



Defining beauty: Rubens's female nudes

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More than any other Western painter, Rubens is identified with the women he depicted. Apart from being undressed, his female type is above all characterized by specific physical qualities, which tend to be summarized as 'fleshy' and 'corpulent'. Four centuries after date, the 'Rubensian' is no longer limited to the artistic field only but has become a proverbial, though not always positive, qualification for voluptuous forms. The origins of this biased perception probably lie in the debate between the *Poussinistes* versus *Rubénistes* at the end of the seventeenth century. It found acceptance about a century later in the writings of scholars such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) and Georg Forster (1754-1794).¹ Scholarly literature of a more recent date seems to take Rubens's reputation as the master of the female nude for granted. However, a comprehensive discussion of its genesis, characteristics and constituents is lacking. Well-researched observations tend to be marginal or fragmentary. An important aspect, which has received quite some attention since the 1960s is the remarkable colourfulness and liveliness of Rubens's human bodies. In the wake of Hans Sedlmayr, especially German art historians have applied themselves to multifaceted analyses of the artist's unique technique of painting skin and building up flesh colours.² Further comments have been given within the scope of iconographical and iconological studies. Both Fiona Healy and Kristin Belkin have brilliantly analyzed Rubens's renderings of the female nude in his mythological paintings. Healy connects Rubens's strong fascination for the female nude with his fancy for the Venus iconography.³ She reads Rubens's Venus as the personification of physical love, and as such the ultimate image of his own Hélène. This fusion of Hélène Fourment and Venus becomes very palpable in *Het Pelsken*, the illustrious *portrait historié* of Rubens's young wife as Venus, which was only recently brought into the spotlight again as the subject of two widely divergent approaches. While Margit Thøfner used this picture to discuss feminine spectatorship in confrontation with erotically charged pictures, Kristin Belkin drew attention to it in order to show how costume history could contribute to our understanding of Rubens's portrayal of the nude.⁴ Deliberately challenging but surprisingly pertinent within the context of this paper is Svetlana Alpers's approach. Throughout her controversial book *The Making of Rubens* she yields a new vision of Rubens's art and defines his pictorial mode as feminine and highly sensorial - versus masculine and intellectual.⁵

These and other more or less subsidiary observations constitute the materials and incentives for further research. The purpose of the present article, then, is to investigate to which extent the modern, widespread view corresponds with that of the seventeenth century. Firstly, an effort will be made to find out how contemporaries thought about Rubens in general and about his pictorial representations of female nudes in particular. Did they, too, perceive the female nudes as the most typical motif of the artist? And was the judgement about these nudes equally determined by their physical qualities or did contemporaries apply other criteria? Secondly, this paper aims at increasing our understanding of Rubens's renderings of the female nude by reconstructing their original connotations. This approach foregrounds Rubens's personal beliefs about artistry, femininity and the human body and it combines visual and textual analysis with an investigation of artistic conventions.

Beautiful women, depicted 'con amore, studio e diligenza'

From the moment Rubens had scored his first artistic successes in Italy until the end of his life in 1640, many a contemporary put into words his appreciation for the man and his art. Written sources range from literary encomia and picture poems, inscriptions on engravings and diary notes, to chapter reports, and commentaries in letters. The background and education of the authors were just as varied. Amongst them we find friends and relatives of Rubens, university professors, clergymen, poets, diplomats, politicians and merchants.⁶ Though scattered and often cursory, the most perceptive observations are to be found in non-literary writings and most of all in Rubens's personal correspondence.

A comparatively major source for our purpose is Constantijn Huygens's (1596-1687) communication of July 2, 1639. That day the Dutch poet, intellectual and courtier writes another letter to his then favourite artist Peter Paul Rubens, accompanying some copper engravings of his recently raised town palace in The Hague. He offers those prints, he writes by way of thanking Rubens for his advice in this matter and because he would like to know the - in architecture well-versed - artist's opinion about the final result. After an exhaustive explanation about the architectural project, Huygens finishes with what might be regarded as the highest sign of appreciation he could give to an artist; in name of stadtholder Frederick Hendrik (1584-1647), whose secretary and artistic adviser he was for many years, Huygens asks Rubens if he was willing to take up a commission:

His Highness was very pleased to know that you have recovered from a serious illness; and having heard that you have started to paint again since, he has requested me to learn from you if you would be willing to decorate a mantelpiece of his – the measures of it being sent to you – with a painting the subject of which and the matter of depiction are entirely yours; the only thing we demand is that it features three or four characters at the most and that the beauty of the women is elaborated 'con amore, studio e diligenza'.⁷

Although mentioned seemingly in passing and at the very end of the letter, these concluding sentences deserve a closer examination for several reasons. Firstly, they attest to the exceptional freedom Rubens could count on in the carrying out of commissions, even if his patron belonged to the highest social circles. In this specific example, Frederick Hendrik explicitly left the choice for both subject and style to Rubens himself. The unquestioning confidence of both patron and advisor must have been due to the international reputation, which the artist had built himself by that time, as well as their familiarity with the painter's work.⁸ Through Huygens, Frederick Hendrik made two conditions only as concerns the realization of the commission: on the one hand, with regard to the number of characters, which should not amount to more than three or four and, on the other hand, and this is particularly noteworthy, with respect to their gender and nature. The stadtholder obviously took for granted that Rubens's picture would be featuring women, whose beauty, he said, had to be fashioned with 'amore, studio e diligenza'.⁹ This short observation reveals that when acquiring a Rubens painting Frederick Hendrik was less interested in the iconography than in the characters representing it. He wanted women and chiefly women who were painted masterfully, 'with love, scholarship and diligence'. But how can we understand these words? What exactly did 'beautiful women' mean and why was this aspect of Rubens's art so exciting?

Interestingly, Rubens achieved his very first artistic successes with the depiction of women. Shortly after his arrival in Italy, Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua (1562-1612) hired Rubens to portray court ladies and other ladies of standing for the ducal 'gallery of beauties'.¹⁰ Gonzaga spoke highly of those pictures representing beautiful women in the typical Venetian tradition. And maybe it was his praise that formed the soil for new, similar commissions such as the series of full-length portraits of noblewomen carried out around 1606-07 in Genoa. A dazzling example is the portrait of *Brigida Doria Spinola* (fig. 1) in which Rubens reached a high degree of realism through a successful suggestion of depth by means of a strategically placed portico, the brilliant depiction of the costly satins and the masterly suggestion of youth in the blooming face of this twenty-two-year-old.¹¹

After his return to the Netherlands, Rubens was given the chance to concentrate on history painting, the genre he himself preferred most. For obvious reasons, biblical subjects represented the principal part of his commissions, but little by little secular subjects won in popularity. Some years after his arrival, in 1618 to be precise, he undertook his famous deal with Sir Dudley Carleton, the English ambassador in The Hague. In this context, an intensive correspondence was set up. At the end of his letter of April 28, 1618 Rubens listed the pictures offered in exchange for Carleton's antiquities providing each item with technical data, such as the estimated price and measures, with a description of the subject and of the degree of authenticity, all of that completed with remarkable details of the representation. Near the end of the list featured the painting of *Achilles discovered amongst the daughters of Lycomedes*, a picture done in collaboration with Sir Anthony van Dyck and nowadays in the Prado (fig. 2). Rubens recommended this painting to his potential client with the following words: 'most delightful, and full of many very beautiful young girls'.¹² Apparently, he believed that the beautiful girls

I

Peter Paul Rubens, *Marchesa Brigida Doria Spinola*, c. 1605-06,
oil on canvas, 152.5 x 99 cm,
Washington, National Gallery of Art



made the strength of the painted scene and, consequently, he tried to sell it as such. In a later letter to the same Carleton, he sold both a *Hagar* and a *Suzanna* (fig. 3) as ‘galanterie’ (It.).¹³ In using this terminology he was probably referring to the erotic appeal of the nudity characterizing the depicted women, which moreover, seemed to have been a commercial surplus value.¹⁴ Carleton’s request to make the aforementioned *Suzanna* ‘so pretty that she

would enamour even old men' seems to underscore this hypothesis.¹⁵ All things considered, it is tempting to assume that Rubens acquired his reputations as a painter of (naked) women already early in his career, and was given some of his commissions exactly for this reason.

The latter probably also holds true for Frederick Hendrik. The conditions attached to his 1639 commission, suggest that he as well as his spokesman Huygens regarded the mature Rubens primarily as a painter of beautiful women. Huygens's words gain in meaning upon a closer investigation of the stadtholder's collection. The 1632 inventory lists six paintings by Rubens, which are, in order of creation: an *Annunciation*,¹⁶ a *Devotion of*

2

Peter Paul Rubens and Sir Anthony van Dyck, *Achilles discovered amongst the daughters of Lycomedes*, c. 1617–18, oil on canvas, 246 x 267 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado







Artemisia,¹⁷ a *Flora and Zephyrus* made in collaboration with Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625),¹⁸ a *Flight of Cloelia* (fig. 4),¹⁹ a *Mars and Venus*²⁰ and, finally, a picture featuring *Alexander and Rosana*.²¹ The painting ordered in 1639 is unfortunately unknown and was probably left unfinished due to Rubens's early death less than a year later, but we might suppose that the prince wanted the kind of representation he was familiar with. He might have been alluding to a picture in the style of the *Flight of Cloelia* (fig. 4) for instance, the high number of characters notwithstanding. Its subject is the story of the Roman maiden Cloelia and her companions who escaped from imprisonment by the Etruscan king Lars Porsenna by swimming across the Tiber. In his interpretation of the classical myth, Rubens chose to zoom in on the glorious nudity of the women who are in close physical proximity to the spectator. The sensual flesh is painted with great care and vigorous contours shape the youthful bodies. This picture which in 1632 hung along with the aforementioned *Alexander and Rosana* in the chamber of the stadholder's wife, Amalia van Solms, was highly appreciated and even became the subject of an epigram by P.C. Hooft (1581-1647). In one version of this poem Hooft makes the river Tiber turn hot with excitement at the sight of the crossing girls, thus complimenting Rubens on the lifelikeness of the naked women who were painted so convincingly and beautifully that men were set ablaze.²²

4

**Peter Paul Rubens, *Flight of Cloelia*,
c. 1618–19,**

oil on canvas, 236 x 343 cm,
formerly Berlin, Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum

3

**Lucas Vorsterman after Peter Paul Rubens,
Susanna and the Elders, 1620,**

engraving

From all this, we may presumably infer that from early on in his career Rubens was seen by intellectuals and affluent buyers as a painter who excelled in the depiction of beautiful women. Whereas his Italian patrons seemed to be mostly attracted by his portraits, once in Antwerp Rubens earned himself a name as a painter of biblical, historical and mythological women and more and more of nude women. The question arises as to what made those images so unique and, moreover, how they took shape.

Classical elegance

To our great benefit, Rubens himself started to keep a theoretical notebook even before his journey to Italy in 1600. During his Italian years he constantly updated it, expounding the cornerstones of his artistic view. Lost in the original, this 'pocketbook' can be partially reconstructed from copies by his pupils and followers, and from a French translation of some of its Latin text in the late eighteenth century.²⁶ Its title *De figuris humanis etc.* suggests that the human figure formed from the very outset the core of the artist's theory and practice. This implies that as a young man already Rubens thought of himself as a painter of bodies. But did he regard himself specifically as a painter of female bodies? And if so, what was his ideal?

In his notebook Rubens develops a gender sensitive hierarchy, which is assessed in terms of the divine harmony and its three most perfect forms: the triangle, the square and the circle (fig. 5). The male figure in which all those shapes tend to perfection, comes first. Man is the incarnation of perfect form. In the woman, on the contrary, all elements are weaker and smaller, so perfection is less: instead of a cube, her characteristic form is a long square or a rectangular parallelogram with unequal sides; instead of the triangle it is a pyramid and instead of the circle it is an oval. As a consequence, the female, within the divine order, occupies the second place only, more liable to predestination than her male counterpart. Nevertheless, this does not imply, as we might suppose, that Rubens preferred male protagonists. There was simply a difference of criteria, for, Rubens says, if the perfection of the female form is less its elegance is greater.²⁷ The ideal man is robust and strong, the ideal woman elegant and pretty.

What exactly does the concept of 'elegantia' mean? Firstly, Rubens defines it by means of female proportion. The basic elements here are the circle and the round shape, which are the cause and principle of each kind of beauty – whereas in the man the square and the cube dominate as the basis of robustness and strength.²⁸ Evidence for this theory was not gathered by measuring the bodies of living women, but those of ancient sculptures. Point of departure for this way of thinking was Rubens's belief that the bodies of ancient Greeks and Romans were closer to the perfection of creation from which humankind had since declined.²⁹ The ideal model was in those days referred to as the 'Greek Venus' (fig. 6).³⁰ The drawings in the pocketbook indicate that this was the common term for the *Venus pudica* type, which is the 'entire assemblage of all the beauties and perfections one could wish for in a woman' (fig. 7).³¹ This sculptural model shows a woman, head and arms missing and standing in an elegant *contrapposto* with the weight on the left leg. She is naked except for a drapery falling down from her waist and cover-

6

After Peter Paul Rubens, *Ms. Johnson*
fol. 99v,
 London, The Samuel Courtauld Trust,
 Courtauld Gallery



7

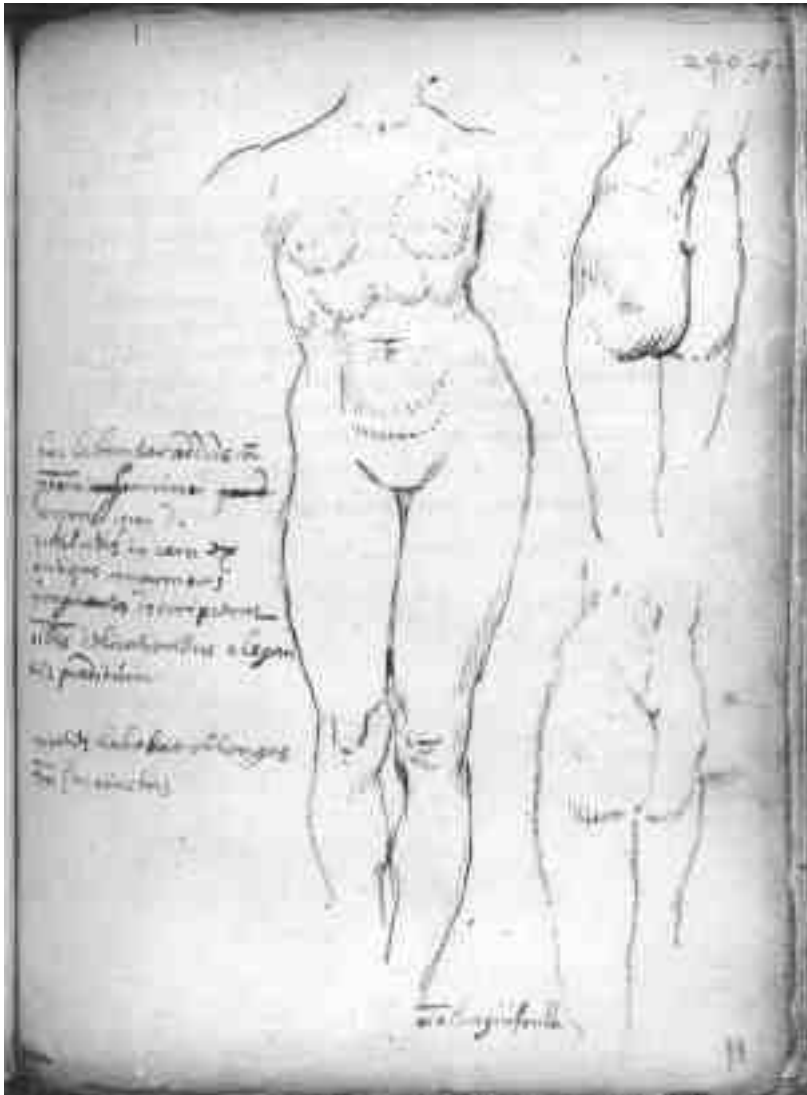
After Peter Paul Rubens, *Torso of Venus*
Pudica (side view),
 drawing, 255 x 158 mm,
 Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst



ing her bottom and the backside of her legs. Rubens's ideal woman was not only antique but nude as well. The annotations on the drawing make clear that this perfect model should furthermore be endowed with 'delicate elegancies and had firm, oblong buttocks' (fig. 8).³²

So far one can argue that the human figure – male as well as female – occupied a privileged place in Rubens's theoretical reflections as well as in his artistic practice. Although less perfect in form and proportion than men, women could incarnate ideal beauty, provided that they were antique, nude, elegant and modest.

Through his gendered approach and in his choice of the *Venus pudica* as the perfect model for female characters, Rubens joined in with the broader artistic discourse of the day. Some slight differences in terminology notwithstanding, statements from theorists such as Karel van Mander (1548-1606)



8

After Peter Paul Rubens, *Ms. Johnson*
fol. 99r,
 London, The Samuel Courtauld Trust,
 Courtauld Gallery

and Franciscus Junius (1589-1677) made similar distinctions between the male and female ideal.³³ Moreover, theoretical writings were sustained by visual evidence. The great numbers of drawings after antique Venuses made since the early Renaissance show how Rubens's working procedure was embedded in a strong tradition. But fit for Rubens, he also introduced a novel concept.

Equine nobility

Indeed, the idea of female beauty led to a remarkable comparison paralleling the female body with that of a horse, 'the most noble and elegant amongst animals'. Rubens drew the analogy in a long enumeration listing the following similarities: a small and slender head, large and black eyes, a long neck, a

broad chest, a long mane of hair, a back which is supposed to be short, flat and upright, an abdomen which is slightly curved and decreasing downwards, buttocks which are not stretched or hanging, but round, ample, firm and fleshy, a small womb, thighs that are plump, certainly on the side where they are attached to the bottom and finally small, slightly raised feet and preferably blond hair.³⁴

This method of using animals to illustrate human characteristics is typical of zoological physiognomy, a discipline originating in ancient writings and popularised in the period Rubens wrote his notebook by Giambattista della Porta's *De humana physiognomonia* (1586).³⁵ This analytic system aimed to divine the characters of human beings from their resemblance to certain animals in the belief that the characters of the animals were well-known.³⁶ Rubens was obviously fascinated by this way of thinking and even adopted in his comparison the concise style characteristic of physiognomic books, consisting of short and compact propositions without further explanation. The selected animals were coupled to bipolar concepts essential to the apprehension of psychical differences between human beings. One of those twin concepts was male/female, their standard representatives being the lion and the leopard. Rubens, however, deviated from this paradigm and compared the female human being with the horse instead of the leopard.³⁷ As such, he acted as an autonomous zoological physiognomist, a way of behaving that was fully within the scope of his authority given his exceptional knowledge of both physiognomy and zoology.³⁸ His predilection for the horse as animal archetype of the human female seems to derive from the lore of bestiaries, combined with well-founded zoological and physiognomic judgments, his personal familiarity with horses and his view on either nature as 'noble' and 'elegant'.³⁹ Commented and sometimes comparative drawings illustrate his ideas (fig. 9).⁴⁰

By tradition, zoological physiognomy is not interested in morality.⁴¹ But when a bit further in the text of the notebook it is argued that women's forms and contours as well as their facial expression and demeanour have to breathe 'simplicity and modesty', ethics seems to slip into the Rubensian anthropology.⁴² A similar connection between body language and moral categories is to be found in the emergent manuals of civility and in contemporary art writings by Karel van Mander (1604) and Gérard de Lairese (1707).⁴³ They speak in analogous terms: Rubens's *elegantia* and *nobilitas* are replaced by *aerdigheyt*, *gracelijcheyt* and *welstand*; features of it are the *contrapposto*, uprightness and the joining of knees and feet, all of those tokens of 'modesty' and 'grandeur'.⁴⁴ One wonders if Rubens's codification and moralisation of female posture and demeanour, and his emphasis on nobility and elegance were as many answers to the new civility, which he had discovered in Italy.⁴⁵

Enticing flesh tints

In his choice of antique sculptures as a model for the depiction of human figures in general and of women in particular, Rubens built on humanistic theory which had been leading for a century. He explained his approach in a separate section of the notebook entitled 'On the imitation of ancient statues', a text drawing immediately our attention.⁴⁶ Here he underlines the



9

After Peter Paul Rubens, *Ms. Johnson*
fol. 96,
 London, The Samuel Courtauld Trust,
 Courtauld Gallery

importance of ancient sculpture to attain the highest perfection in painting, in the belief that it provides a model for grandeur both in proportion and conception. However, in one and the same breath the artist conveys restraint arguing that '[the imitation of the antiques] must be judiciously applied, and so that it may not in the least smell of the stone.'⁴⁷ Rubens tells us that a successful assimilation of sculpture in paint is only guaranteed through naturalistic vividness which is generally missing in statues, but which can be reached in painting through the observation of specific rules. Decisive in this respect is the depiction of human skin which should be anything but what he laconically describes as 'marble tinged with various colours', a current error amongst the painters of the time and, according to him, largely due to an overly sculptural technique, which becomes manifest in excessively contrasting light effects creating the impression of opaque and lifeless bodies.⁴⁸

10

Peter Paul Rubens, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1610,

oil on canvas, 190 x 223 cm,

Madrid, Museo de la Real Academia de Bellas
Artes de San Fernando

Through his emphasis on a lifelike epidermis Rubens took up a position in an age-old artistic discourse making the realistic depiction of skin a primary concern of painting.⁴⁹ Almost simultaneously, Karel van Mander published his influential *Grondt der edel-vry schilderconst* in which he remarkably enough spoke in very similar terms.⁵⁰ However in a different context, he referred to the bad habit amongst Netherlandish painters to depict nudes with 'a stony greyness, or pale, fishy, coldish colour' and 'hard shadows' or 'sharp-edged highlights'.⁵¹ He linked these unnatural effects not immediately to ancient sculpture but attributed them to the use of undiluted white or black in the carnations.⁵² As a reaction he made a fervent appeal to the native painters to pursue the typically Italian, *morbido* or fluffy painting manner through the use of a richer range of colouring and softer halftones, all of them fleeing.⁵³

Van Mander's hero was Titian, expert in 'prominent highlights and



recessive fleeing depths'.⁵⁴ Artists who followed his lead, could reach that ultimate glowing and fleshy effect.⁵⁵ A native painter who succeeded wonderfully well in this technique was Jacob De Backer (1545/50-after 1610), a rather enigmatic personality active in the late sixteenth-century, who earned himself a reputation among artists and at foreign courts with exceptionally palpable nudes.⁵⁶ Van Mander called him 'one of the best colourists that Antwerp had known: he had a fleshy manner of painting because he highlighted not just with white but with flesh colour'.⁵⁷ Where and under which circumstances he reached this high level is hard to say. Around 1600, Frans Badens (1571-1618) introduced in the Northern Netherlands the so-called 'glow', a facet of Italian technique, which was all-important for the *morbido* appearance of the painted nude. The effect of carnations glowing from beneath the surface was mainly reached through the use of red and ochre underpainting shimmering through the upper layers of the skin.⁵⁸

After an experimental stage,⁵⁹ Rubens managed to refine the acknowledged techniques in view of a greater vivaciousness. Shortly after his return to Antwerp in 1608 he painted a *Suzanna* (fig. 10), which he only too gladly showed in the nude, proud of his recently acquired skills. Immediately visible are the gentle contour lines in pure red lake, the unseen variety of flesh tints with warm underpainting, the soft bluish shadows and yellow highlights.⁶⁰ Dead marble has made way for living woman's flesh. The *paragone* has been settled and is, moreover, visually sustained: the rosy carnations of the sensual woman's body contrast sharply with the greyish stone colour of the dolphin fountain on her left. The subtle and bright alterations of hue beneath Suzanna's skin suggest translucency, which clearly differs from the opaque structure of the sculpture where the surface attracts all attention.⁶¹ In Rubens's interpretation the skin is no longer a border or covering of the body but has become part of the flesh beneath it.⁶² Suzanna's corporeality further gains strength through the subtle range of colouring in the face, prime area of human expression and starting point of every intimacy.⁶³ Noteworthy are her rosy cheeks, a sign of shame resulting from the unintended exhibitionism. One could argue that Rubens's make-up of the flesh tints contributes not only to the palpability of the female body as such, but also opens on to the emotional world of the woman represented. Through a subtle differentiation of carnations Rubens visualizes human *affetti* and the physiology of the body.⁶⁴ The skin has become a site where emotions surface, a mirror of the soul. The ambiguous combination of a sensual body and a face marked by shame make the female protagonist all the more attractive for the male viewer.

Since the earliest manuals on painting techniques, allusions were made on the possibilities of flesh tints for a nuanced rendering of contrasting human conditions such as young/old, living/dead and last but not least male/female.⁶⁵ More than any other painter before him, Rubens took advantage of this peculiar technique in order to highlight the difference between the sexes. His exceptional combination of technical virtuosity and expertise in medical, physiological and anatomical matters was an important catalyst.⁶⁶ His special concern with sex roles was a prerequisite.⁶⁷ Translated into paint, he made female skin appear even lighter and more transparent and, as such, clearly distinguished from the heavily tinted carnations with reddish

shadows of the male hands, which cannot resist touching it.⁶⁸ Definitely, the skin was endowed with a tempting power, a feature acknowledged by art theorists like Van Mander who argued that the colours of young people and of women especially, might stir sensual desires.⁶⁹ The erotic potential of Rubens's flesh tints especially was indicated by Roger de Piles (1635-1709) who championed a sensory apprehension of the artist's paintings and praised the artifice of colour.⁷⁰ It was this notion of seduction, which made Svetlana Alpers define Rubens's style as feminine.⁷¹ What remained unarticulated by Alpers was the dependence of the seventeenth-century French debate between *Rubénistes* and *Poussinistes* on a rhetorical tradition established in the sixteenth-century distinction between *disegno* and *colore*. It was in this context that the divide between design and colouring was gendered as male and female respectively, its exponents being Michelangelo and Titian.⁷² Accordingly, Alpers's construction of the Rubensian style as feminine is much more to the point than presumed, for it is embedded in a long art-theoretical tradition.

Elastic flesh

Conform with his concern for a differentiated physiology, Rubens brought the contrast between male and female skin to a new artistic level, not only in the colouring but also in the texture. The elders lusting after Suzanna in the Madrid painting (fig. 10) may well be of a relatively advanced age, but they radiate that characteristic force Rubens so strongly sought for and which finds expression in tensed muscles and veins. Suzanna's body, on the other



II

Titian,
The Andrians, c. 1523–24,
oil on canvas, 175 x 193 cm,
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

hand is far from muscular, but, fittingly, round, soft and most of all fleshy. One could say that muscles are decisive for the appearance of the male skin, while fleshy hummocks and bulges are for the female.

Such gender related distinctions were articulated in art theoretical treatises since the late sixteenth century. In 1568, for instance, Vasari urged naturalism – suppleness – in the depiction of human limbs and stressed the need for an explicit distinction between on the one hand, men and on the other hand, women and children, whereby the latter should show bulges and fleshiness.⁷³ Some decades later, Van Mander, in a passage on the proportions of the human figure, warned his readers that ‘women should not show any hardness in the muscles, but that the latter should be softly concealed or disappear lovely and, should, moreover, be of plump flesh, with small creases and folds, dimpled hands, as with children’.⁷⁴ Rubens endorsed those ideas in his own

12

Peter Paul Rubens

The Andrians, c. 1635,

oil on canvas, 200 x 215 cm,

Stockholm, Nationalmuseum





13

Titian, *Worship of Venus*, c. 1528–20,
oil on canvas, 172 x 175 cm,
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

treatise *De Imitatione Statuorum* emphasizing the flexibility of the skin, which reveals itself in certain places of the body surface. Pre-eminently fitting in this category are typical female parts such as thighs, hips and abdomen. Those feminine areas are the ideal places in the human body to realize emulation with sculpture. At the same time, they are the ultimate markers of the differences between the sexes. With their naturally higher fat content, female skin and flesh are by definition more elastic than their male equivalents.



14

Peter Paul Rubens, *Worship of Venus*,**c. 1635,**

oil on canvas, 195 x 209 cm,

Stockholm, Nationalmuseum

Rubens took delight in exploring and emphasizing those body parts. He translated them very faithfully to the painted surface in unseen combinations of diaphanousness and density.⁷⁵ This successful rendering was due to Rubens's unique use of paint resulting from a combination of time-honoured Flemish and modern Italian techniques.⁷⁶ His talent was such that he managed to give Suzanna a tangible and life-like body. By making the old waylayers reaching eagerly for her body, it is almost as if Rubens draws attention to his exceptional talent: her body is painted so palpably so that the old men not only fall in love with her, but neither can resist touching her.⁷⁷

Defining the canon in the field of depicting nudes on the basis of Van Mander would result in a series of Netherlandish as well as Italian names. Leading figures from the north appear to be the aforementioned Jacob De Backer and Frans Badens, but also Frans Floris (ca. 1516-1570) and Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617). Southern figures were Michelangelo, Raphael, Correggio and, most of all, Titian. But what if Van Mander had known Rubens? It goes without saying that Rubens himself saw in Titian a shining example.⁷⁸ Especially towards the end of his career he would enter into an intensive artistic dialogue with the Italian master who became as important to him a model as did the ancient artists before.⁷⁹ Rubens's admiration of Titian's work becomes quite explicit in the numerous copies and adaptations he made from 1628 onwards. Particularly charming are the variations he painted around 1635 of the *Andrians* (figs 11-12) and the *Worship of Venus* (figs. 13-14), two paintings Titian had made around 1518-24 for Alfonso d'Este's

Camerino, taking their subjects from Philostrates' *Imagines*. Considering the thirty years which separate Rubens's own viewing of the originals and the creation of the copies,⁸⁰ they remain very faithful. Deviations are limited, but significant. Rubens's version of the *Andrians* (fig. 12) shows a general loosening up and dissolving of Titian's solid forms, a greater atmospheric unity and ditto abandonment expressed in the physiognomies and body language. Eye-catcher in the picture and point of particular interest for our purpose is the sensual reclining nude on the foreground. The similarities are self-evident, the differences fascinating. If Vasari remarked that Titian's nymph was 'so beautiful that she seemed alive',⁸¹ this is even truer of Rubens's version. Apart from the greater expressivity and suggestiveness, it is chiefly the palpability of her body which catches the eye. This new and hitherto unseen sense can be explained by two changes in particular. Firstly, the colouring looks much brighter through Rubens's particularly audacious and effect conscious painting technique with its full use of the grey *imprimatura* in the cool halftints.⁸² Secondly, the skin looks much suppler and fleshier through its articulation by folds. The latter are particularly visible above the feet, around the knees, on the thighs, hips and round the armpit and breasts. It is apparent from the copy that Rubens went a step further than Titian in his depiction of the female nude. Both masters displayed great sympathy for the antique models, which they used as the norm for female proportions. The ancient world provided ideal forms recreated by Titian in living beings through his varied palette. Being well versed in both of them, Rubens managed in his later works to fully realize his early principles and to create a new type of woman.⁸³ Her appearance was closer to that of real women, cellulite and little fat rolls included, without, however, being burdened with characteristic imperfections, such as bulkiness and corpulence.⁸⁴

Classical elegance and grace remained Rubens's guides. He depicted nature without imitating it. He assimilated ancient art without copying it. This is aptly illustrated in Rubens's version of the *Worship of Venus* (fig. 14). Here too a female nude is the visual centre of the painting. Nevertheless, it is not a living nymph but a sculpted Venus, and more in particular the ideal as described by Rubens in his theoretical notebook. Titian endowed his sculpture with life, in accordance with his wish to make her, like Philostrates did, refer to the true goddess – and not to the statue.⁸⁵ Rubens went further. He added the true goddess in the sky and as such the statue became statue again. In spite of this, he painted her in such a way that she seems to be ready to talk and interact with the putti and worshipping girls around her. As in the *Andrians* (fig. 12), he loosens her drapery and augments her facial expression, but through dramatic light effects he makes her body very tactile, too. As a result, Venus remains recognisable as a statue only through her typical position on a pedestal and through her grey complexion. In doing so, Rubens undeniably emulates Titian. But in his role of painter-sculptor he also illustrates before our eyes the wonderful possibilities of painting – compared to sculpture – in the animation of female nudes. If Van Mander had known Rubens, it is likely that pride of place in the depiction of female nude would have been given to him, instead of Titian. Rubens seemed to have responded to Van Mander's call for a softer and silkier depiction of the nude. He went

beyond the highest expectations through a concentrated attention to substance – versus form.⁸⁶ In Rubens's hands, the bodies of women came alive through the swirling touches of nacreous paint, soft, round and rippling.

Reshaping beauty: the genesis of a new ideal

Definitely, Rubens was a master in the rendering of the female nude. Early in his career already he was recognized as a talent in the depiction of women and was stimulated by his buyers' public to present himself more and more as a painter of nude women. His nudes, to modern eyes infamous for their 'fatness', actually take up no more room than Titian's nudes. Their originality is elsewhere and is the result of a lucky meeting of a number of factors.

Any attempt to fathom Rubens's view on women should take into account that the artist distinguished himself by a delicate handling of classical culture, which he continued to absorb throughout all his life by an intense study of its art and culture. Inspired by humanistic theory, Rubens was, moreover, convinced that the aim of painting was the idealized imitation of nature. Two eras in particular respected the true purpose of painting: Antiquity and Renaissance. Accordingly, artefacts from these periods and from Antiquity chiefly, constituted valuable models for the artist's production, which on its turn tried to come even closer to that painterly ideal. As a consequence, not a living model, but the antique and sculpted *Venus pudica*, formed his perfect embodiment of the ideal woman. She was beautiful, elegant, modest and nude. Some of the features Rubens underlined in his theory of the female figure such as elegance and uprightness, suggest, moreover, that he strived to fashion the female body not only after ideals from ancient culture but also after current social and moral ideals.

Probably different from the majority of painters, Rubens was not satisfied with a superficial knowledge of the female body. On the contrary, he did everything within his reach to grasp the female sex and to highlight its differences from its male counterpart. Through the study of a wide variety of scientific disciplines such as medicine, anatomy, philosophy and physiology he gained access to the woman's nature and its external signs. Additionally, he let himself inspire by the then popular theory of zoological physiognomy so as to make the ingenious comparison between woman and horse. This method makes it likely that Rubens wanted his painted women to be regarded as physical signs of an underlying psychic identity.

Being the archetypical subject of beautiful art, the female nude gave Rubens the opportunity to compete with illustrious examples from Antiquity and the Renaissance. As such, the representation of the female nude became the field *par excellence* to demonstrate technical virtuosity. For all of his life Rubens continued his search for the most lifelike possible depiction of female carnations, delicately distinguished from male complexion. The result was a thrilling skin alternating density with diaphanousness. Titian was his great example, but, finally, Rubens would outclass him by his exceptionally diverse view on the female body and his sophisticated technique combining the best of two worlds, Flemish and Italian.

Notes

- 1 See K. Renger, 'Rubens'sche Frauen: Lesesplitter zu einem Vorurteil', in: A. Beyer, V. Lampugnani and G. Schweikhart (eds.), *Hülle und Fülle: Festschrift für Tilmann Buddensieg*, Alfter 1993, 469-475.
- 2 H. Sedlmayr, 'Bemerkungen zur Inkarnatfarbe bei Rubens', *Hefte des Kunsthistorischen Seminars der Universität München*, 9-10 (1964), pp. 43-54; E. Maurer, 'Der Fleischmaler: ach oder oh? Notizen zur Hautmalerei bei Rubens', in: *Fünfzehn Aufsätze zur Geschichte der Malerei*, 1982, pp. 143-150; U. Heinen 'Haut und Knochen-Fleisch und Blut. Rubens' Affektmalerei', in U. Heinen and A. Thielemann (eds.), *Rubens Passioni. Kultur der Leidenschaften im Barock*, Göttingen, 2001, 70-109; M. Fend, 'Inkarnat oder Haut? Die Körperoberfläche als Schauplatz der Malerei bei Rubens und Ingres', in: B. Eschenburg (ed.), *Pygmalions Werkstatt: Die Erschaffung des Menschen im Atelier von der Renaissance bis zum Surrealismus*, cat. exh. München (Lehnbachhaus) 2001, pp. 71-79.
- 3 F. Healy, *Rubens and the Judgment of Paris: a question of choice (Pictura Nova III)*, Turnhout 1997.
- 4 K. Lohse Belkin, "La belle Hélène" and her beauty aids: a new look at *Het Pelsken*', in: K. Van der Stighelen (ed.), *Munuscula amicorum: contributions on Rubens and his colleagues in honour of Hans Vlieghe (Pictura Nova X)*, Turnhout 2006, 299-310; M. Thofner, 'Helena Fourment's *Het Pelsken*', *Art History* 27 (2004), 1-33.
- 5 S. Alpers, *The making of Rubens*, New Haven/ London 1995.
- 6 For historiographic reviews of Rubens's early literary appreciation, see P. Arents, *Geschriften van en over Rubens*, Brussels 1940, 11-12; L. Rens, 'Rubens en de literatuur van zijn tijd', *Dietsche Warande & Belfort* (1977), 328-355; D. Freedberg, 'Fame, convention and insight: on the relevance of Fornenbergh and Gerbier', *The Riving Museum of Art Journal* (1983), 236-259; M. van der Meulen, 'Rubens in Holland in de zeventiende eeuw: enige aantekeningen', in: *Rubens and his world: Bijdragen – Etudes – Studies – Beiträge opgedragen aan Prof. dr. ir. R.-A. d'Hulst*, Antwerp 1985, 307-317; J.M. Muller, 'Rubens, Italy and England: the testimony of Edward Norgate', in: *Rubens: Dall'Italia all'Europa. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Padova, 24-27 maggio 1990*, Padua 1992, 113-119, 157-158; The best historiographic review of Rubens's early fortuna critica, still remains J.G. van Gelder 'De waardering van Rubens: een terugblik', *Antwerpen. Tijdschrift der Stad Antwerpen* 31 (1977), no. 4, 178-197, esp. 178-183.
- 7 'Son Altesse s'est resjouie de vous sçavoir relevé d'une forte maladie; depuis laquelle apprenant que vous encor ramené la main au pinceau, elle m'a recommandé de sçavoir, si vous auriez aggréable de luy embellir une cheminée, dont les mesures vous seroyent envoyées, de quelque tableau dont l'invention fust toute vostre, comme la façon; qu'on ne désireroit que de trois ou quatre figures pour le plus, et que la beauté des femmes y fust élaborée con amore, studio e diligenza.' The original text in French is published by J.H.W. Unger, 'Brieven van eenige schilders aan Constantijn Huygens', *Oud Holland IX* (1891), 187-206, esp. 197-198; see also C. Ruelens and M. Rooses (eds.), *Correspondance de Rubens et documents épistolaires concernant sa vie et ses oeuvres*, 6 vol., Antwerp 1887-1909, VI, no. 1371, 234.
- 8 In his autobiography written between 11 May 1629 and April 1631, which contains one of the scarce more substantial appreciations about Rubens's work, Huygens not only gives himself away as a great admirer of Rubens and his universal mind, but also suggests that he had seen work by him with his own eyes. The fragments about the painters of his time were first published and translated by J.A. Worp, 'Constantijn Huygens en de schilders van zijn tijd', *Oud Holland 9* (1891), 106-136; for a critical discussion about Huygens and Rubens, see H. Vlieghe, 'Constantijn Huygens en de Vlaamse schilderkunst van zijn tijd', *De zeventiende eeuw* 3 (1987), no. 2, 191-210, esp. 191-198. Before 1639 already the art collection of the princes of Orange counted at least six paintings by Rubens as appears from the 1632 inventory which is published in extenso by S.W.A. Drossaers in *Oud Holland* (1930), 193-241. For a discussion, see J.G. van Gelder, 'Rubens in Holland in de zeventiende eeuw', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 3 (1950-51), 103-150, esp. 108-115 and P. van der Ploeg and C. Vermeeren, 'Uijt de penningen vande zeeprijsen'. De stadhouderlijke schilderijenverzameling', in: Idem (eds.), *Vorstelijk verzameld. De kunstcollectie van Frederik Hendrik en Amalia*, cat. exh. The Hague (Mauritshuis), Zwolle 1997, 34-60.
- 9 Jeffrey Muller identified these Italian words as a formula of critical judgment devised by Sir Henry Wotton's *The Elements of architecture* (London 1624) and quoted here by Huygens, who owned a copy of Wotton's book: '[...] when a piece of art is set before vs, let the first caution be, not to aske who made it, least the fame of the author doe captivate the fancie of the buyer. For, that excellent men doe always excellently, is a false conclusion; whereupon I obserue among Italian artisans three notable phrases, which well decipher the degrees of their workes. They will tell you, that a thing was done *con diligenza*, *con studio*, and *con amore*; the first, is but a bare and ordinary diligence, the second, is a learned diligence; the third, is much more, even a louing diligence; they meane not with loue to the bespaker of the worke, but with loue and delight in the worke itself, vpon some speciall fancie to this, or that storie; and when all these concur (particularly the last) in an eminent author, then perchance *Titianus fecit* .. will serue the turne, without farther inquisition [...]' See H. Wotton, *The elements of architecture*, 1624, ed. F. Hard, Charlottesville 1968, 84-85; see also J.M. Muller, 'Con diligenza, con studio, and con amore': terms of quality in the seventeenth century', in: *Rubens and his world, op. cit.* (n. 6), Antwerp 1985, 273-278. The same chain of phrases was used by Edward Norgate who was, moreover, in contact with Rubens from 1618 until the end of the artist's life. See Edward Norgate, *Miniatura or the art of limning*, 1648. ed. J.M. Muller and J. Murrell, New Haven/London 1997, 95, 186, note 220. In his letter of 1639, Huygens uses these words to demand from Rubens the highest quality in the depiction of the women.
- 10 In a letter of March 5, 1603 Chieppo requests Rubens through Annibale Iberti, the duke's resident minister, to go via France to paint more women for his gallery of beauties: '[...] et perche esso Pietro Paolo riesce assai bene nelle pitture di ritratti, vogliamo che restando alter Dame di qualità, oltre quelle che fece ritrarre costi il Co. Vincenzo, vi vagliate dell' opera sua per mandarcene i ritratti con minor spesa et forse con maggior eccellenza.' (And since Rubens is doing very well in portraiture, we would like you, for the other ladies of standing which remain and which are different from those which the count Vincenzo made reproduce there, to make use of his talent to send me portraits executed with lesser

- cost and more excellence'. Ruelens and Rooses, *op. cit.* (n. 7), I, 81; for Rubens's activities as a portraitist in Mantua, see *Rubens a Mantova*, cat. exh. Mantua (Palazzo Ducale), 1977, esp. 68-85; J. Müller-Hofstede, 'Frans Pourbus der Jüngere in Mantua: Anmerkungen zu Rubens' Bildnismalerei in Italien', in: Idem, *Peter Paul Rubens 1577-1640: Rubens in Italien: Gemälde, Ölskizzen, Zeichnungen*, cat. exh. Cologne (Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) 1977, 68-75.
- 11 L. Burchard, 'Genuesische Frauenbildnisse von Rubens', *Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 50 (1929), 319-349; see also F. Huemer, *Rubens: portraits (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard XIX-I)*, Brussels/London, 1977, 33-43.
- 12 '[...] quadro vaghissimo e pieno de molte fanciulle bellissime'. See Rooses and Ruelens, *op. cit.* (n. 7), II, 137; R.S. Magurn, *The letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, Cambridge, Mass. 1955, 61. The painting is the result of a collaboration between Rubens and the young Anthony Van Dyck. Cf. *Achilles discovered amongst the daughters of Lycomedes*, 1616-1618, oil on canvas, 246 x 267 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.
- 13 '[...] la Susanna similmente finite de mia mano a sua sodisfattione con qualq. altra galanteria de mia mano'. Rooses and Ruelens, *op. cit.* (n. 7), II, 150.
- 14 E. McGrath, *Rubens: subjects from history (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard XIII)*, I, London 1997, 52.
- 15 'La Susanna hà da esser bella per innamorar anco li Vecchij [...]'. Rooses and Ruelens, *op. cit.* (n. 7), vol. 2, 165.
- 16 Workshop of Peter Paul Rubens, *The annunciation*, c. 1613-14, oil on panel, 183 x 152 cm, Dublin, National Gallery of Ireland. See D. Oldfield, *Later Flemish paintings in the National Gallery of Ireland: the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*, Dublin 1992, 104-109, fig. 73.
- 17 Peter Paul Rubens, *The devotion of Artemisia*, c. 1615-16, oil on panel, 98 x 105 cm, Potsdam-Sanssouci, Bildergalerie. In the 1632 inventory the subject of this painting was wrongly identified as the story of Artemisia. McGrath, *op. cit.* (n. 14), II, no. 13, fig. 51.
- 18 Peter Paul Rubens, *Flora and Zephyrus*, c. 1617, oil on panel, 136 x 109 cm, Dessau, Kulturstiftung Dessau-Wörlitz, Schloss Mosigkau. See A. Woollett and A. van Suchtelen (eds.), *Rubens and Brueghel, a working friendship*, cat. exh. Los Angeles (J. Paul Getty Museum)/The Hague (Mauritshuis) 2006, no. 6; W. Savelsberg, 'Das Gemeinschaftswerk *Flora und Zephyrus* von Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) und Jan Brueghel d.Ä. (1568-1625) – Ein Glanzlicht des oranisch-nassauischen Bilderschatzes in Dessau-Wörlitz', in *Oranienbaum – Huis van Oranje*, cat. exh. Dessau (Oranienbaum) 2003, 10-12.
- 19 Peter Paul Rubens, *The flight of Cloelia*, c. 1618-19, oil on canvas, 236 x 236 x 343 cm, formerly Berlin, Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. See McGrath, *op. cit.* (n. 14), no. 47, figs. 170-171.
- 20 Peter Paul Rubens, *Mars and Venus*, c. 1618-20, oil on canvas, 170 x 193 cm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage. See H.G. Evers, *Rubens und sein Werk. Neue Forschungen*, Brussels 1944, 270-271, fig. 292. The painting, once in the collection of the Old Palace of Berlin and believed to have been looted by Soviet troops from the Königsberg Castle, East Prussia in 1945, was discovered in December 2004 in the State Hermitage Museum. See H.G. Evers, *Rubens und sein Werk. Neue Forschungen*, Brussels 1944, 270-271, fig. 292.
- 21 Peter Paul Rubens, *Alexander and Rosana*, c. 1625, oil on canvas, 116.3 x 105.8 cm, Wörlitz, Staatliche Schlösser und Gärten. See McGrath, *op. cit.* (n. 14), no. 15, fig. 58.
- 22 'De Tiber waer verbrandt v siende maeghden aen/ Had hem doen ijsen niet uw mannelijck bestaen'. For the genesis and explanation of this epigram, see H. Miedema, 'De Tiber en de zwemmende maagden: een afknapper', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 19 (1968), 133-155; see also McGrath, *op. cit.* (n. 14), II, 249.
- 23 Those are the *Annunciation* and the *Devotion of Artemisia*. See notes 16 and 17 respectively.
- 24 For a compact overview of Rubens's oeuvre, see M. Jaffé, *Rubens. Catalogo completo*, trans. G. Mulazzani, Milan 1989.
- 25 See Van Gelder, *op. cit.* (n. 8), 143-144, figs. 26-27.
- 26 Three of these are in manuscript: two later seventeenth-century copies, the Ms. Johnson (London, Courtauld Institute Galleries), the Chatsworth Ms. (Chatsworth, Collection of Duke of Devonshire) published by Michael Jaffé as an early work by Van Dyck in 1966, and, finally, the Ms. de Ganay (Present location unknown). The latter was published in the eighteenth-century already in a French translation by Jombert. See M. Jaffé, *Van Dyck's Antwerp sketchbook*, 2 vols, London 1966; P.P. Rubens, *Théorie de la figure humaine, considérée dans ses principes, soit en repos ou en mouvement*, ed. Ch.-A. Jombert, Paris 1773. Arnout Balis is currently preparing a study of the theoretical notebook for the *Corpus Rubenianum*. See A. Balis, 'Rubens und Inventio. Der Beitrag seines theoretischen Studienbuches', in: U. Heinen and A. Thielemann (eds.), *op. cit.* (n. 2), 11-40; for recent discussions of the notebook see also P.P. Rubens, *Théorie de la figure humaine*, ed. N. Laneyrie-Dagen, Paris 2003; D. Jaffé and A. Bradley, 'Rubens's "Pocketbook": an introduction to the creative process', in D. Jaffé and M. Moore (eds.): *Rubens: a master in the making*, cat. exh. London (National Gallery) 2005, 21-27.
- 27 'Ex quo in foeminea perfectio minor, elegantia maior est'. See Ms Johnson, fol. 74r. A similar idea is to be found in Junius's *De Pictura Veterum*, where, with reference to Tully, he makes, the distinction between sorts of pulchritude: 'Cum pulchritudinis duo genera sint, quorum in altero venustas sit, in altero dignitas; venustatem, muliebrem ducere debemus; dignitatem, virilem.' ('Seeing there are two sorts of pulchritude, sayth Tully, the one consisting in sweetness, the other in dignity. We are to know, that sweetness becometh a woman; dignity on the contrary is more proper for a man.'). See F. Junius, *De pictura veterum. Libri tres, Amsterdam 1637 (The printed sources of Western art, 25)*, facs., ed. Th. Besterman, Portland, Oregon 1972, 157; for the English translation, see F. Junius, *The painting of the ancients*, London 1638, ed. K. Aldrich, Ph. and R. Fehl, Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford 1991, I, 230.
- 28 Here he relied on Plato who argues that the round form is the most beautiful figure: 'In forma foeminea circulus sive figura rotunda, qua ullum negat esse pulchriorem esse'. Ms. Johnson, fol. 74r.
- 29 Ms. Johnson, fol. 31.
- 30 M. van der Meulen, *Rubens: copies after the antique (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard XXIII)*, II, London 1994, 72-73.
- 31 '[...] foemineae formae, & status, et pulchritudinis atque omnium elegantiarum unicum exemplar est omni perfectione maius, Venus illa, quae Aphroditis (vulgo Graeca) dicitur, et Romae in Mediceo conspicitur'. Ms. Johnson fol. 23v; see also Van der Meulen *op. cit.* (n. 3), II, 71-74, nos. 58-59.
- 32 'fragmento discriperat/ o[mn]ibus delicatioribus eleganter/tiis preditum/'nates habebat oblongas/t[u]m succinctas/' o[mn]ia longiuscula'. See fig.

- 8.
- 33 Van Mander explicitly underlines this difference in the chapter about 'attitude' in his *Grond der edel vry schilder-const.* See K. van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck*, Haarlem 1603-04, fols 11v-15r. For Junius, see note 27.
- 34 'Unde foeminis et equabus pulchritudinis communes sunt:/caput non magnum aut carnosum/ oculi magni et nigri/ collum altum et largum/ pectus valde latum/ crines aut juba longa/ dorsum breve et planum cum amplitudine/ spatium laterale ab axilla usque ad coxam valde breve/ brevis alvus venter nec magnus nec parvus nonquam deorsum deficiens vel propendens./ notes non longae aut pendentes, sed magnae et largae tum durae carnis et valde carnosae.../ vulva parva./ clunes in equa fere ad genua crassi (quae sunt femora) praecipue ab eo latere ubi ventri annectuntur./ pedes non magni sed altius elevati./ primus color in equarum crinibus seu potius jubis pulcherrimus est candidus qui in [sic] foeminis blondus est et comae dicuntur argeneae aut aureae'. Ms. Johnson, fols 74v-90r.
- 35 The ultimate source was the Pseudo-Aristotle. Cfr. Aristotle, *Minor works*, trans. W.S. Hett (Loeb Classical Library), London-New York, 1936. Rubens might have owned a later commentary on it by Camillus Baldi published in 1621 in Bologna, since a copy of it is mentioned in the sales catalogue of his son Albert. See *Catalogus librorum bibliothecae clarissimi viri D Alberti Rubens*, Brussels 1658, fol. 8. Della Porta's book was a roaring success and went through a large number of reprints, in Naples (1588, 1598, 1602, 1603, 1610, 1612 ...), Venice (1644), Hanovre (1593), and also in Brussels (1601) and Leyden (1645). A copy of the first edition is in the sales catalogue of Albert. See *Catalogus librorum ... Alberti Rubens*, op. cit., fol. 8.
- 36 For a stimulating historical survey of zoological physiognomy, see J. Baltrušaitis, 'Physiognomonie animale', in: *Abberations: essai sur la légende des formes*, Paris, 1983, 9-53.
- 37 Della Porta too makes connections between human beings and horses, but only for certain parts of the body and certainly not explicitly with reference to women. Somewhat earlier already a similar comparative study of facial expressions of man and horse was made by Leonardo da Vinci. See Giambattista della Porta, *De humana physiognomia libri III*, Naples, 1586 and K. Clark, *The drawings of Leonardo da Vinci in the collection of her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle*, 2nd ed., 3 vols, London/New York 1968, I, 25-26, no. 12326r.
- 38 In order to practise properly the zoological method, the physiognomist had to be zoologist and know the physical parts and characters of the animals. See A. Zucker, 'La physiognomie antique et le langage animal du corps', in: *Actes du XXXVIII^e Congrès International de l'APLAES, «L'animal, un modèle pour l'homme» dans les cultures grecque et latine de l'Antiquité et du Moyen Age*, Rursus, 1 (2006), <http://revel.unice.fr/rursus/document.html>; for Rubens's concern with zoology, see A. Balis, *Rubens: hunting scenes (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, XCIII-2)*, London/Oxford/New York 1986, 70-83.
- 39 Rubens had a special personal relationship with horses. We know from Roger de Piles – who was informed by Rubens's nephew – that each day after five o' clock the artist went for a ride on the horse outside the city or on the ramparts and also, that one of his greatest pleasures consisted in 'riding a beautiful Spanish horse' – apart from reading a book and considering his medals, agates etc. Cf. R. de Piles, *Conversations sur la connaissance de la peinture*, Paris 1677, 214-215.
- 40 It is hard to say to which extent this animal simile influenced Rubens's artistic practice and that of other artists. Frits Scholten drew my attention to a terracotta model of a walking horse made by the Flemish sculptor Artus Quellinus (1609-1668) and sold at Christie's New York on January 10, 1990 (no. 196) which, in his opinion, might be an allusion on and/or an elaboration of Rubens's idea.
- 41 Zucker, op. cit. (n. 38).
- 42 'In feminis omnis simplicitas et modestia sunt observandae non in vultu oculis aut similibus etenim sed in actu et modis standi, eundi, sedendi etc.' Ms. Johnson, fol. 75r
- 43 H. Roodenburg, *The eloquence of the body: perspectives on gesture in the Dutch Republic*, Zwolle 2004, 120-127.
- 44 Van Mander, op. cit. (n. 33), fols 11v-15r; G. de Lairese, *Het groot schilderboek*, Amsterdam 1707, 52-59.
- 45 Codes of civility were first introduced in Italy during the sixteenth century and the ultimate guide to manners propagating this codification was the famous *Libro del Cortegiano* by Baldesar Castiglione published in Venice in 1528. The Netherlands had to wait until the seventeenth century for a real assimilation of those ideas, first in the highest circles and only in the second half of the century in broader social groups. See Roodenburg, op. cit. (n. 43).
- 46 It was entirely published and translated by Roger de Piles. Cf. R. de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes*, Paris 1708, 139-147.
- 47 'Concludo tamen ad summam eius perfectionem esse necessariam illarum intelligentiam, imo imbibitionem [sic]; sed iudiciose applicandum earum usum & omnino citra saxum.' Ms. Johnson, fol. 31r.
- 48 '[...] multa sunt enim notanda, imo et vitanda etiam in optimis accidentia citra culpam artificis precipue differentia umbrarum sunt caro pellis cartilago sua diaphanitate multa leniant precipitia in statu nigredinis est umbra que sua densitate saxum duplicat inexorabiliter obum adde quasdam maceaturas ad omnes motus variabiles et facilitate pellis aut dimissas aut contractas statuarius vulgo evitatis optimis tamen quae aliquando admissas, picturas certo sed eum moderatione necessarias, lumine etiam ab omni humanitate alienis sive differunt lapideo splendore et aspera luce superficies magis elevati ac par est aut satis saltis oculos fascinante.' Ms. Johnson, fol. 31r
- 49 A.-S. Lehmann, 'Hautfarben. Zur Maltechnik des Inkarnats und der Illusion des lebendigen Körpers in der europäischen Malerei der Neuzeit', in: Ch. Geissmar-Brandt et al. (eds.), *Gesichter der Haut*, Frankfurt am Main/Basel 2002, 93-128.
- 50 Even if Van Mander's significance for seventeenth-century art and certainly for Rubens has occasionally been diminished by art historians, it may be worth considering his comments with at the back of his mind the words of Balthazar Gerbier, friend and admirer of Rubens: 'every day one sees Van Mander being misused; the Schilder-boeck is turned inside out and upside down, by some to see if they have been sufficiently highly rated, by others to note who stands in front or at the rear, and by others yet who say that Van Mander had better have remained silent'. B. Gerbier, *Eer ende Claght-Dicht ter eeren van den lofueerdighen constricten ende gheleerden Hernicus Goltzius, constricten schilder, plaetsnijder, ende meester van de penne. Overleden tot Haerlem, den 29 December 1617*, The Hague 1620, 43.
- 51 '[...] Wilt altijd mijden d'werck met cantighe hooghsels besnijden, soos y voormaels deden [...]; 'Niet alleen siet ons dinghen uyt den drooghen maer als w'ons

- best vleesch te schilderen meenen, soo isser al visch oft beelden van steenen'; '[Onse const hebben wy cortlijck in onse Nederlanden ghesien in beter ghestaltnis toenemen en veranderen, besonder in de coloreringhe, carnatie, en diepselen, meer en meer zijn gheworden afghescheyden van] een steenachtige graewicheyt, oft bleecke vischachtige, coudtachtighe verwe.' Van Mander, *op. cit.* (n. 33), fols 48v, 49v, 298v.
- 52 'Hooght so niet met wit mans naecten noch vrouwen, geen puer wit in 't leven blijkt in 't aenschouwen'; 'Het lampswart om naecten bant uyt den lande [...] Het lampswart in diepsels meuchdy wel derven in naecten [...] T'bederft die verwen daer't onder oft mede vermengt is metter tijdt, ter ander sijde maket een grijsheyt en geen gloeyenthede'. Van Mander, *op. cit.* (n. 33), fols 49r-v.
- 53 'Dus moeten wy toesien/ dat ons wat milder de pinceelen pinceelen moghen zijn [...]. Jae wy moeten bedencken/hoe den schilder wel soo veelderley verwen heeft van doene/om een troenge te schild'ren/als men groene/blaeuw/ghel/en van alles behooft nootsakich/om maken een landschap schoon en vermakich'. Maer sacht moet het zijn al in een verdreven'. Van Mander, *op. cit.* (n. 33), fol. 49v. Van Mander uses the term 'poeseligh' as a translation of Vasari's 'morbido' used to describe Titian's style. See for example Van Mander, *op. cit.* (n. 33), fols 49r, 246v; compare to G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi, VII, Florence 1878, 427 ('morbidezza').
- 54 'Uytstekende hoogselen, en afwijkende verdreven diepselen'. Van Mander, *op. cit.* (n. 33), fol. 285v, see also fol. 49r.
- 55 Recently Paul Taylor examined the meaning and origin of the 'glow' in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Dutch painting and referred to Van Mander. See P. Taylor, 'The glow in late sixteenth and seventeenth Dutch paintings', in: E. Hermens (ed.), *Looking through paintings: the study of painting techniques and materials in support of art historical research (Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek XI)* 1998, 159-178.
- 56 L. Huet, *Jacob de Backer (1545/50-na 1610), pictor olim famosus: leven en werken*, MA thesis, KULeuven 1989.
- 57 'Summa, hy is wel een van de beste Coloreerders die Antwerpen heeft ghehad, hebbende een vleeschachtighe manier van schilderen, soo niet met enckel wit, maer met carnatie verhoogende, so dat hy onder den Schilders eeuwich gherucht heeft verdient.' See Van Mander, *op. cit.* (n. 33), fol. 232r; for the English translation, see H. Miedema (ed.), *Karel van Mander. The lives of the illustrious Netherlandish and German painters, from the first edition of the Schilder-boeck (1603-1604)*, 6 vols, Doornspijk 1994, I, 199.
- 58 This technique was made fashionable by Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617). See Taylor, *op. cit.* (n. 55).
- 59 Compare for instance the early London *Judgement of Paris* of about 1597-1599 and the Madrid version painted in Italy around 1606-1608. The flesh tints of the female nudes in the former tend more to the traditional cold manner with rather harsh bluish shadows, whereas in the latter Rubens seems to be experimenting with the Italian glow since the skin of the figures – of the men especially – is glimmering so much that it looks as if their bodies are oiled. For the most recent literature about those paintings, see London 2005, *op. cit.* (n. 26); 58-59, no. 9 and 61, no. 11; Healy, *op. cit.* (n. 3), 49-60, 73-79.
- 60 This method is typical for Rubens's carnations from around 1609-10 and has been noticed for other works too. Exemplary are the London *Samson and Delilah*, *The dispute of the Holy Sacrament* in Antwerp and the *Raising of the cross* in the same city. See J. Plesters, 'Samson and Delilah: Rubens and the art and craft of painting on panel', *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 8 (1981), 30-49; L. Kockaert, 'Composition and structure of the paint layers', in: *Peter Paul Rubens's "Elevation of the cross". Study, examination and treatment*, *Bulletin IRPA* 24 (1992), 63-77; N. Van Hout, 'Reconsidering Rubens's flesh colour', *Boletín del Museo del Prado*, XIX, no. 37 (2001), 7-20.
- 61 Some differentiation is called for here. If still to a lesser extent in his early paintings, over the years Rubens will more and more breathe life into the marble sculptures he depicted in spite of their essentially hard texture. In doing so, he made his emulation of ancient sculpture very tangible. However, he believed that the transparency and flexibility of human flesh were 'avoided by the generality of sculptors; yet are sometimes admitted into use by the most excellent' ('statuariis vulgo evitatis optimis tamen quae aliquando admissas'. Ms Johnson, fol. 31r). Writing in a letter of 17 April 1640 to the sculptor François Duquesnoy (1597-1643) that his *putti* on the Van den Eynden epitaph in Rome 'looked as if nature had sculpted them instead of art, as if marble was changed in soft, living flesh' ('se li habbia scolpiti piuttosto la natura che l'arte; il marmo si sia intenerito in vita'), he seemed to insinuate that Duquesnoy was one of those excellent sculptors and gave him probably the most beautiful compliment a baroque sculptor could wish. For the letter, see Ruelens and Rooses, *op. cit.* (n. 7), VI, 271.
- 62 Fend, *op. cit.* (n. 2).
- 63 The importance of the face in the perception of Rubens's female nudes was for the first time explicitly emphasised by Kenneth Clark. He is followed in this approach by Fiona Healy who assigns an important place to the facial expression in her interpretations of Rubens's mythological goddesses and biblical heroines. See K. Clark, *The Nude*, Harmondsworth 1960, 137; Healy, *op. cit.* (n. 3); K. Lohse Belkin and F. Healy, *A House of Art: Rubens as collector*, cat. exh. Antwerp (Rubenshuis & Rubenianum) 2004, 88-91.
- 64 This idea of the flesh tints as the stage of human emotions was some fifteen years ago touched upon by Emil Maurer and was recently developed extensively by Ulrich Heinen in the context of a new art historical method described by him as "Malphysiologie" (D). This approach crosses the physiology of colours with that of the human body. See Heinen, *op. cit.* (n. 2).
- 65 Lehmann, *op. cit.* (n. 49), 97-101.
- 66 For recent contributions illustrating Rubens's medical and physiological knowledge, see Heinen, *op. cit.* (n. 2); Idem, 'Rubens Garten und die Gesundheit des Künstlers', *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* LXV (2004), 71-182; see also J. Dequeker, 'Benign familial hypermobility syndrome and Trendelenburg sign in a painting "The Three Graces" by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640)', *Annals of the rheumatic diseases* 60 (2001), 894-895.
- 67 For a penetrating assessment of heterosexual love and relationships in Rubens's imagery, see E. McGrath, *op. cit.* (n. 14), I, 113-131.
- 68 As Junius, for instance, argued, this reddish colouring was in those times considered essential feature of healthy men: [...] dignitatem, virilem. Formae autem dignitas, coloris bonitate est; color exercitationibus corporis' ([...] Dignitie [...] is more proper for a man. This dignity

- is maintained by the goodness of colour, and colour is maintained by the exercise of our bodies'). Junius 1637, *op. cit.* (n. 27), 157 and, for the English translation, Junius 1638, *op. cit.* (n. 27), I, 230.
- 69 Van Mander, *op. cit.* (n. 33), fol. 51v.
- 70 This idea seems to go against Ulrich Heinen's assertion that Rubens's affective modelling of the flesh tints does not intend the emotional stimulation of the viewer, but a stoic distance. Cfr. Heinen, *op. cit.* (n. 2).
- 71 Alpers, *op. cit.* (n. 5).
- 72 P. Reilly, 'The taming of blue: writing out color in Italian Renaissance theory,' in: N. Boude and M. Garrard (eds), *The Expanding discourse: feminism and art history*, New York 1992, 86-99; M. Pardo, 'Artifice as seduction in Titian', in: J. Turner (ed.), *Sexuality and gender in Early Modern Europe: institutions, texts, images*, Cambridge/New York 1993, 55-89; see also D. Bohde, *Haut, Fleisch und Farbe. Körperlichkeit und Materialität in den Gemälden Tizians*, Emsdetten / Berlin 2002.
- 73 '[...] le femmine, & putti con le membra naturali, come agli uomini: ma ricoperte di quelle grassieze, & carnosità [...]'. Vasari, *op. cit.* (n. 53), IV, 9.
- 74 'Doch de vroukens moeten hardicheyt derven in den musculen/welcke gheheel sachtich moeten verliesen/oft aerdich versterven/poeselich van vlees/met vouwkens en kerven/kuylkens in handen/als kinderachtich'. Van Mander, *op. cit.* (n. 33), fol. 11v.
- 75 '[...] brevis alvus venter nec magnus nec parvus nonquam deorsum deficiens vel propedens./ notes non longae aut pendentes, sed magnae et largae tum durae carnis et valde carnosae.../ vulva parva./ clunes in equa fere ad genua crassi (quae sunt femora) praecipue ab eo latere ubi ventri annectuntur. [...]'. Ms. Johnson, fols 74v-90r.
- 76 Rubens's theory as well as his practice are probably nourished by stoic physics explaining the genesis and change of elements as condensing, diluting and mixing. See Heinen, *op. cit.* (n. 2), 79-83.
- 77 When Sir Dudley Carleton asked Rubens in his oft quoted letter of 1618 to paint the *Suzanna* he was making for him – another version than the one we are dealing with here – so 'beautiful that even old men would fall in love with her', he might have been referring to Rubens's exceptional skills in the illusionist depiction of female flesh which gave his female characters the impact of real, living beauties who aroused the desire to be touched. For Carleton's letter, see Ruelens and Rooses, *op. cit.* (n. 7), II, 164-165.
- 78 The best overview of Titian's impact on Rubens undoubtedly remains: J.S. Held, 'Rubens and Titian', in: D. Rosand (ed.), *Titian: his world and his legacy*, New York 1982, 283-339.
- 79 Rubens openly admits his particular interest in the study of the Italian masters in his famous letter to Junius of 1637. See Ruelens and Rooses, *op. cit.* (n. 7), VI, 179-180.
- 80 Rubens must have seen the originals in Cardinal Aldobrandini's collection during his Italian journey. The copies were made only thirty years later with the aid of visual mnemonic devices. See G. Cavalli-Björkman (ed.), *Bacchanals by Titian and Rubens. Papers given at a symposium in Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, March 18-19*, Stockholm 1987, esp. 75-140; idem, *Rubens copista de Tiziano*, cat. exh. Madrid (Museo Nacional del Prado), Madrid 1987.
- 81 '[...] Una donna nuda che dorme, tanto bella, che pare viva.' Vasari, *op. cit.* (n. 37), VII, 434.
- 82 Van Hout, *op. cit.* (n. 60), 16.
- 83 This procedure consisting in the fruitful use of earlier artistic achievements, and in particular of ancient sculpture and renaissance painting, is in accordance with Rubens's theory of imitation. See J. Muller, 'Rubens's theory and practice of the imitation of art', *Art Bulletin* 64 (1982), 229-246.
- 84 '[...] Veterascente mundo inde politi irreparabili damno, seu etiam omnium natura si antiquitus origini perfectionisque proprius afferebat ultro compositum quod omni seculorum senescentium defectu sub accidentibus vitiis et etiam staturae hominum multorum sententiis probatae paulatim decessentia [...] Anima precipua qua nostril eri hominess different ab antiquis est ignoratum et inexercitatum vivendi genus quippe esse bibere nulla exercitandi corporis cura vel deprominet depressum ventris onus simpler assidua [...] ('Now being decay'd and corrupted by a succession of so many ages, vices, and accidents, has lost its efficacy, and only scatters those perfections among many, which it used formerly to bestow upon one. In this manner, the human stature may be proved from many authors to have gradually decreased [...] The chief reason why men of our age are different from the ancients, is sloth, and want of exercise; for most men give no other exercise to their body but eating and drinking. No wonder therefore, if we see so many paunch-bellies, weak and pitiful legs and arms, that seem to reproach themselves with idleness [...]'). For the English translation, see R. de Piles, *Principles of Painting*, London 1743.
- 85 Ph. P. Fehl, 'Imitation as a source of greatness: Rubens, Titian, and the painting of the ancients', in: G. Cavalli-Björkman, *op. cit.* (n. 80), 107-132, esp. 115-117.
- 86 Rubens himself criticized painters who in imitating ancient sculptures made no distinction between the matter and the form, the stone and the figure, the necessity of using the block, and the art of forming it: 'plures imperitit et etiam periti non distinguunt materiam a forma, saxum a figura nec citatem marmoris ab artificio'. Ms. Johnson, fol. 31r; see also De Piles, *op. cit.* (n. 46), 140.

