

Rubens: the most influential artist of all?

Royal Academy's first must-see exhibition of 2015 traces the Flemish Master's influence over 300 years. Club Life gets a preview.



What springs to mind when you hear the name Peter Paul Rubens? It's likely scenes of generously sized pale-skinned ladies cavorting amid foliage with tanned, Adonis-like men. Although the Flemish painter, who lived from 1577 to 1640, was undoubtedly a master of the human figure, his work was not limited to studies in voluptuous female body types: his portfolio is vast and filled with a range of subjects, including dramatic religious scenes, bucolic landscapes and regal portraits - as well as the odd naked lady, of course.

This is why the Royal Academy's latest blockbuster exhibition -Rubens and his Legacy: From Van Dyck to Cézanne - curated by the RA's Arturo Galansino and Nico Van Hout of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, is so important. It proves the extent of his talent and versatility - just a handful of the works by Rubens portray stereotypical fleshy scenes - and investigates how these attributes led to his enduring influence on other artists throughout the centuries.

Organised under five themes - poetry, elegance, power, lust and compassion - each mixes up work by Rubens alongside responses from those he influenced, including paintings, drawings and prints collated from some of the finest collections world-wide.

The exhibition also explores how the interest shown in his work by later artists was selective: French painters were attracted mainly to his eroticism and poetry, while Germans were enthralled by his vitality and pathos. Spaniards admired the drama of his religious works, while English painters drew most from his elegant portraits and bucolic landscapes.

'Many artists - Delacroix, Vigée-Lebrun, Reynolds and Renoir to name a few - were trained by seriously studying Rubens' altarpieces, allegories, portraits and landscapes,' says curator Nico Van Hout. 'Each artist focused on different aspects of his oeuvre and the works in this exhibition show the great variety of this impact: they include exact copies, creative copies, pastiches and quotations right through to works that only echo Rubens' style. Each has been carefully considered for its significance to showcase the ongoing strength of Rubens' legacy throughout the past three centuries.'

The exhibition also features one 'new' picture, which had been written off as a fake for over 60 years since its first discovery. 'The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus' was re-discovered by van Hout, accidentally, in another gallery on a trip to Oslo.

In all, Rubens and His Legacy: Van Dyck to Cezanne features 160 works by Rubens and those he influenced - including Manet, Turner, Delacroix and Picasso.

Some highlights:

The Garden of Love, c1633

This game-changing large-scale painting in the room titled Poetry is one of Rubens' most famous, depicting a joyous celebration of courtship and love among the wealthy and fashionable people of Antwerp in his day. This painting set the tone for a genre known as the fete galantes: it especially bewitched the young Jean-Antoine Watteau who painted *The Pleasures of the Ball* in 1714, in response.

Tiger, Lion and Leopard Hunt, 1617

This almost life-size painting is among Rubens' most impressive compositions in a series of hunting scenes, all showing dramatic confrontations between man and beast. Filed under 'Violence', it is distinguished by volatile movement, as a leaping tiger claws unforgivingly at a man on horseback. This kind of energetic scene captured the imagination of Eugene Delacroix who in 1847, wrote in his journal: 'I made some sketches from the Hunts by Rubens. There is as much to be learned from his exaggerations and his swelling forms as from exact imitations.'

Portrait of Maria Grimaldi and Dwarf, c. 1607

Rubens found a market for painting portraits during a trip to Genoa, including this full-length painting of the ruff-sporting Maria Grimaldi and a rather strange-looking dwarf, which hangs in the Elegance room. Rubens' most famous pupil, Sir Anthony Van Dyck, also visited Genoa to paint portraits, and was highly accomplished by the time he became Rubens assistant at the age of 16.

Pan and Syrinx, 1617

Rubens is most famous for his paintings of nudes, which most often take the form of goddesses and nymphs from classical mythology. Hanging in the 'Lust' room, Pan and Syrinx tells a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Edouard Manet was among the first of his generation of French artists to turn to Rubens for inspiration, while Paul

Cezanne creatively reworked Rubens's curvaceous women in his Three Bathers (c.1875).

Rubens and His Legacy: From Van Dyck to Cézanne is at the Royal Academy of Arts, London W1 from Saturday 24 January until 10 April. For more information, visit royalacademy.org or call 020 7300 8000.

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