

then recruit them into the royal navy. The stress on the royal navy increased dramatically under Charles I, whose aggressive foreign policy initiatives put a premium on recruiting and retaining skilled mariners: “In warfare, as in the captivity crisis, the Crown’s desire to cherish its seafaring subjects outstripped its capacity, resulting in widespread misery and unrest” (268). The disastrous course of the war combined with Charles’s deteriorating financial condition to produce ongoing discontent among the poorly fed and chronically underpaid seamen, many of whom knew from personal experience that they would have been materially better off as pirates. By the spring of 1628, the Duke of Buckingham became the focal point of protests among disgruntled mariners, contributing the context in which he was assassinated in Portsmouth while assembling another fleet.

Smith and Hubbard each engage effectively with the discussion among historians of the process through which the English state modernized as its monarchs developed an increasingly ambitious vision of empire. The corporations on which Smith focuses occupied an important stratum in the composite state of England, and although Hubbard sees the state as relatively weak, the mariners she studies nonetheless facilitated the work of merchant corporations when such corporations provided them sufficient incentives to do so. At the very least, it can be said that early modern merchants and seaman both contributed to a long-term project of nation-building apparently without being motivated by the type of nationalist ideology that would be a hallmark of later phases of imperialist expansion.

J. Vanessa Lyon. *Figuring Faith and Female Power in the Art of Rubens*. Amsterdam University Press, 2020. 248 pp. 67 illus. \$ 136.00. Review by RUTH SARGENT NOYES, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK.

This book, authored by J. Vanessa Lyon, associate professor of Art History at Bennington College, offers a refreshing, thoroughly researched, and well-considered new approach to a shibboleth of art history, the relationship between artist Peter Rubens and women’s bodies (and women more generally); or, put differently: the question of Rubens and feminism (or even: Rubens as feminist). Published under

the aegis of AUP's series *Visual and Material Culture, 1300–1700*, this monograph takes its place amongst a burgeoning cadre of works in the series that approach early modern art history from the perspective of gender studies and feminist theory, revisiting—even reviving—a corpus of scholarship from the 2000s through the turn of the twenty-first century and re-evaluating the legacy of feminist art history while demonstrating that such analytical approaches continue to offer new and significant insights in the field.

*Figuring Faith and Female Power in the Art of Rubens* argues that in his capacities as artist, propagandist, and diplomat, Rubens not only possessed an awareness of evolving period religious and cultural attitudes toward women, but was also actively involved in shaping this same discourse. Embedded in close scrutiny of Rubens's paintings combined with close analyses of distinct genres of early modern textual sources, Lyons's historically contextualized approach undertakes to avoid and revise modern-day anachronistic readings of the artist's images of women that prescribe and proscribe certain forms of femininity. By analytically remapping within the discursive landscape of seventeenth-century female court culture and Catholic theology some of the artist's more renowned works, the book offers an historically grounded feminist corrective to a body of seventeenth-century art criticism that undervalued the painter's works on gendered terms, and to more recent scholarship wherein studies of gender and religion are often mutually exclusive. Lyons framed this work as a series of thematic semi-biographical case studies that proceed chronologically according to Rubens's extensive career and in relation to significant and powerful female figures from his personal and professional life: these include the artist's wives Isabella Brant and Helena Fourment, contemporary female rulers, and biblical or mythological personages who figured prominently in his works such as Delilah and the Virgin Mary, Juno and Omphale. The author unfolds how, rather than the bearer of a fixed meaning or set of meanings, the female form functioned across Rubens's oeuvre as a polysemous transhistorical carrier of meaning that, while unstable and evolving over the course of the artist's lifetime, was consistently imbued with heightened devotional and rhetorical efficacy by virtue of being inflected by period notions of female difference and particularity.

A Prologue and Introduction that deftly map the state of scholarship, provide a helpful bibliographical and historiographical overview of the issue of a feminist approach to Rubens's art, and establish the early modern European context of the "woman question" whereby "the height of the *querelle des femmes* coincided with the widest reach and reinforcement" of Catholic Counter-Reformation decrees, such that paradoxically, "while earthly liberties were being summarily curtailed for mortal women an even greater spiritual status was being accorded to female saintliness" (20). As Lyons states in the Introduction with regard to the overwhelmingly Catholic courtly context for many works treated in this study, while remaining hermeneutically guarded "when confronting the portrayal of women for and within the historically masculinist institution of the Christian Church" (27), nonetheless a broader argument can be framed whereby women often functioned in Rubens's religious images as typological *figurae* gesturing to a meaning (such as Catholic doctrinal truths) beyond themselves while also standing for themselves; moreover, his depicted female forms more generally figured "quintessentially Rubensian powers of peacemaking, reproduction, and devotion in typological and trans-historical ways" (32).

Chapter One, "Samson and Dilemma: Rubens Confronts the Woman on Top," takes up a new critical reading of an intriguing and provocative threesome of paintings of dyadic couples from the early years of the artist's career, which this study reads against one another. These include *Hercules and Omphale* (c.1606), depicting Ovidian characters, *Samson and Delilah* (1609), portraying Old Testament protagonists, and the well-known *Self-Portrait with Isabella Brant* (1609), a rare (for the period) depiction of a married couple shown life-size within the same frame of the artist and his first wife (an educated and wealthy woman in her own right). Lyons posits that the former two history paintings should be read as iconographical and compositional keys to unfolding layers of significance subsumed in the imagery of the double portrait. This chapter unpacks how these images were inflected on one level by contemporary circumstances in the artist's life (notably his union with a woman from a family possessed of a higher social rank than Rubens's own), and on another level by motifs and forms adapted from Renaissance works across media by artists including

Michelangelo and Titian according to typical Rubensian strategies of emulation. Through contextualized iconographic and formal analysis that attends particularly to specific compositional aspects—e.g., placement of female in relation to male figures, the role of drapery and (cross-)dress, and biblical topoi alluded to by all three paintings—this chapter succeeds in shedding new light on the canonical and much-discussed *Self-Portrait*, disclosing its potential ambiguity, which Lyons suggests may reflect the painter's own shifting notions of sex difference within the milieu of the *querelle des femmes* and his familial circumstances. The second chapter, "Making Assumptions: Marian Tropes After Italy," similarly explores a novel cluster of paintings, here dating to the era of Twelve Years' Truce (1609—21) that brought the cessation of hostilities between the Southern Netherlands and the Dutch Republic, which proved for Rubens a highly productive period during which he secured important commissions for his iconic Antwerp *Crucifixions*. Lyons reads these renowned altarpieces against a contemporary cluster of complex mythological paintings that included *Juno and Argus*, and contemporaneous depictions of the *Assumption of the Virgin* and the lactating Virgin. Chapter Two marshals discussion of these ostensibly disparate images to map a meta-artistic trajectory linking Rubens's earlier Michelangelesque works and his increasingly Venetian approach to picturing, underscoring the critical implications of the corresponding stylistic shift from Rome to Venice—associated, respectively with central Italian *disegno*'s masculine linearity and feminized *colorito*—to which the author will return in the book's final chapter in greater depth.

Chapter Three is divided into two complimentary sections, each devoted to cycles and suites of paintings executed for female sovereigns, whose respective patronage commissioning important large-scale pictorial programs in the 1620s played a significant role in shaping Rubens's mid-career production. Part One, "Recycling Sovereignty: Maria de' Medici," takes up the sometimes misunderstood, relatively secular and mythologically inflected Medici cycle of canvases produced for the widowed queen mother of France and currently preserved in the Louvre; Part Two, "Figuring Faith and Female Power: Isabel Clara Eugenia," treats the so-called Eucharist tapestries, commissioned as a luxurious *ex-voto* taking up aspects of Catholic doctrine by the arch-

duchess and governor general of the Spanish Netherlands and today in the royal Poor Clare convent in Madrid. Constituting the book's inflection point and "a diptych of sorts" (119), this chapter gives a carefully constructed comparative analysis that makes for a lively re-reading of two otherwise ponderous projects, which Lyons characterizes as Rubens's most inventive and important large-scale programs for female patrons, despite their dramatic differences in conception, tone, and subject. Against the entangled backdrop of the Thirty Years War, early modern gendered theories of leadership, battlefield views, and portraits that attended the careers of both embattled female rulers, this study highlights how the artist conceived of vastly different artistic solutions to the common challenge of how to portray the legacies of both subjects as divinely appointed sovereign widows.

The fourth chapter, "Peace Embraces Plenty: Queering Female Virtue at Whitehall," extends the book's exploration of gendered figurations of leadership to the Protestant ambit of the English royal court under King Charles I during the 1630s, when Rubens won the sought-after commission to paint the ceiling of London's Whitehall Palace Banqueting House, resulting in his cycle of canvases known as the *Peaceful reign of King James I*. Within this extensive painted program, Lyons pinpoints attention on a specific pair of intimately coupled figures portraying Peace and Plenty personified in an amorous same-sex embrace, conventionally described as the artist's allegory of "Righteousness kissing Peace" after Psalm 85. Chapter Four argues instead for a new interpretation of this provocative figural group that re-situates Rubens's passionate female personifications within the context furnished by the contemporaneous discourse weaving together Caroline divine-right rhetoric, sermons by court clergyman William Laud, and changing period approaches to allegorical representation. Against this rich contextual backdrop, this case study tenders that "the scriptural meeting and kissing of virtues provided Rubens with both a notional narrative and an authoritative justification for representing female affection, even same-sex desire, in a political and morally positive light" (177). Chapter Five, "Feminizing Rubens in the Seventeenth Century," circles back to an issue of gendered seventeenth-century critical receptions of Rubens's oeuvre raised earlier in (and indeed at various points throughout) the volume. Here, Lyon performs close

readings of ways in which early modern art theorists “mobilized dichotomously gendered, regionalist taxonomies of painting in order to reassign the artist from the ranks of the foreign-born naturalist painters considered as *Caravaggisti* to the company of the purportedly (even) less cerebral, graphically unskilled follower of Titian” (209). By disclosing the coded and continuously reappropriated stylistic binaries opposing “masculine” Tuscan *disegno* against inferior “feminine” Venetian *colorito*, this chapter offers a reevaluation of Rubens—whose work has been shown over the course of this book as inhabiting both artistic spheres—as an underappreciated artist who in fact achieved a synthesis of the two rival, regional approaches to painting.

Rather than a theoretical overlay applied onto the works of art discussed, across a series of chronological-thematic case studies the feminist perspective seems to emerge organically from the material, deftly mined, refined, and presented by the author. Given this approach, and the vastness of the artist’s oeuvre, there is necessarily a degree of selectivity at work (which Lyons acknowledges), and the study makes no pretense at being a universal survey of Rubens’s career. However, Lyons succeeds in setting forth a kind of analytical toolkit, drawing deftly on past studies and foregrounding close visual analysis of images, such that they develop adaptable models that might be re-iterated and brought to bear on other works beyond the purview of this study. Productively provocative, rigorously contrived, and enlightening, *Figuring Faith and Female Power in the Art of Rubens* will appeal to a broad academic readership: Rubens specialists interested in new perspectives on canonical works; art historians of the period, particularly those who teach undergraduate and graduate surveys of Baroque art, who will find this book enriches timely discussions of Rubens’s otherwise increasingly potentially problematic oeuvre in the post-Me Too era; scholars of women’s, gender and sexuality studies interested in visual culture; as well as graduate students and advanced undergraduates interested in the continued relevancy of feminist art history (Lyons helpfully translates relevant period texts in English and contextualizes specialized terms for greater accessibility).