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The Young van Dyck and Rubens

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Anthony van Dyck was received as master in the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke in February 1618. It was probably even before this time that he entered Rubens' studio, not as a pupil but as the master's assistant. He was to remain in that post until his departure for England late in the year 1620.

The painting of *Achilles among the Daughters of Lycomedes* (Fig. 1) affords what may be an early glimpse of van Dyck's activity in Rubens' studio. This work, now in the Prado in Madrid, was one of a group of pictures offered by Rubens in 1618 to Sir Dudley Carleton, English Ambassador at The Hague. It was described by Rubens himself in a letter to Carleton: 'A painting of Achilles in woman's clothes, made by my best disciple (*fatto dal miglior mio discepolo*) and entirely retouched by my hand.'¹ In 1618 the words 'my best disciple' can only have referred to van Dyck, who presumably executed the picture from the master's preliminary studies. It is useless to look for evidences of the young artist's workmanship, since the painting was entirely gone over by Rubens.

As the master's principal assistant, van Dyck found himself involved in a monumental project when Rubens was commissioned to make the ceiling paintings for the new church of the Jesuits in Antwerp. In the contract for this great cycle, which was drawn up in 1620, it was specified that the paintings were to be executed by van Dyck, together with other 'disciples,' working from Rubens' designs.² Unluckily, the extent of van Dyck's participation in the decorative programme will never be known, for the entire cycle of paintings was lost in the fire that consumed the interior of the Jesuit Church in 1718. All we can say is that in 1620 Rubens looked on van Dyck (then about 21 years of age) as his ablest and most trusted assistant and intended that he should be the chief executant of the ceiling paintings.

Van Dyck, who had a highly developed imitative faculty, was a precocious artist and quickly taught himself how to paint in a Rubenesque manner – which of course explains why Rubens found him to be an invaluable collaborator. On occasion we may see the young painter composing his own version of a history subject previously represented by the master. About 1609 Rubens had painted a *Samson Betrayed by Delilah*, now in the National

¹ M. Rooses and C. Ruelens, *Correspondance de Rubens et documents épistolaires* (Antwerp, 1887-1909), II, 137.

² J.R. Martin, *The Ceiling Paintings for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* (Brussels, 1968), 214.

FIGURE 1. Rubens and van Dyck. *Achilles among the Daughters of Lycomedes*. Madrid, Museo del Prado (Photo: Mas Barcelona).





FIGURE 2. Rubens, *Samson and Delilah*. London, National Gallery (reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London).



FIGURE 3. Van Dyck, *Samson and Delilah*. London, Dulwich Picture Gallery (by permission of the Governors of Dulwich Picture Gallery).

Gallery in London (Fig. 2). When van Dyck took up the same subject in the painting now in the Dulwich Gallery (Fig. 3), he followed Rubens very closely, though the fact that the composition has been reversed may indicate that he also made use of Jacob Matham's engraving after Rubens' oil sketch.³ But van Dyck made some significant alterations. Instead of imitating Rubens' darkened room, he chose to represent Delilah's betrayal as taking place on an open loggia, with the Philistine soldiers waiting behind a column at the left. Moreover, the opening out of the composition, whereby the principal figures are less compactly grouped, is a characteristic feature of van Dyck's art.

It was observed by Vey that the pose of van Dyck's sleeping Samson bears some resemblance to the so-called Borghese *Hermaphrodite*, especially in the attitude of the torso, the angle of the head and the bent right arm.⁴ That the artist should have chosen such a lithe and slender model for the strong man of Israel may seem merely capricious. But the allusion to the antique *Hermaphrodite* is surely intentional. For Samson's haircut may be understood as a symbolic castration, and van Dyck seems to imply that once the hero's hair is shorn he will become powerless and effete.

³ A. McNairn, *The Young van Dyck* (Ottawa, 1980), 57.

⁴ H. Vey, *Die Zeichnungen Anton Van Dycks* (Brussels, 1962), 75.

⁵ J.S. Held, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens* (Princeton, 1980), I, 575; II, pl. 403.

Perhaps the most Rubens-like of all van Dyck's paintings is the altarpiece of *St. Martin Dividing his Cloak* in the parish of St. Martin in Zaventem (Fig. 4). In point of fact his starting point was an oil sketch of this subject by Rubens. Julius Held has suggested that the Zaventem commission was first given to Rubens, who went so far as to make the preliminary sketch but later turned over the task to his 'disciple' van Dyck.⁵ About the derivation of the latter's design from Rubens' sketch there can

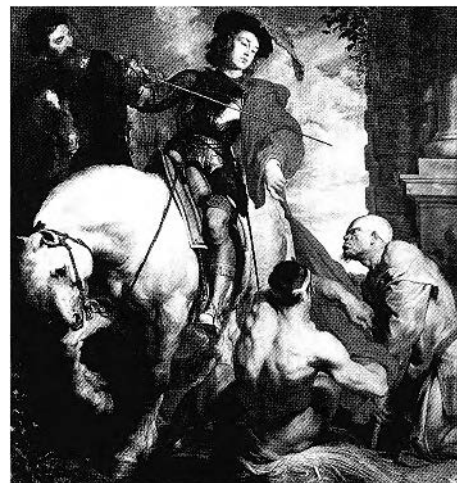


FIGURE 4. Van Dyck, *St. Martin Dividing his Cloak*. Zaventem, Church of St. Martin (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels).

be no doubt: though the composition is reversed, the principal personages assume very similar attitudes. The reversal was surely not due simply to a whim on van Dyck's part, but probably had to do with the placing of the painting in the church. In Rubens' sketch the light comes in the conventional manner from the left and the saint's face is accordingly turned in that direction. But van Dyck, considering the situation of the altarpiece, realized that the light would enter from the south side, that is to say from the right, and for this reason turned the composition round so as to conform to the natural fall of light.

It has long been recognized that the kneeling man at the right side of the picture was inspired by the crippled beggar in Raphael's tapestry cartoon of *The Healing of the Lame Man*. Although there is no corresponding figure in Rubens' oil sketch of *St. Martin*, the idea may nevertheless have come from him. For Rubens, as we learn from the inventory of his possessions, had made painted copies of Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles*, which would have been known to van Dyck.⁶

Lionel Cust was, I believe, the first to observe that the attitude of St. Martin echoes that of one of the Egyptian horsemen in Domenico dalle Grecche's woodcut after Titian's *Destruction of Pharaoh's Host in the Red Sea*.⁷ This very figure was copied by van Dyck in a pen drawing in the so-called Italian Sketchbook, now in the British Museum.⁸

Three final studies in chalk are known for the St. Martin altarpiece: the drawing in Rotterdam of the seated beggar seen from the back; the study in Chatsworth for the kneeling beggar; and the drawing, likewise in Chatsworth, for the head and for quarters of the horse.⁹ Since no comparable study exists for the figure of St. Martin himself, it has been suggested that van Dyck simply made use of his pen drawing of the horseman after the woodcut by Domenico dalle Grecche.¹⁰ I believe, on the contrary, that for an altarpiece such as this van Dyck would not have failed to make for the principal figure a careful study in chalk from the life. That drawing, unfortunately, has been lost.

It is perhaps not surprising that certain works of Rubens dating from the period when van Dyck was an assistant in his studio have been attributed to the younger master. These include the so-called cartoons for the tapestry series illustrating the history of the Roman consul Decius Mus, which have been in the Liechtenstein Collection since 1696, and which Rubens himself, writing to Sir Dudley Carleton in 1618, specifically described as of his own making. Yet throughout the later

6 J. Denucé, *Inventories of the Art-Collections in Antwerp in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Antwerp, 1932), 59, n^{os} 71-75.

7 L. Cust, *Anthony Van Dyck, An Historical Study of his Life and Work* (London, 1900), 33.

8 G. Adriani, *Anton van Dyck, Italianisches Skizzenbuch* (Vienna, 1940).

9 Vey, n^{os} 16-18, pls. 20, 22, 26.

10 McNairn, 19-20.

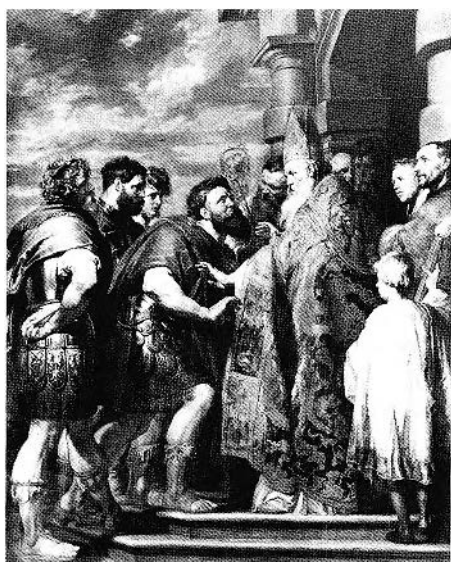


FIGURE 5. Rubens, *St. Ambrose and the Emperor Theodosius*. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



FIGURE 6. Van Dyck, *St. Ambrose and the Emperor Theodosius*. London, National Gallery (reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, the National Gallery, London).

seventeenth century these paintings are referred to, even by very well-informed persons, as being by the hand of van Dyck. As Rubens' assistant, van Dyck may indeed have had a small share in the execution of the larger canvases, but that he was chiefly responsible for the cycle as a whole is inconceivable.¹¹

Closely related in style to the paintings of the Decius Mus cycle is the large canvas in Vienna representing *St. Ambrose and the Emperor Theodosius* (Fig. 5) which, though surely invented and executed by Rubens, has sometimes been considered to be the work of van Dyck, no doubt because there exists a version of this subject by van Dyck in London (Fig. 6). Recent studies have shown that the London picture is not a preparatory sketch for the Vienna painting but a reinterpretation of the subject by the young van Dyck. The numerous modifications, some in the form of pentimenti, reveal quite another temperament and make it all the more evident that the two paintings are the work of two different hands.¹²

11 For a recent discussion of the Decius Mus cycle, see Held, 21-24.

12 Horst Gerson gives a fine characterization of van Dyck's *St. Ambrose*. H. Gerson and E. H. ter Kuile, *Art and Architecture in Belgium 1600-1800* (Baltimore, 1960), 113. See also G. Martin, *National Gallery Catalogues, The Flemish School ca. 1600 - ca. 1900* (London, 1970), 29-34.

13 McNairn, 94, fig. 51.

At the left side of Rubens' *St. Ambrose* there is a Roman Officer who stands with the right arm sharply bent and the right hand holding a baton. This stern soldier seems to have made a particular impression on van Dyck. It is true that in his version of this subject (Fig. 6) the corresponding figure has a different set of the head and carries no baton; but X-ray photographs prove that in the first state of the picture van Dyck followed Rubens' figure more exactly and only subsequently altered it by repainting.¹³ The same imposing prefect, here wearing an animal skin over his armour, reappears in van Dyck's *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, formerly in Berlin (Fig. 7). There being no steps in this composition, the feet and legs are differently placed, but in other respects the attitude, with the elbow turned outward and the hand grasping a baton, closely resembles the prototype in Rubens' *St. Ambrose* (Fig. 5).

Van Dyck painted a second version of the *Crowning with Thorns* (Fig. 8). The work is known to have been in Rubens' possession, having presumably been presented to him by the artist; it was subsequently purchased by King Philip IV of Spain and is today in the Prado in Madrid. In its earliest form the painting virtually repeated the composition of the Berlin picture. Van Dyck himself later repainted the entire left-hand section. The two officers who originally stood there were eliminated, and in their place were added a dog and two



FIGURE 7. Van Dyck, *Christ Crowned with Thorns*. Formerly Berlin, Kaiser-Freidrich-Museum (photo: Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz).

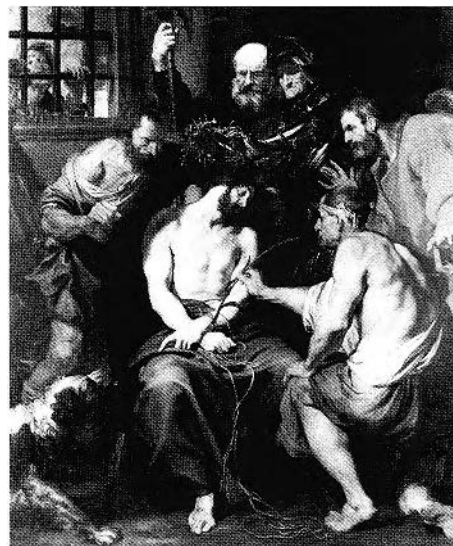


FIGURE 8. Van Dyck, *Christ Crowned with Thorns*. Madrid, Museo del Prado (Photo: Mas. Barcelona).

onlookers peering through the barred window above. In fact a few traces still remain of these martial figures: the ghostly sandaled foot of the nearer officer can be made out between the dog's paw and the foot of Christ. Are we to conclude that van Dyck, having decided to give the painting to Rubens, thereupon deleted the most obvious Rubenesque figure in the composition?

As it happens, this is not the only instance of such an alteration in a painting intended for Rubens. The *Betrayal of Christ*, like the *Crowning with Thorns*, exists in two versions – one in Minneapolis and the other in the Prado. Both paintings follow the traditional iconography by representing, at the lower left, Peter's impetuous attack on Malchus, servant of the high priest.¹⁴ In the Minneapolis picture (Fig. 9) Malchus is seen lying on his back in an abruptly foreshortened attitude: his left leg is raised and his head is thrown back so sharply that the face, with its staring eyes, is inverted. The posture derives unmistakably from Rubens. A close parallel may be found in that artist's *Miracles of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Fig. 10), where the possessed man in the left foreground lies in a similar attitude of helplessness and terror.

In his second version of the *Betrayal* (Fig. 11) van Dyck made a drastic revision of the attitude of Malchus. The dramatic foreshortening has been

¹⁴ Van Dyck's third painting of this subject, in Corsham Court, omits the episode of Peter and Malchus.



FIGURE 10. Rubens, *Miracles of St. Ignatius of Loyola*. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



FIGURE 9. Van Dyck, *Betrayal of Christ*. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

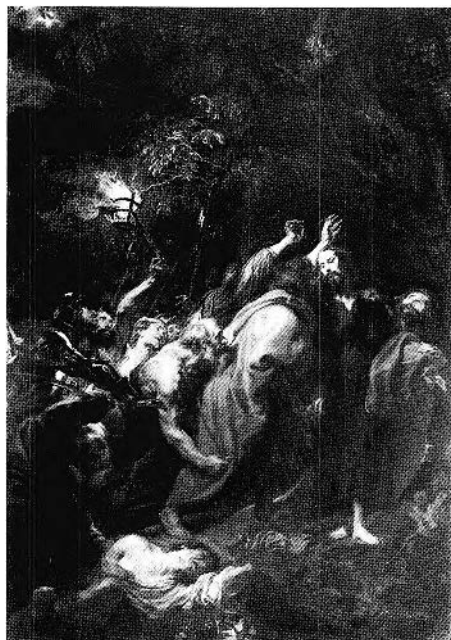


FIGURE 11. Van Dyck, *Betrayal of Christ*. Madrid, Museo del Prado (Photo: Mas, Barcelona).

discarded and the victim of Peter's assault now lies along a line roughly parallel to the main action of the painting. This canvas, now in the Prado, likewise came from the collection of Rubens. It is therefore curious to see that van Dyck, in preparing a repetition of one of his works for the older master, has once again suppressed what everyone would have recognized as a distinctively Rubensian motif. Whether these changes were recommended by Rubens, perhaps as a way of encouraging the young painter to assert his independence, or whether the decision was made by van Dyck himself it is impossible to say.

Knowing that he would always feel overshadowed by the sovereign presence of Rubens, it was inevitable that van Dyck should resolve to leave Antwerp. Yet he must also have been aware that in making the journey to Italy he was only following in the footsteps of Rubens, who as a young man had lived there for eight years.

Bellori, writing in 1672, says that upon arriving in Venice van Dyck 'turned completely to the colour of Titian and Paolo Veronese.'¹⁵ Having already acquired a certain familiarity with Italian

paintings before leaving Antwerp he undoubtedly looked forward to the opportunity to see more of the works of Titian. His Italian Sketchbook, in which he made drawings of those paintings that particularly interested him, provides further proof of his enthusiasm for the great Venetian master. Even after the return from Italy, van Dyck would no longer look to Rubens as his chief guide and mentor. The *Madonna and Child with Sts. Rosalie, Peter and Paul*, which was painted in Antwerp in 1629 (Fig. 12) seems almost to confirm Bellori's words, for the composition brings together elements both from Titian's *Pesaro Madonna* and from Veronese's *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine* (Fig. 13).

The history paintings of the English period, few in number though they are, show that it was not only the Venetian masters who served as a source of inspiration to van Dyck. The *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (Fig. 14) was commissioned for the Church of the Recollects in Antwerp, where it formed part of an altarpiece dedicated to the Virgin of the Seven Sorrows. Christ lies on a shroud, his head and shoulders resting on the knees of Mary. It is a conception that owes little to Rubens, whose paintings of the Lamentation generally represent the dead Christ in a pronouncedly foreshortened position,¹⁶ whereas van Dyck's

¹⁵ G.P. Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni* (Rome, 1672), 254.

¹⁶ R. Oldenbourg, *Rubens, Klassiker der Kunst*, v (Stuttgart-Berlin, n.d.), 76.

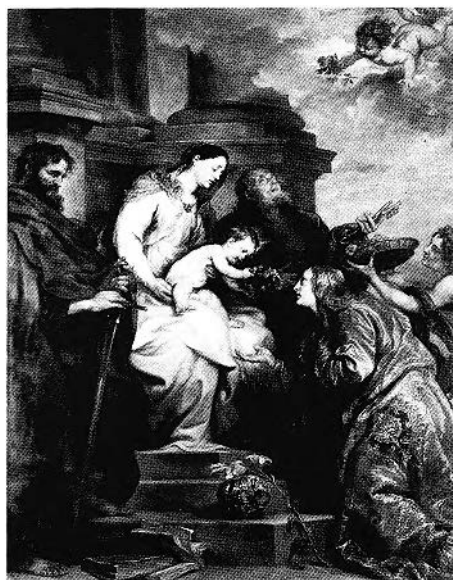


FIGURE 12. Van Dyck, *Madonna and Child with Sts. Rosalie, Peter and Paul*. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



FIGURE 13. Paolo Veronese, *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine*. Venice, Accademia (Photo: Alinari).



FIGURE 14. Van Dyck, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels).

composition is thought of almost in terms of bas-relief. The left arm of Christ is raised by St. John, who points to the mark of a nail in the hand and turns towards two grieving angels, in order to draw their attention to the wounds suffered by the Crucified. This pathetic motif is Italian in origin. In Rome van Dyck might have seen the great Farnese *Pietà* of Annibale Carracci, now in Naples,¹⁷ in which an infant angel lifts Christ's hand to display the wound and looks round to the right in manner not unlike that of St. John in the Antwerp



FIGURE 15. Annibale Carracci, *Pietà* (the *Christ of Caprarola*), etching, Princeton University Art Museum.

painting. A more probable model, however, is the same artist's etching of the Lamentation known as the *Christ of Caprarola* (Fig. 15), in which the figures are arranged in an extended frieze-like composition resembling somewhat that employed by van Dyck. Here too is seen the identical action of St. John, who raises Christ's hand and points to the wound of the nail while turning his head towards Mary Magdalene at the left.

¹⁷ D. Posner, *Annibale Carracci* (London, 1971), pl. 119a.