues but also regarding personal interests and art concerns; for instance, Gerbier mediated the art transaction between Rubens and the Duke of Buckingham (see Rubens' letter to Gerbier, May 19, 1927, in Rubens, *op. cit.*, p. 127).

[46] One of the most illustrative testimonies for assessing Rubens' unremitting excitement with collection of antiquities is exemplified by the business negotiation with Sir Dudley Carleton, English ambassador and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, regarding the acquisition of antique sculptures by Rubens in exchange of some of his paintings (see Rubens, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-51).

[47] See Jaffe, *art. cit.*, p. 649 and Jeffrey M. Muller, *Rubens: The Artist as Collector*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

[48] Jaffe, *art. cit.*, p. 648.

[49] Suter, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

theory.[50] In addition, Rubens' artistic membership of the *Guild of Saint Luke* in Antwerp and his affiliation to the humanist and intellectual circles of the *Latin Solidarity* and *Romanists Association*,[51] respectively, complete the profile of one of the most devoted cultural diplomats of modern Europe.

Several distinctions marked Rubens' multilateral agency as a courtier, diplomat and artist, in full acknowledgement and appreciation of his merits. Three rulers awarded Rubens nobiliary titles, mirroring the increasing prestige of his status. The Flemish master started his unofficial duties as courtier and was formally appointed court painter by the Duke of Gonzaga in Mantua in 1603 and by Archduke Albert and Infanta Isabella in 1609[52] after his return to Antwerp. The more solid the relationship between Rubens and the Spanish kingdom, the more prestigious the distinctions and awards. Following the patent of nobility received by Rubens from King Philip IV in 1624 and the appointment as Secretary to the Privy Council for life in 1629, the supreme recognition of his artistic mastery and long-standing loyalty came only in July 1631 when King Philip IV of Spain knighted the Flemish master.[53] This initiative might have been inspired not only by the express recommendation of Archduchess Isabella but also by the decision of Charles I of England to knight Rubens one year earlier, in March 1630, as a tribute to both the artistic brilliance and the good offices of the Flemish master. According to Jean Puget de la Serre, courtier and confidant of Queen-mother Marie de Medici, Rubens was "a man whose industry, though rare and marvelous, is the least of his good qualities: his judgment in affairs of state and his wit on government exalt him so high above the condition he professes that the works of his wisdom are as remarkable as those of his brush".[54]

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[50] Marina Daiman, "Rubens, Replicas, and Reputation: Reflections in Italian Art Theory" in Morselli and Paolini (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 149-164. Moreover, his brother Philip published *Electorum Libri II* (1608), a work on Roman public life and customs, to which the painter contributed a few plates (Cristopher White, *Peter Paul Rubens, Man and Artist*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[51] Suter, *op. cit.*

[52] The 'painter of the court' distinction exempted Rubens from routine public duties. In 1609 Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella gave Rubens a sword, a gold chain and a medal, as gifts in recognition of his new status (Woollett and Suchtelen, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24).

[53] Rooses, *op. cit.*, pp. 399, 466, 498. In the meanwhile, in October 1629, the University of Cambridge awarded Rubens the secular honorary degree entitled Master of Arts (*ibidem*, p. 491).

[54] Apud Rooses, *op. cit.*, p. 513.

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