



**Rubens, *Flight of Lot and His Family from Sodom.***

**Oil on Canvas, c1613. 220.3cm x 243.8cm**

Permanent Collection, 1936. The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida. SN218

**Exhibition Review, with Images. Peter Paul Rubens: Impressions of a Master**

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida. February 17–June 3, 2012

Organized by the Ringling Museum, Florida, and the Royal Museum of Fine Art, Antwerp

Curator: Virginia Brilliant, Associate Curator of European Art, Ringling Museum

Curatorial Liaison in Antwerp: Nico Van Hout, Royal Museum of Fine Art

In lieu of printed exhibition catalogue: [Triumph & Taste](#) by Virginia Brilliant (2011)

[Exhibition Web site](#)

[Rubens Symposium](#), March 30-31, 2012. Johnson-Blalock Center, Ringling Museum

Exhibition Design & Installation: Matthew Harmon, Don Roll & preparators, Ringling Museum

Didactic Exhibits: Virginia Brilliant, curator; Education Department, Ringling Museum; Joseph Loccisano, Gallery Manager, State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota

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Public Relations: Scott Gardiner, Ringling Museum of Art

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**By Maureen E. Mulvihill**

Princeton Research Forum, Princeton NJ

Have we in 2012 taken the full measure of Peter Paul Rubens? Evidently not. Almost four centuries since his death in 1640, this Flemish master of the Baroque continues to inspire lavish exhibitions, most recently at the [Museo del Prado, Madrid \(2011\)](#) and now at the crown jewel of Florida art venues: [The Ringling Museum](#) in glamorous Sarasota. Dazzling generations of scholars, collectors, librarians, and museum curators with his lush sensuality, not to mention his broad influence in printmaking, the book arts, connoisseurship, statecraft, and (yes) intellectual property protection, this prince of painters recently [fetched about \\$4.6M](#) at The European Fine Art Fair (Maastricht, Netherlands) in March 2012.

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**Peter Paul Rubens** (Siegen 1577-Antwerp 1640; Image 1, Gallery of Images, below), was a great deal more than a successful career painter of the Dutch Golden Age: this was one of the most accomplished public figures of the seventeenth century. Trained in the classical curriculum, Rubens was a living example of Humanist ideals, and his large corpus of commissioned work draws upon biblical, historical, and mythological themes (Image 2), as well as the critical political setting of his day, a setting which benefitted handsomely from Rubens's diplomatic skills. Rubens's own [muse and chief influence](#) was Titian; he also learned by studying Michelangelo, Raphael, Rembrandt, Tintoretto, and other masters. Rubens himself influenced the work of Van Dyck, his most successful student (and sometime collaborator), as well as Sir Joshua Reynolds and Gainsborough in England; and, in France, Watteau and Delacroix who famously judged Rubens "the Homer of painting". Renoir and Jackson Pollock were also admirers.

Rubens's career tactics are of special interest. He made none of his own prints, but rather employed skilled printmakers, such as engravers Paulus Pontius (Image 1) and Lucas Vorsterman I (Image 3), and woodcutter Christoffel Jegher, to advance his reputation by producing prints of his canvases (he often worked collaboratively, correcting and improving first results). Rubens also intersected with the book mar-

ket, most notably the respected publishing house of [Plantin-Moretus](#) (Antwerp), by producing printers' devices and elaborate title-pages (see *Porta*, Image 6). Presciently, Rubens sought to protect his work by establishing a copyright for his popular prints, both in Holland and outside of the Netherlands, in England, France, and Spain, where his work was also esteemed. This is a feature of Rubens's career which merits more attention from historians of copyright and early Intellectual Property law.

Diplomacy and statecraft were also among the master's gifts. Working mostly as an envoy (operative, really) for Philip IV of Spain, Rubens's intersections with Europe's power brokers is the subject of an important new book by [Mark Lamster](#) of Brooklyn, who shows that Rubens was a key player in England's peace treaty with Spain. Acknowledging his role in the negotiations, Charles I conferred a knighthood upon Rubens in March of 1630; he also was knighted by Philip IV. In addition to Rubens's political affairs in London, he had a busy art schedule as painter of the [ceiling canvases](#) of the Banqueting House, Whitehall, and also advancing the (visual) propaganda campaign of the Stuart court with a series of glorious power images ([George Villiers, first Duke of Buckingham](#)). Students of his biography say that Rubens was a dedicated husband and father, and a devout Roman Catholic who was given major commissions from almost every Catholic country in Europe. In a century of remarkable people ~ Aphra Behn, Comenius, Descartes, Dryden, Henrietta Maria, Huygens, Louis XIV, Marie de' Medici, John Milton, Pascal, Purcell, Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Anna Maria Van Schurman, Vermeer, and others ~ Rubens stands apart.

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The 2012 Rubens show at the Ringling Museum in Sarasota is a sweeping and creative display of some 100 exhibits in four large adjoining galleries. Foremost, there are selections from Rubens's great paintings (Ringling's permanent collection includes five Rubens canvases; see [Triumph & Taste](#) by Dr Virginia Brilliant, the show's curator, on the history of the Rubens paintings at Ringling). And then the show's prints. Supplying visual balance to the grand canvases are some 50 prints of Rubens's work (engravings, woodcuts), mostly loan

items from The Royal Museum of Fine Art, Antwerp. As Brilliant explained to this writer:

The show came together in a slightly curious way, which had an impact on our choices. The prints from Antwerp were actually those that formed the core of an exhibition which The Royal Museum of Antwerp did with the art museum in Montreal, around the year 2000; and Antwerp offered us, in Sarasota, those prints for an exhibition here at the Ringling. At that time, I realized that the Ringling has a large collection of prints after Rubens, as well, that no one every really sees. Plus, Ringling owns several paintings. So I decided to take Antwerp's works (the prints they offered) and ours, and also asked them for several more prints that correspond to Rubens's paintings, and that's how the show came together. It was an organic process, working with what was offered and what we had, rather than a concept that I originated and developed and then sought specific loans for; in the end, I was just striving to give an overview of Rubens's artistic *oeuvre*.

The show is suitably subtitled *Impressions of a Master*, for this is a display of Rubens's physical and material impressions, with painterly tools, on the surface of a stretched canvas. But the show suggests other impressions. There are those made on paper by the skilled printmakers of Rubens's canvases. And, not least, there are the viewers' impressions: responses to what they see in the gallery, all that they take in.

In addition to the welcome variety of content in the show, its installation merits special applause. First, its physical setting. Visitors are put at ease in this modern reconstruction of a seventeenth-century world owing to several features: the large size of the show's four adjoining galleries (the largest gallery is, well, rubenesque: 1650 square feet); the uncrowded spacing of the exhibits; the comfortable walking surface (low-stress bamboo flooring); low-glare overhead track lighting; and the cool temperature setting throughout the galleries. And then the many creative additions to the show's design, such as the large hanging opaque banners (scrims) throughout the exhibition space, each banner illustrated with an image from the paintings (Image 4). And a particularly fine touch is a decorative baroque-style wall vignette,

drawn from a scrolling motif in one of the show's prints (Image 5).

Complementing the show's beautiful installation is its didactic orientation, and here we have an instance of a cultural institution serving its community as resource and teacher. This goal is achieved in the show in a variety of ways. The Ringling created a receptive mood for the exhibition by organizing a two-day [Rubens Symposium](#) on Rubens's *Triumph of the Eucharist* series (March 30-31, 2012; Johnson-Blalock Center, Ringling Museum). This forum included presentations by respected art historians from the States and Europe, most notably Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). The didactic spirit of the show is also prominent in the galleries' handsome white letterpress wall text. Stepping into Gallery 1, for example, visitors are captured by Rubens's huge canvas, *The Flight of Lot*, surrounded by an appropriate selection of prints and smaller pieces; but the eye also notices the wall text throughout Gallery 1 and the adjoining spaces (Images 4, 5). The wall text serves as old-style exhibit labels, identifying the exhibit items and supplying background information on Rubens's life, career, and collaborations; it also requires that visitors to the show be readers as well as viewers. But the most compelling didactic touch in the show are two floor-to-ceiling freestanding pillars, or columns: "From Painting to Print: The Artists' Process" and "Printmaking Process: Can You See The Difference?" These two large displays were a three-way collaboration of the show's curator, the Museum's Education Department, and Joseph Loccisano (Bradenton, Florida), Gallery Manager, State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota. Loccisano, who supplied information and materials for the didactic exhibit in Gallery 4 (Image 6), had this to say:

Ringling engaged me to assist in this challenging project of the didactic exhibits, and I welcomed the opportunity to work with them. They wanted to make Rubens's work, as it is reproduced or replicated in the printmaking medium, accessible to viewers of the show. So in the "Printmaking Process" column (or pillar) in Gallery 4 [Image 6], I actually created and displayed three different kinds of prints from a Rubens image of St Catherine: an etching, an engraving, and a woodcut. Each of these prints, in three different mediums, looks very different; and each is displayed, with an explana-

tory text, on its own dedicated surface of the column. To my Modernist eye, those three images of Catherine which I produced look more like Lucian Freud, or Francis Bacon, or even Schmitt-Rotluff, a German Expressionist – why, ol’ Rubens would have fired me as a printmaker of his work! But no matter, it’s the different look of his *Catherine* in each of the three mediums which I needed to achieve and display to gallery visitors. I supplied and also showed in this exhibit the actual materials used in these three different processes: the copper plate, the engraver’s steel burin or cutting tool, and the woodblock, though I used a linoleum plate in lieu of a woodblock. So these two unusual didactic displays in the show instruct gallery visitors, using both text and image, in the process of printmaking. They are taken through the process, step-by-step. These “didactics” were considerably challenging, for all of us, but so worthwhile. I am proud to have contributed to this special show on a great, great artist of yore.

One of the final exhibits is a freestanding multimedia didactic display consisting of two components: a glass-encased copy of Gevaerts’s *Pompa introitus honori Ferdinandi Austriaci Hispaniarum Infantis* (oversize folio, Antwerp: Plantin-Moretus, 1635, 1641 ed.; the prints inspired by Rubens’s stage set designs); and a touch-screen computer kiosk, placed under the glass case, enabling viewers to (digitally) page through this large folio. Thus, the show’s ‘digital *Pompa*’ (Image 7).

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In an exhibition which took great pains to show the cultural and political interconnections in Rubens’s world, it is regrettable that little attention was given to the master’s diplomatic work with and for the Stuart administration in London (this could have been managed in the show’s background information, displayed on the show’s wall text). Also, visitors would have appreciated (even expected, in a show of such scale) a printed exhibition catalogue, or certainly an exhibition brochure (or pamphlet) made available to them as they stepped into Gallery 1.

Here, now, is a look at the Ringling *Rubens*, and its splendid installation:

**A Gallery of Selected Images from the 2012 Rubens Show,  
Ringling Museum, Sarasota, Florida**



**Image 1. Peter Paul Rubens (Siegen 1577 - Antwerp 1640).  
Self-portrait**

Engraving, Paulus Pontius (Antwerp, 1603-1658). 360mm x 263mm  
Royal Museum of Fine Art, Antwerp



**Image 2. Workshop of Rubens. *Danaë and the Shower of Gold***

Oil on canvas. 80 ¼" x 69 ¼" x 3 ½". SN220  
The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.  
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936.

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**Image 3. Lucas Vosterman I (Zaltbommel 1595-Antwerp 1675)**

*The Return from Egypt*, 1620. Engraving, after Peter Paul Rubens.

42cm x 31cm

On loan from The Royal Museum of Fine Art, Antwerp

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#### **Image 4. Installation: Detail of Gallery 1**

A view capturing the installation's impressive space, as well as its lighting, walking surface, and variety of exhibits. The creative accent of an oversize opaque banner, or scrim, depicting an image from Rubens's work, is used throughout the show's four adjoining galleries.

Giovanni Lunardi, photographer, Sarasota, Florida.

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### **Image 5. Installation: Detail of Gallery 1**

A view capturing the prominence of white letterpress wall text throughout the show. Note also the large white baroque-style motif, a contemporary design from the show's print offerings. This motif is used as a creative wall accent, and show logo, throughout the installation.

Giovanni Lunardi, photographer, Sarasota, Florida.

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**Image 6. Freestanding Didactic Exhibit (images and text):  
“Printmaking Process”**

Two of these custom-made displays are in the show, with the goal of making Rubens’s work accessible to modern viewers. The exhibit above, in Gallery 4, displays information and materials supplied by Joseph Loccisano (Bradenton, Florida; Gallery Manager, State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota).

Giovanni Lunardi, photographer, Sarasota, FL.

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**Image 7. Freestanding Didactic & Multimedia Exhibit:  
The Show's 'Digital *Pompa*'**

This touch-screen computer kiosk enables viewers to digitally page through the exhibit's displayed book (prints inspired by Rubens's stage set designs): *Pompa introitus honori Ferdinandi Austriaci Hispaniarum Infantis* (Antwerp: Plantin-Moretus, 1635; 1641 ed.).

Giovanni Lunardi, photographer, Sarasota, Florida

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This essay is dedicated to the memory of *Elizabeth Stone* (d. 2010), librarian, Language & Literature Division, Brooklyn Public Library, Grand Army Plaza, Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York. She is sadly missed.

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