

**LIVING GODS WILL**

**Biblical Artists**

**RUBENS**



**PETER PAUL RUBENS**

**Born:** 1577 – Siegen, Germany

**Died:** 1640 – Antwerp, Belgium

## Peter Paul Rubens

### Early years and Italy

**Rubens** was a remarkable individual. Not only was he an enormously successful painter whose workshop produced a staggering number of works; but he also played an important diplomatic role in 17th-century European politics.

He was clearly a charming and attractive companion, described as having 'a tall stature, a stately bearing, with a regularly shaped face, rosy cheeks, chestnut brown hair, sparkling eyes but with passion restrained, a laughing air, gentle and courteous'.

**Peter Paul Rubens** was born in Siegen in Germany, but from the age of 10 he lived and went to school in Antwerp. His first job, at the age of 13, was as court page to a countess. It was a prestigious position for a young man, but **Rubens** found it stifling and began training as an artist.

As soon as he had completed his training, he set out for Italy in order to see for himself the great Renaissance and classical works that he knew from copies. For eight years, he travelled and worked in Spain, copying and incorporating the techniques of Renaissance and classical art.

### Antwerp

In 1608 news came that **Rubens's** mother was dying. He left immediately for Antwerp, but by the time he arrived she had died. Once home, **Rubens** decided to stay in the city.

His reputation had preceded him, and in 1609 at the age of 33 he was appointed court painter to the rulers of the Netherlands, the Archduke Albert and his wife Isabella. The following year, he married his own Isabella - **Isabella Brandt**.

**Rubens** could now afford to buy a grand house in a fashionable part of Antwerp. He built a large studio to accommodate his pupils and assistants (he received far too many commissions to complete them all single-handedly).

He designed it himself in an Italian style. He also added a circular sculpture hall, based on the **Pantheon**, to the house.

**Rubens's** major business was altarpieces, particularly suitable for an artist who enjoyed working on a grand scale.

A diligent and disciplined man, he rose at 4am each day and worked until 5 in the evening before going out riding to keep himself physically fit. While painting, he would have someone read to him from a work of classical literature.

An enthusiastic collector of gems, ancient sculpture and coins, and other curiosities (including an Egyptian mummy), **Rubens's** collection became a well-known attraction for visiting dignitaries.

### **The diplomat**

In 1622 **Rubens** was commissioned to carry out a huge project in Paris for the notoriously difficult Maria de Medici, widow of King Henry IV of France.

Two entire galleries were to be decorated with scenes from the lives of the queen and her late husband. The commission was a fraught one. Maria was awkward and changeable; and her favorite, Cardinal Richelieu, saw **Rubens** as a political threat.

After years of wrangling, the project was abandoned half completed when Maria was banished from court.

In 1625 the plague reached Antwerp. **Rubens** moved his family to Brussels until the worst of it had passed. They then moved back to Antwerp where, to **Rubens's** horror, his wife became ill and died, probably of plague.

Usually a man who prided himself on his stoicism, **Rubens** was devastated by the loss of 'one whom I must love and cherish as long as I live'.

**Rubens** threw himself into his diplomatic work in order to distract himself. He spent several months in England where he carried out several commissions for Charles I who was a passionate collector of art.

One of the commissions that **Rubens** was to carry out for Charles was the decoration of the roof of his new Banqueting House at Whitehall.

### **Court artist**

From the mid-1620s **Rubens** became increasingly busy with diplomatic duties. Antwerp, in the southern Netherlands, was part of an empire ruled by Catholic Spain. The Protestant northern Netherlands were united under Dutch rule. Both sides hoped to unite the Netherlands under their own regime.

In 1610, a 12 year truce between the Dutch and the Spanish had allowed the Archdukes Albert and Isabella to continue their Catholic rule in peace and stability.

In 1621 the truce came to an end and just at this crucial time, the sovereign Archduke Albert died. His consort, Isabella, continued as governor but her situation was a precarious one as Spain, France and England tried to decide who they should ally themselves with, and against whom.

**Rubens** was called upon to negotiate in France and England on behalf of Isabella as the representative of the Spanish Netherlands.

Because painters often had reason to travel to foreign courts, he was well placed to carry out secret or delicate visits without his presence arousing suspicion. He became a close confidante of Isabella and she valued his advice.

In 1624 **Rubens** was granted a patent of nobility by Isabella's nephew Philip IV and in 1627 she moved him even further up the social scale by making him a 'gentleman of the household'.

### **Last years**

After 18 months abroad, **Rubens** had had enough of the thankless task of politicking. He returned to Antwerp to see his children and to look after his domestic affairs.

He could also dedicate himself entirely to painting. One of his most important patrons in the 1630s was King Philip IV of Spain who commissioned over **80** paintings.

In 1630, at the age of 53, **Rubens** married again. To everyone's surprise he did not marry into the nobility, but chose **Hélène Fourment**, the **16 year-old** daughter of a respectable merchant family.

**Rubens** was clearly bowled over by his new wife with whom he had five children, and **she figures in numerous portraits, including a version of 'The Judgement of Paris' in which she appears as Venus.**

During his last years **Rubens** spent increasing amounts of time with his new young family in his country house, the Chateau de Steen. He began to paint more landscapes, often for his own enjoyment, rather than for sale.

**Having suffered painfully from gout for several years, in 1639 a particularly bad attack left Rubens unable to paint and he died a few months later in May 1640.**

**Samson and Delilah**

**oil on panel (185 × 205 cm) — 1609-1610**

Samson has fallen asleep in the lap of his beloved Delilah. Not knowing that she works for his enemy, the Philistines, he told her the secret of his enormous strength: his uncut hair.

When he sleeps, the Philistines quickly cut his hair.

The statue in the background shows Venus and Cupid, well-known symbols of love. The crossed hands of the Philistine with the scissors stand for deceit.

**Raising of the Cross**

**oil on panel (center panel: 460 × 340 cm) — 1610**

This famous triptych was made for the church of St-Walpurgis in Antwerp. Since 1815 it is on display in the cathedral of Our Lady, also in Antwerp. Contrary to many other triptychs, here the panels tell one story.

This center panel is filled with drama and power. The strong, tainted figures lug the ropes in order to raise the cross, carrying the pale body of Jesus. The influence of Michelangelo and Tintoretto on Rubens is obvious in the muscular bodies.

**Saint Peter**



oil on panel (107 × 82 cm) — c. 1611

Around 1612 Rubens made a series of portraits of the apostles, in commission of the duke of Lerma.

Peter was depicted holding a pair of keys, his common symbol: the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.

This work is linked to **1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:1**

## Saint Simon



oil on panel (108 × 83 cm) — c. 1611

Around 1612 Rubens made a series of portraits of the apostles, in commission of the duke of Lerma. All are identified by an attribute. Simon holds a saw in his left hand. According to a tradition he was put to death with a saw.

The Bible doesn't say much about this Simon. He is only mentioned in lists of all apostles. To distinguish him from Peter, who was also called Simon, this Simon was called **Simon the Zealot**.

This work is linked to **Mark 3:18**



**Saint James the Minor**

**oil on panel (108 × 84 cm) – 1612-1613**

Around 1612 Rubens made a series of portraits of the apostles, in commission of the duke of Lerma.

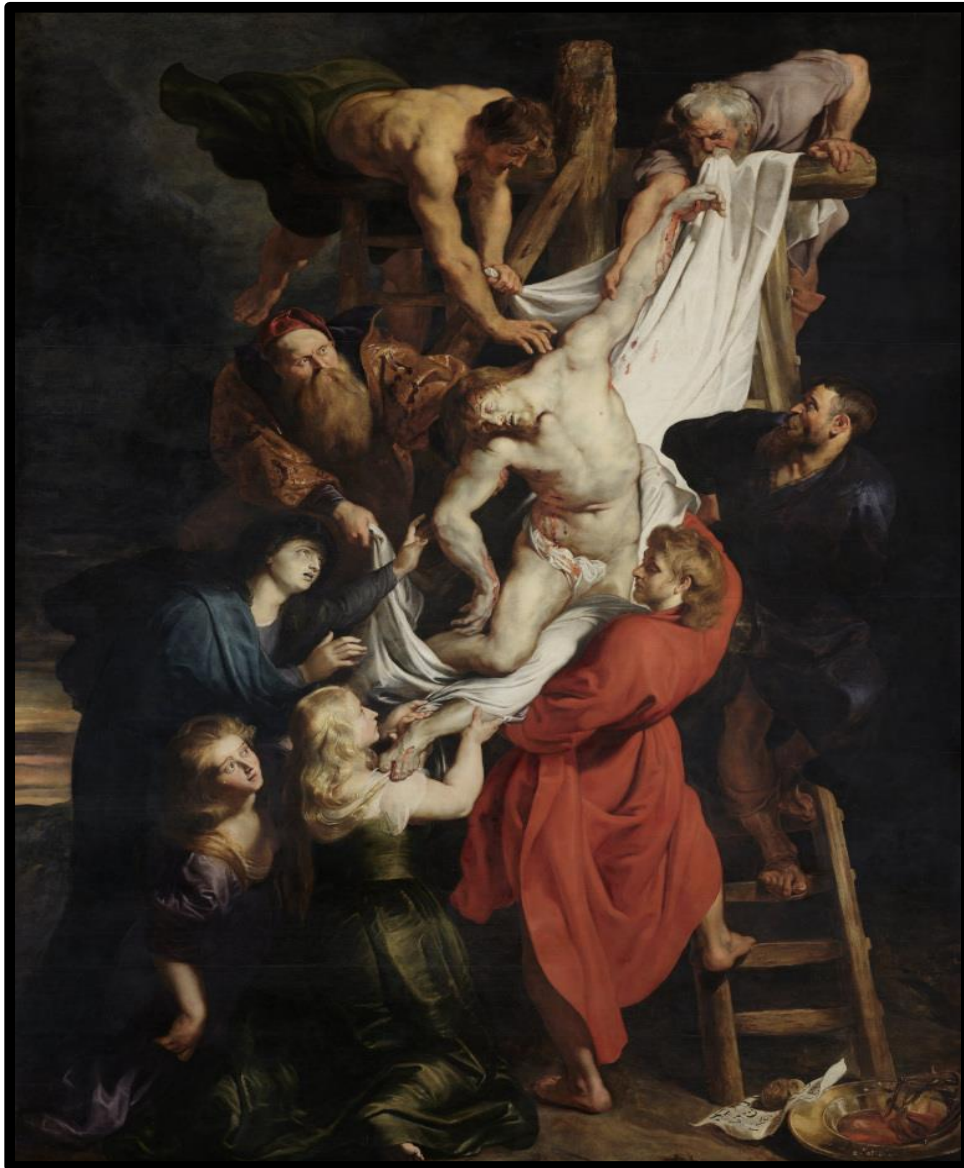
James the Minor is identified by his attribute: a fuller's hammer.

Legend has it that James was killed with his own tool.

In the roman-catholic tradition the apostle James the Minor is considered the author of the Epistle of James.

This work is linked to **James 1:1**

## The Deposition of Christ



**oil on panel (421 × 311 cm) — 1612 – 14**

Joseph of Arimathea has been granted permission to take down the body of Christ - a special dispensation, since it was customary to let the bodies hang.

John the Apostle, Nicodemus and two servants lend a hand. Christ's feet are resting on Mary Magdalene's shoulders.

The woman in blue is Mary, Mother of Christ.

**David Slaying Goliath**

**oil on canvas (123 × 99 cm) — ca. 1616**

David has just slain Goliath with a stone from his sling and is about to decapitate the giant.

A strong composition by Rubens, all the more so because of its suggestion of circular motion and its diametrical positioning of the opponents' faces.

This work is linked to **1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 17:51**

**The Risen Christ**

**oil on canvas (183 × 155 cm) – 1616**

Rubens shows Christ just after he has risen from the grave. The Resurrection has often been depicted in art. Contrary to most paintings on the subject, here the skull and the snake are missing. They are the symbols of death and sin that Christ has overcome.

To the left two angels intend to put some sort of crown on Jesus' head. Another angel lifts the shroud.

The painting is known to have been in the possession of the Medici family already in the first half of the 17th century.

This work is linked to **John 21:14**

**An Angel Gives Bread & Water to Elijah**

**oil on panel (72 x 62 cm) – 1625-28**

The life of the prophet Elijah is threatened by queen Jezebel, who has already had hundreds of Elijah's colleagues killed.

She was a supporter of the false god Baal. The disheartened Elijah withdraws, to fall asleep under a tree, hoping to never wake up again.

But an angel, a messenger from God, wakes him and feeds him.

This work is linked to 1 **Kings 19:7**

## The Martyrdom of Saint Andrew



**oil on canvas (306 × 216 cm) – c. 1639**

According to tradition, after the death of Christ St. Andrew preached in a number of cities along the Black Sea and in Anatolia.

In the Greek city of Patras, he was arrested. After undergoing flagellation, he was tied to a cross and left to die.

Since the Middle Ages his cross has always been shown having the shape of an X: Saint Andrew's cross.

Rubens painted this canvas in the last years of his life.