

Galleries

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Peter Paul Rubens and the Baroque

Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) was one of the greatest painters of the 17th century, and his art came to define the splendor and style of the High Baroque. Born in Westphalia (Germany), he studied in Antwerp and then in Italy, before returning to Antwerp, where he made his home. At the height of his career, Rubens was a court painter, designer, draftsman, diplomat, and a man of the world. He was also a devoutly religious person, dedicated to his Catholic beliefs and patrons. He had major commissions from almost every Catholic country in Europe, and his artistic genius found consummate expression in *The Triumph of the Eucharist* cycle, the full-scale cartoons of which are displayed in these two galleries.

A painter of grandiose cycles glorifying monarchs, heroes, and the faith, Rubens was also a brilliant portraitist and an innovative landscape painter. He had a remarkable range of expression, and when painting subjects from history, mythology, religion and life, he was able to convey triumph and tragedy with equal ability. His art was characterized by bravura color and brushwork, grandeur and precision, and a perpetual sense of movement and emotion. Immediately to mind come the paintings of Titian, the frescoes and sculptures of Michelangelo, and the architectural designs of Bernini. Indeed, Rubens became so popular that he required many assistants to execute the large and numerous commissions. The finest of these painters, such as Anthony van Dyck, Jacob Jordaens, and

Frans Snyders, adapted his style and lessons and became the most admired and successful artists after the master himself.

In the 17th century, the Southern Provinces of the Netherlands (modern day Belgium and Luxembourg) were under the rule of the Spanish Catholic Hapsburg dynasty: Archdukes Albert and Isabella followed by Archduke Ferdinand. These governors were major patrons of Rubens, who served them not only as painter but also as an ambassador. Spanning Rubens' lifetime, the religious and political struggles between the Netherlands and Spain resulted in the revolt of the Northern Provinces (modern day Holland) and one of the longest wars in European history, known as the Eighty Years' War. The Hapsburgs did everything in their power to uphold the Catholic Church and its doctrines, and Rubens became one of their greatest allies as the Counter-Reformation's chief artistic proponent in northern Europe.

Rubens' The Triumph of the Eucharist Cycle

The Eucharist cycle was Rubens' largest and most complex tapestry cycle, commissioned around 1625 by the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia. It is an example of the Counter-Reformation art of the Baroque used to uphold the doctrine of the Catholic Church. Rubens was a devout Roman Catholic, and supported by the Spanish Hapsburgs, he was known for such large-scale cycles glorifying the lives, beliefs, and virtues of 17th-century monarchs, the most famous being the Marie de' Medici cycle now in the Louvre in Paris.

Rubens' cycle relates to the celebration of the Eucharist or Mass in the Roman Catholic Church, which is also known as Communion or the Lord's Supper. The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, ratified by the Church at the Council of Trent in 1551, refers to the change of the substance of bread and wine into that of Christ's body and blood. This change occurs when the priest consecrates the emblems during the mass. The acceptance of the Eucharistic host as the actual physical embodiment of Christ became a critical issue in the rift

between Catholicism and Protestantism, leading to radically opposed views of the service and the role of the priesthood.

Rubens created at least eleven (and possibly sixteen) compositions on the subject of the Eucharist for the cycle. They were conceived as an unified panorama through the double illusion of fictive tapestries hung within an architectural setting: tapestries within tapestries. Rubens followed his usual practice of first producing bozzetti (oil sketches) of each subject, followed by modelli (models), and finally, full-scale painted cartoons, which rarely show any significant departure from the final work, in this instance, the tapestries. The cycle's eleven key paintings illustrate a religious epic comprising four Old Testament prefigurations, two allegorical victories of the sacrament over paganism and heresy, two groups of evangelists and saints announcing and defending the Eucharist, and three triumphal processions of Faith, Divine Love, and the Church. The Ringling Museum owns five of the cartoons: *The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek*, *The Gathering of the Manna*, *The Four Evangelists*, *The Defenders of the Eucharist*, and *The Triumph of Divine Love*. Also in the collection are two late 17th-century tapestries made after the original series: *The Triumph of the Catholic Faith* (displayed in this gallery) and *The Triumph of the Church*.

The Royal Commission and its Provenance

Rubens' royal patron, Isabella Clara Eugenia (1566-1633), Infanta of Spain and Portugal, Archduchess of Austria, and the daughter of King Philip II of Spain, wanted a series of tapestries on the subject of the Eucharist for the Convento de las Descalzas Reales in Madrid (The Royal Order of the Discalced Carmelites, also called the Poor Clares). The convent was founded by her aunt, Dona Juana of Austria, and became a retreat for the women of the Spanish royal family. Isabella herself spent eight months there as a child, and after her husband's death in 1621, she wore the habit of the order. The convent had a special devotion to the Eucharist, and held two related processions each year, at which time they borrowed

tapestries from the royal collection to decorate the chapel. The commission provided the nuns with a permanent set of hangings. Displayed in Galleries 1 and 2 are five of the original eleven cartoons (full-scale mirror compositions painted on canvas) produced by Rubens and his studio to be copied by the weavers at the tapestry manufacturer. The Infanta kept some of the paintings in her palace in Brussels and had the tapestries sent to the convent in Spain.

The original set of tapestries commissioned by the Infanta remains in the convent in Madrid; however, the painted cartoons were dispersed after her death in 1633. Some of these paintings stayed in Brussels while others were sent to Spain, but later removed from the country during the Napoleonic occupation. In 1818, the Duke of Westminster purchased four of the cartoons for Grosvenor House in London, and it was from the Duke's descendents that John Ringling bought them in 1926. The Triumph of Divine Love cartoon was acquired separately by the Museum in 1980 when it came on the art market. Two other cartoons from the series, Elijah and the Angel and The Triumph of the Catholic Faith, are in the Louvre, while four others were destroyed in a fire at the Archducal Palace in Brussels in 1731. The works displayed in the Ringling Museum comprise the only extant large-scale painting cycle by Rubens outside of Europe, and they are joined by several other paintings by the artist in the Museum collection.



Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish, 1577-1640

The Triumph of Divine Love, c. 1625, Oil on canvas, Museum Purchase, 1980, SN 977

Rubens depicts the Love of God as the motherly figure of Charity (who also resembles the Virgin Mary) standing on a small processional chariot drawn by two lions. Behind Charity a pelican pierces its breast to feed its young, a sacrificial gesture symbolizing that of Christ's. A dense halo of flying putti (child-angels) fills the air. Three more putti are land-bound. One bends to burn intertwined snakes, traditional symbols of sin and evil; another raises a flaming heart and a bow; the third putto, astride one of the lions, brandishes the arrow of sacred love. The theme of love, sacred and profane, is thus announced by the putti, with their bow and arrow (like Cupid's), the torch (to ignite the feeling of love) and the flaming heart. All three of these attributes recur throughout Rubens' composition. For example, the spokes of the chariot wheel radiate alternating arrows and shafts of flame. Below the bottom ledge is a flaming heart pierced by two crossed arrows.



Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish, 1577-1640

The Four Evangelists, c. 1625, Oil on canvas, Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 213

Like *The Defenders of the Eucharist*, the cartoon of *The Four Evangelists* represents figures in motion. The institution of the Eucharistic sacrament at the Last Supper was recorded by the Evangelists in the Gospels. In front is Saint Luke with his symbol, the ox. This beast, alluding to sacrifice, is traditionally an attribute of Luke, since his Gospel begins with the sacrifice of Zachariah. Next to Luke is Saint Mark, holding his Gospel under his arm. The lion that alludes to the Christ of the Resurrection, walks at his side. Saint Matthew and the angel are given central place. With one hand, the angel points to a Gospel passage, and with the other gestures heavenward, reflecting the divine inspiration with which Matthew wrote his Gospel. Saint John, the youngest of the group, looks up at an eagle. The eagle, thought to be able to look directly into the sun, alludes to John's vision of the Apocalypse. The cup with the snake refers to poison that John drank, proving his faith. The cockleshell at the bottom of the painting is a traditional symbol of the Resurrection. Surrounding the shell is a cornucopia of fruit, suggesting the sustaining abundance to which the Gospels give access, and a dolphin, another Christian symbol of the Resurrection.



Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish, 1577-1640

The Defenders of the Eucharist, c. 1625, Oil on canvas,
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 214

In this companion piece to *The Four Evangelists*, Rubens has incorporated figures from early church history into a dramatic spectacle. On the far right is Saint Jerome, dressed in cardinal's robes. Jerome's taking of the sacrament of the Eucharist at his last rites had become a favorite subject in painting among artists by Rubens' time. The book Jerome reads is his translation of the Bible into Latin. In front of Jerome is Norbert, the German bishop Saint, in his white monastic habit and four-cornered hat. He carries the sacrament of the Eucharist bundled beneath his robes. In the center stands Saint Thomas Aquinas in his Dominican habit, holding a book of his writings and pointing heavenward. This gesture mirrors that of Saint Matthew in the adjacent cartoon of *The Four Evangelists* and thus reinforces the early Church fathers' role as proclaimers and defenders of the Eucharist doctrines. Next to Saint Thomas is Saint Clare, dressed in the Franciscan habit of the Poor Clares and holding a great monstrance. The features of Saint Clare are those of Rubens' patron, the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia, Governess of the Netherlands. To the left of Saint Clare is Saint Gregory the Great, shown wearing papal robes and tiara and holding the papal staff. Gregory authored some of the most important texts of the Church, including most of the Canon and prayers of the Mass. Next to him is the bishop-saint Ambrose. Also an influential shaper of Church doctrine, he is best known for asserting the dogma of Divine Presence in the Eucharist. At far left and recognizable by his black beard, crosier, and miter, is Saint Augustine. His writings on the Trinity explained various aspects of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The still life of books, pens, and lamp in the foreground recollects and reiterates the scholarly implements with which the fathers of the early Church had defended the dogma of the Eucharist.



Peter Paul Rubens
Flemish, 1577 -1640

The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, c. 1625
Oil on canvas

Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 212

The largest and artistically most important of the Ringling cartoons is *The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek*. The inspiration is an episode from the Old Testament (Genesis XIV, 17-24), where the Patriarch Abraham returns victorious from the battle of Dan. Melchizedek, King of Salem (later Jerusalem) and High Priest, offers Abraham bread and wine and blesses him. In return the Patriarch offers the High Priest gifts from the spoils of battle. The offering of the bread and wine is shown by Rubens as a prefiguration of the Christian Eucharist: Melchizedek, standing in the higher position, hands down the offering to Abraham, as if handing down of the Eucharist from the altar in the Catholic Mass. The figures attending the High Priest also reflect the assistance of acolytes in the sacramental rite. The other Old Testament prefigurations to be found in the *Triumph of the Eucharist Series* are *The Gathering of the Manna* (between the doors on the left wall), *Elijah and the Angel* and *The Sacrifice of the Old Covenant* (both now in the Louvre Museum, Paris).



Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish, 1577-1640

The Gathering of the Manna, c. 1625, Oil on canvas
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 211

The manna (or bread) which the Israelites gathered in the desert, like the bread and wine offered to Abraham by Melchizedek, prefigures the New Testament Eucharist. The subject, taken from the Book of Exodus (XVI, 13-36), represents a second miraculous feeding of the Israelites during their journey through the Sinai desert. The white flakes (Manna) that mysteriously fell from Heaven are here shown as round wafers that resemble the Host of the Mass. As the leader of the Exodus, Moses stands at the right of the composition in a bright red robe, a rod in one hand and the other raised as if to summon the precious substance from Heaven. Two women, one leading a child, carry baskets on their heads and circle a young man who stoops in the center to gather more manna.



Peter Paul Rubens, designed by
Flemish, 1577-1640

Jan Frans van den Hecke, woven by
Flemish, active from 1660, died 1695

Fides Catholica (The Triumph of the Catholic Faith), c. 1662
Tapestry

Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 1024

The allegorical figure of Faith is shown standing on her chariot holding a chalice aloft as she proceeds in triumph before the defeated personifications of Science, Philosophy, and Nature. The first captive, a personification of Science, is a bearded man who holds an astrolabe in one hand and a book in the other. Beside him is an old man with the well-known features of Socrates who represents Philosophy. Just behind this figure is a younger person crowned with a laurel wreath who represents the antique figure of Poetry. At the side of Philosophy walks Nature depicted as a woman with multiple breasts. The rear figure is dark, bearded and wears an exotic headdress. He most likely typifies Moorish or Islamic Philosophy, which was finally brought into line with the rest of those who follow obediently behind the true Faith. Decorating the chariot with Faith is a globe representing the extent of her rule. In front of this globe is an angel holding a large wooden cross representing the Crucifixion of Christ. This image together with the two cherubs holding the instruments of the passion of Christ: the crown of thorns, loincloth and the nails of the cross, refer to the sacrifice of Christ's life. The triumphal procession of Faith is illuminated by an angel holding a torch and pointing the way.



Gaspar de Crayer

Flemish, 1584-1669, active in Antwerp

Portrait of the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia, c. 1620

Oil on canvas

Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 217

The sitter was a daughter of King Philip II of Spain. She married the Archduke Albrecht and after his death became Governess of the Southern Netherlands (Belgium). She died in Brussels in 1633. Isabella was a major patron of Rubens from his early years, culminating with the commission for the Eucharist series on display in this gallery. De Crayer was a follower of Rubens who was also extensively employed by Isabella and her successor Ferdinand. Rubens portrayed the Archduchess dressed as Saint Clare in the cartoon for *The Defenders of the Eucharist*.



Spanish, 17th century

A Female Saint

Polychromed and gilded wood

Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 1545



Flemish
Pyx, 15th century
Gilt copper
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7071

Italian (Siena)
Chalice, late 14th century
Gilt silver, gilt copper and champlevé
enamel
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7068

Italian (Siena)
Chalice, 15th century
Gilt silver, gilt copper and champlevé
enamel
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7062



North Italian
Censer, early 15th century
Gilt copper
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7077

French (Limoges)
Pyx, c. 1250
Copper-gilt, champlevé enamel
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7154

French (Limoges)
Pyx, c. 1250
Copper-gilt, champlevé enamel
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7153

French (Limoges)
Reliquary Chasse, 13th century, (with
probable later modifications)
Gilt copper and champlevé enamel
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7070



German (Meuse)
Altar Candlestick, 13th century
Gilt bronze
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7073

German or Flemish
Figural Candlestick, early 15th century
Brass
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7063

Flemish (Dinant)
Candlestick, 16th century
Brass
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7152



German or Flemish (Dinant or Mosan)
Two Twin-Branched Candlesticks, early 15th century
Brass
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7020-7021

German or Flemish
Figural Candlestick, early 15th century
Brass
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7049

German (Meuse)
Altar Candlestick, 13th century
Gilt bronze
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7074



German (Cologne), 15th century

Monstrance

Gilt-copper

Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7076

Southern Netherlandish, 15th century
(partially reworked in the 19th century)

Monstrance

Gilt-copper, glass, and other materials

Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7016

German, 15th century (partially reworked
in the 19th century)

Monstrance

Gilt-copper and glass

Bequest of John Ringling, 1936, SN 7017