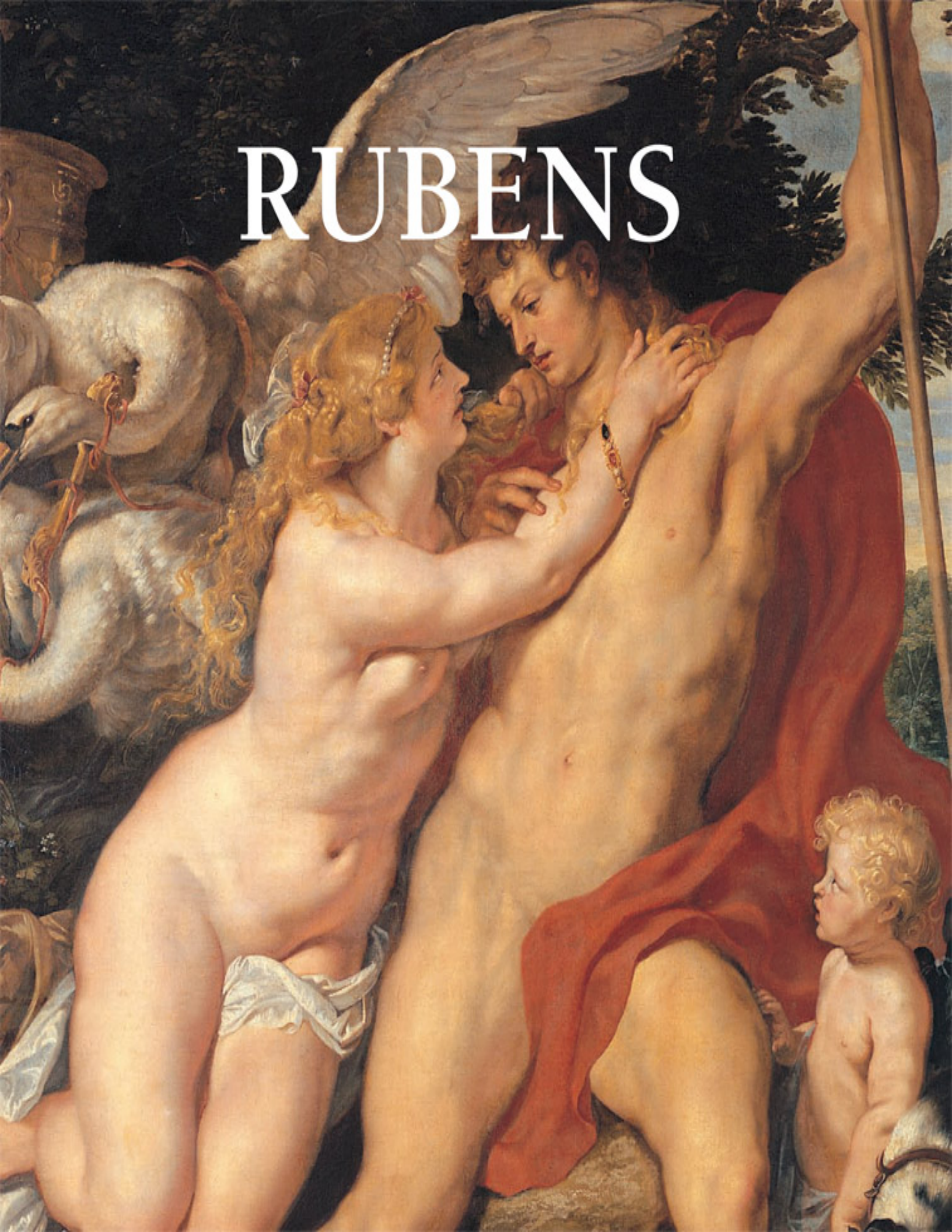
# RUBENS





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# Peter Paul Rubens

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oil on canvas, 63.5 x 47 cm,
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The name of the great seventeenth-century Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens is known throughout the world. The importance of his contribution to the development of European culture is generally recognized. The perception of life that he revealed in his pictures is so vivid, and fundamental human values are affirmed in them with such force, that we look on Rubens' paintings as a living aesthetic reality of our own time as well.

One gains the impression that in the seventeenth century Rubens did not attract as much attention as later. This may appear strange: indeed his contemporaries praised him as the "Apelles of our day". However, in the immediate years after the artist's death in 1640 the reputation which he had gained throughout Europe was overshadowed. The reasons for this can be found in the changing historical situation in Europe during the latter half of the seventeenth century. In the first decades of that century nations and absolutist states were rapidly forming. Rubens' new approach to art could not fail to serve as a mirror for the most diverse social strata in many European countries which were keen to assert their national identity and had followed the same

path of development. This aim was inspired by Rubens' idea that the sensually perceived material world had value in itself; Rubens' lofty conception of man, his place in the Universe, and his emphasis on the sublime tension of man's physical and imaginative powers (born in conditions of the most bitter social conflicts), became a kind of banner of this struggle, and provided an ideal worth fighting for. In the second half of the seventeenth century the political situation in Europe was different. In Germany after the end of the Thirty Years' War, in France following the Frondes, and in England as the result of the Restoration, the absolutist regime triumphed. There was an increasing disparity in society between conservative and progressive forces; and this led to a "re-assessment of values" among the privileged, who were reactionary by inclination, and to the emergence of an ambiguous and contradictory attitude towards Rubens.

This attitude became as internationally prevalent as his high reputation during his lifetime, and this is why we lose trace of many of the artist's works in the second half of the seventeenth century after they left the hands of their original owners (and why there is only rare mention of his paintings in descriptions of the collections of this period). Only in the eighteenth century did Rubens' works again attract attention.

In the course of the three centuries which have elapsed since the death of Rubens, his artistic legacy, while not losing its immediate aesthetic value, has been variously interpreted. Prevailing aesthetic opinion has never been able to ignore his influence, but at each specific historical juncture it has sought to channel this influence in a particular direction. At times the perception and interpretation of the artist's legacy has been determined by those features which people desired to see in his works, or

those that they hesitated to find there. Rubens' creative activities were so closely interwoven with the world he lived in that the detachment necessary for an overall assessment of his role and importance was not possible to achieve during his lifetime.
His contemporaries did not furnish literature on his art.
Only a few brief reviews or verses dedicated to his works by his contemporaries confirm his wide recognition.[1]

The opinion stated in a letter by Vincenzo Giustiniani, the well-known Italian *Maecenas* and patron of Caravaggio, may be considered one of the first attempts to define the nature of the artist's work. Writing during Rubens' lifetime, Giustiniani discussed the development of contemporary art: he considered it possible to place Caravaggio and Guido Reni in one group, with Rubens in another. He included Rubens, together with Ribera, Terbrugghen and Honthorst, in the group of "naturalists".[2]

Critical writings about Rubens began to appear when enthusiasm for him was moderated, and when the aesthetics of the "Grand Manner" began to take hold.

One of the chief proponents of this trend was Giovanni Pietro Bellori, the director of the Academy of St. Luke in Rome. His classical theories had a decisive influence on the formation of artistic taste throughout Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. According to his aesthetic principles, the main requirement of art was that it should embody "the ideal of beauty"; moreover, all that was individual, partial, accidental or transitory had to be raised to the level of the universal, eternal and immutable.

3. ***Head of an Old Man***. around 1609,
oil on wood, 63.5 x 50.2 cm,
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.