Rubens’ The Elevation of the Cross

Rubens in Catholic Flanders

The two most important artists of the Baroque era in Northern Europe (what we knew as Flanders in the 15th century) - Rubens and Rembrandt - worked under enormously different circumstances, even though they lived only a few hundred miles apart, because Flanders became divided along religious lines in the 16th century. The area which is today Belgium remained Catholic (where Rubens lived), while the area which is today the Netherlands, or Holland (where Rembrandt lived) broke away from Catholic Spain (which had controlled it) and established an independent Republic that was predominantly Calvinist (a form of Protestantism).

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Elevation of the Cross*, 1610, oil on wood, 15' 1 7/8" x 11' 1 1/2" (central panel), 15' 1 7/8" x 4' 11" (wings) (now located in the transept of the Cathedral in Antwerp, though originally intended for the main altar of Saint Walburga - a church which no longer exists) (photo)
Success in more than just painting

Rubens was an enormously successful artist in the first half of the 1600s. His paintings were sought after by important patrons all over Europe. A shrewd businessman, Rubens was also a devout Catholic. He is also a perfect example of the changed status of the artist: his friends and confidants were scholars, aristocrats, and even the royal families of Europe (Rubens was so trustworthy and clever that he served as a diplomat).

Travel to Italy

Rubens spent several years in Italy early in his career studying Italian Renaissance art, as well as the art of classical antiquity. He combined this with the influence of Caravaggio, the Venetian artists of the Renaissance, and the tradition of his native Flanders (think Campin and Van Eyck). Rubens was so successful that he set up a large studio in his native Antwerp (which you can still visit). There, he churned out large numbers of paintings for his royal and wealthy clients, and charged for the paintings according to how much he had personally painted. He was always responsible for the idea of a painting, but if his assistants executed most of it, the work was less expensive. In his studio Rubens had assistants working for him who specialized in different things, so they could all work on different parts of a single painting. Although Rubens perfected this system, we know that it was common practice for the "master" artist to have the idea and do much of the actual painting, but to have apprentices and assistants work on it too.

Nine men raise the cross

In the central panel of the triptych of The Elevation of the Cross nine enormous figures with bulging muscles struggle to raise the heavy wooden cross that Christ is nailed to. One can almost hear them grunt as they use all their strength to lift the cross. Their bodies form a compendium of different positions of the human body as it heaves a great weight: some figures at the top of the cross push forward from below, another at the center of the cross lifts straight up as he leans his body back, another figure has placed his body...
under the cross and uses the strength of his legs to lift it, while two others crouch at the base of the cross to pull it up and forward. Another figure helps from atop some branches and rocks, and still another pulls on rope that has been tied to the cross drawing our eye to Christ's own upward gaze and the sign attached to the cross that reads, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Perhaps this is the moment when Christ addresses God, and says "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)?

It is not easy to disentangle the limbs of all of these figures - arms and legs seem to join together in one massive effort to raise the cross. Christ's body forms a diagonal line that moves back into space, and the cross is being lifted in our direction. In fact, several of the figures are so foreshortened they seem as though they will spill out into our space any second. This scene could not be closer to us. Rubens transports us to the very foot of the cross at the moment that it is lifted and its base is set into the ground. We sense the chaos of this moment. A dog barks excitedly, and it seems entirely possible that these men will fail and the cross will fall to the ground.

**The Italian and Northern traditions come together**

Rubens combines muscled figures that remind us of Michelangelo (he had returned from a trip to Italy only two years earlier) with the descriptive realism that comes from the Northern tradition. Look for example at the way the light shines on the black armor of the figure on the left. There is also a specificity to the faces of some of the figures (the armored figure again, or the old man at the bottom) that reminds us of the Northern tradition.

Christ's body is simultaneously graceful and powerful as his chest lifts and pulls to his right and
his head, abdomen and legs move to his left. It clearly looks back to the ideal and elegant figures of the high Renaissance, but Rubens makes the figure more dramatic on that receding diagonal and emphasizes Christ's humanity and weakness by the large nails through his hands and feet and the blood that drips down. We can also see the influence of the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio in the strong contrasts of light and dark.

Rubens combines the physicality of classical sculpture (think of the Laocoön in the Vatican Museums), with the elegance and attention to musculature of Michelangelo, and the drama of the Baroque in what some art historians have described as his most important altarpiece.