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Volume 10, Number 1, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074637ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074637ar>

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Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Glen, T. L. (1983). Observations on van Dyck as a Religious Painter. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 10(1), 45–52.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1074637ar>

Observations on van Dyck as a Religious Painter*

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When dealing with European religious art of the seventeenth century, one must inevitably contend with the awesome personality of Sir Peter Paul Rubens. Whether one likes his work or not, it is impossible to deny the genius of this man not only as a painter but also as a diplomat.

Like Annibale Carracci and Caravaggio, Rubens was of the first generation of Baroque painters who translated into visually concrete forms the less tangible ideals of the recently reformed Roman Catholic Church. Their paintings were intended to confirm Catholic faith and convert those outside the Church. Even more than Caravaggio or the Carracci, it was Rubens who was perhaps most responsible for the invention of the type of truly powerful and ultra real representation of Christ and the saints that would later inspire artists throughout Europe. It was Rubens, for example, and not an Italian master, who in 1606 was awarded the prestigious commission to provide a suitable altarpiece for the High Altar of San Filippo Neri's Chiesa Nuova in Rome (Fig. 1). And it was Rubens who first carried the art of the Counter-Reformation out of Italy and infused it with his own Flemish heritage of persuasive naturalism and late mediaeval spirituality.¹

Of the great personalities of the second generation of Baroque artists, perhaps only Gian Lorenzo Bernini escapes the shadow of Rubens. But, then, he was a sculptor and working in Rome long after Rubens had left the eternal city.²

Such is not the case with Anthony van Dyck. Born in Antwerp in 1599, van Dyck was just nine years old when Rubens returned from Italy in 1608. He was barely eleven and probably just beginning his apprenticeship with Hendrick van Balen, when Rubens was commissioned to paint the monumental triptych of the *Raising of the Cross*

for the main altar of the Church of St. Walburgis (Fig. 2). In Rubens' altarpiece we witness Christ triumphant. His form is instilled with the spirit of Greco-Roman antiquity, with a hint of the suffering of the Laocoön. At the same time his humanity is evident in the naturalistic blue tinge of his hands that suffer from a lack of circulation caused by the nails having been driven through His wrists and not, as is more common in painting, through the palms. The viewers were and still are persuaded to feel the literal torture of crucifixion, and at the same time to identify the divine grace of the Saviour who does not cry out and who retains his human and divine dignity. Surely, Rubens intended to present the symbolic banner of Catholicism raised above the standards of the Roman legion. This altarpiece is without doubt a Counter-Reformation image *par excellence*.³ Moreover, in this picture as well as in so many others from the years of 1609 to 1620, Rubens makes use of the late mediaeval Flemish tradition of flower and animal symbolism to enhance his Catholic message and to appeal to more learned parishioners.⁴

* This paper is dedicated to my teacher Professor John Rupert Martin with whom I spent many precious hours in the study of Sir Peter Paul Rubens.

¹ For a more complete discussion of Rubens' religious art at this time, see my *Rubens and the Counter Reformation: Studies in his Religious Paintings between 1609 and 1620* (New York and London, 1977).

² By this I do not mean to suggest that Bernini's art is totally devoid of Rubens' influence. But as of this moment, firm evidence of their artistic relationship has not been convincingly established.

³ For a more thorough treatment of this altarpiece, see J.R. Martin, *Rubens: The Antwerp Altarpieces* (New York, 1969), and Glen, 35-47.

⁴ Rubens' use of Flemish late mediaeval symbolism in his religious art is one of the underlying themes of my *Rubens and the Counter Reformation*.



FIGURE 1. Rubens, *The 'Madonna della Vallicella' adored by Seraphim and Cherubim*. Rome, S. Maria della Vallicella (Photo: Alinari).

Fortunately or unfortunately, as the case may be, the young van Dyck could not escape the fact that while he was himself developing, albeit rapidly, as an artist, Peter Paul Rubens was firmly establishing himself as an eloquent spokesman for revived Roman Catholicism. Rubens' religious art satisfied all the qualities of persuasion, immediacy, clarity and didacticism that were demanded by Catholic theologians not only in Rome, but more importantly in Antwerp. Antwerp had become the major centre for Catholic theological thought and publication. Rubens' recent experience in Italy of the new direction of Roman Catholic religious imagery, his own contributions to its development, and indeed his Flemish heritage, made him the logical choice in Flanders to replace with modern works the sacred pictures that had so recently been destroyed by the Protestants in the long war for religious tolerance and Dutch independence.

⁵ See L. Cust, *Anthony Van Dyck: An Historical Study of His Life and Work* (London, 1900), 58-59.

⁶ See J.R. Martin, *The Ceiling Paintings for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* (London and New York, 1968), 32, 39-40, 214-217.

⁷ Although Rubens probably did not travel to England before van Dyck's visit in the winter of 1620-21, his work was certainly well-known there before van Dyck's trip. A recent M.A. thesis for McGill University (1979) by Pam Wachna treating the ceiling paintings at Whitehall presents some persuasive arguments for the hypothesis that Rubens may have visited England long before 1629.

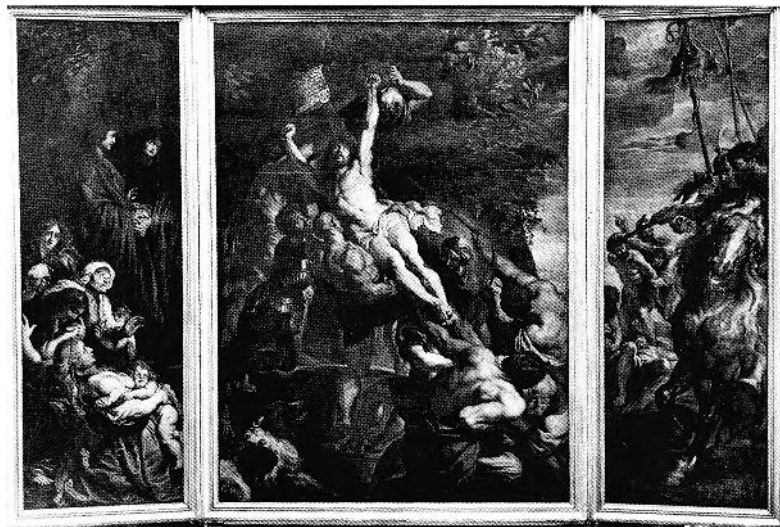


FIGURE 2. Rubens, *Raising of the Cross*. Antwerp Cathedral (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels).

Van Dyck was maturing during the very years of the 'Twelve Years Truce', that is, at the time when Rubens was painting such magnificent religious works as the *Raising of the Cross* (1611), the *Descent from the Cross* (1612-14), the *Entombment* (1612) in Ottawa, the *Christ à la Paille* (1617) and the huge *Coup de Lance* (1620), to name only a few. These are the kind of altarpieces that van Dyck grew up with. Given his wealthy, bourgeois background and, we are told, his deep religious conviction, it would have been inconceivable that as a fellow painter he would not have been profoundly affected by Rubens' art.⁵ That van Dyck was sympathetic with the meaning of Rubens' religious painting is attested to by the fact that the older master and local Jesuit authorities placed their trust in him by permitting him to participate in the huge project of the production ceiling paintings commissioned in 1620 for the so-called Marble Temple, the Jesuit Church in Antwerp.⁶

It is important to reiterate that van Dyck was never Rubens' pupil and that when he worked with him as early as 1618, he was a master himself in the Guild of St. Luke and much respected by Rubens. Moreover, given Rubens' monopoly at the time, it says much for van Dyck's ability that he actually materializes from the pages of art history as a separate major artistic personality.

Even if van Dyck had wanted to disassociate himself from Rubens, he could not. Rubens was known before him in Italy and in England.⁷ Van Dyck would not much outlive the older master and would not turn the tide of seventeenth-century Flemish painting from Rubens to himself; for as

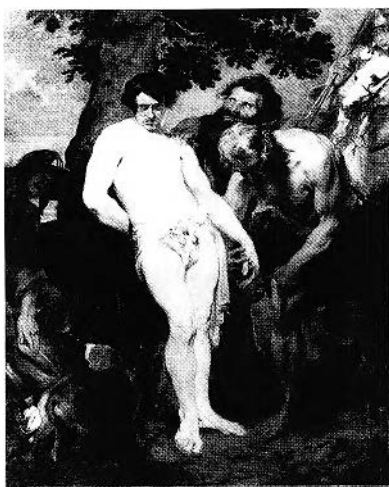


FIGURE 3. Van Dyck, *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*. Paris, Musée du Louvre.



FIGURE 4. Van Dyck, *Entry of Christ into Jerusalem*. Indianapolis Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Herman C. Krannert.

fate would have it, van Dyck followed Rubens to the grave just two years after the old man's death.

There is nothing to suggest that van Dyck was ever violently envious as was Lucas Vorsterman of Rubens' position or abilities. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that he took advantage of his situation by making free use of Rubens' paintings, drawings and oil sketches as sources of inspiration for his own compositions.⁸ Painting, after all, at the time was a profession and a business. If Rubens was producing the kinds of pictures that were so much in demand, then why not also van Dyck? It was, perhaps, for economic reasons that van Dyck's religious pictures were so steeped in the spirit of Rubens. It is significant that van Dyck's most important religious commissions came during his second Antwerp period, after his return from Italy and beginning about 1628, when Rubens himself was absent from Antwerp and very much occupied by other matters.

But even before his trip to Italy in 1621, van Dyck had produced a number of noteworthy altarpieces. We may note that Rubens had, when he was twenty-two, painted only a very few paintings, and none of them of anything like the same quality as van Dyck's art from his youth.

Alan McNairn has rightly remarked that van Dyck's *oeuvre* from his early years in Antwerp merits serious consideration not only because of its high quality, but also because it represents 'the foundation of a style that would serve him well in his subsequent career.'⁹ Two pictures which were in the Ottawa exhibition *The Young van Dyck* are especially exciting examples of the directions in religious painting that van Dyck was exploring

during his first Antwerp period. They are the *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* in the Louvre (Fig. 3) and *The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* in the Indianapolis Museum of Art (Fig. 4).

As a scene of martyrdom and in terms of the ideology of the Counter-Reformation, the *St. Sebastian*, painted as early as 1617, is perhaps rivaled only by Rubens' two slightly earlier versions of the same subject; one in Rome (Fig. 5) and the other in Berlin (Fig. 6). Like Rubens, van Dyck provides the viewer with all the essentials of the narrative, while at the same time presenting the saint as a salutary image of piety worthy of our veneration. Sebastian remains calm, almost resigned, in the face of his imminent torture. The action takes place to the front of the picture plane. There are no extraneous passages to distract the viewer's attention and thus lessen the example of this noble early Christian convert's sacrifice for his faith. I say Christian, although the implication is of course Roman Catholic. St. Sebastian, always a favourite subject among artists, was especially popular as a martyr figure during the early seventeenth century in Catholic Europe. St. Sebastian, who was born in France, became an officer in the Roman Army and was eventually executed in 287 because of his conversion to Christianity. It is not difficult to recognize the parallels that were drawn between St. Sebastian's situation and that of contemporary Catholic martyrs who gave up their lives for their faith in the battles against Protestantism.

8 Alan McNairn, *The Young van Dyck* (Ottawa, 1980), 16.

9 Idem, 3.



FIGURE 5. Rubens, *St. Sebastian*. Rome, Galleria Corsini (Photo: Alinari).



FIGURE 6. Rubens, *St. Sebastian*. Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen.

Van Dyck has not envisioned an ethereal saintly figure, for the countenance of his Louvre *St. Sebastian* is strikingly powerful in its naturalism. Indeed, there appears to be very little idealization. The figure relies to a great extent on the study of a live model and this, together with the vigorous style of the brushwork, provides a most persuasive and tangible vision of martyrdom.

The boldness of van Dyck's realism in the effective contrast between the resigned saint and the awkward executioners becomes especially apparent when this Louvre canvas is compared to Rubens' interpretations, since the saint is imbued with more of the antique, and hence is more idealized than he is in van Dyck's painting. Moreover, in van Dyck's work, the contrast between executioners and calm Sebastian is more exciting than the host of angels who aid the saint in Rubens' earlier Roman composition.

Nonetheless, that van Dyck *was* influenced by Rubens is, I think, quite obvious. Alan McNairn has suggested that the dependence of the Louvre *St. Sebastian* on Rubens' Berlin picture is most recognizable in the hefty body of the saint and in the strong outward thrust of the hips.¹⁰ It appears too, that van Dyck was not unfamiliar with Rubens' canvas now in Rome, since the sagging right arm of the Louvre Sebastian, the placement of his feet and his slight diagonal lean to the left recall the older master's earlier Italian painting. It seems

also that the young artist was not only thinking of Rubens' interpretation of St. Sebastian as there are clear reminiscences of the huge *Raising of the Cross* in van Dyck's *St. Sebastian*. With respect to both composition and even iconography there are striking similarities. In a sense, van Dyck has simply compressed the tripartite scheme of the *Raising* into a vertical composition. In both works there is a similar contrast of calm martyr and awkward executioners. Both artists employed virtually the same motif of mounted Roman officer on the right, who directs operations, and both placed a dog in the lower left corner. In the *Raising*, the dog barks frantically, while in van Dyck's canvas, the dog with tail between his legs glares menacingly at one of the assisting foot-soldiers. It is interesting to note in passing that van Dyck adds this very same dog in his free copy of Rubens' *Meeting between Saint Ambrose and the Emperor Theodosius* (illustrated in preceding article by Martin, fig. 6). With respect to Rubens, I have shown elsewhere that we must regard the dog in terms of its symbolic value, in this instance a reference to the fidelity of the pious viewer standing before the altarpiece – those devoted followers of Christ not included among the spectators in the left-hand panel.¹¹ We might suppose that van Dyck was also conscious of animal symbolism, and the dog in his *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* could also be interpreted in much the same vein. Its appearance, meanwhile, in his copy of Rubens' *Ambrose and Theodosius* could be recognized as an emblem of fidelity to Rubens' composition. Rubens, after all, was himself later to give

¹⁰ Idem, 55.

¹¹ See Glen, 46.

two dogs an equally prominent place in his huge *Coronation of Marie de Medici* to indicate that his painting conveyed a faithful or accurate visual account of the event.

The other motif that merits our attention regarding the thesis that van Dyck followed Rubens in the use of flower and animal symbolism is the tree to which St. Sebastian is being bound. A readily identifiable oak tree exists in both versions of Rubens' *St. Sebastian*, and in the background behind Christ in his *Raising of the Cross* and also in van Dyck's later version of the *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* in Edinburgh.¹² Oak had long been considered in Christian legend to be the wood from which the Saviour's cross had been fashioned. In reference to Christ's Sacrifice it was regarded as the Tree of the New Faith. It also became the symbol of the endurance of the Christian Martyr in the face of adversity.¹³ When dealing with Rubens' art between 1609 and 1620, one must assume that seemingly incidental passages of nature almost always contain a symbolic meaning that can be directly related to the main subject of the picture. But even more interesting is the evidence which suggests that van Dyck, at least in his first Antwerp period, used symbolic motifs in the same way.

One might argue that the dog or the oak in the Louvre *St. Sebastian* were included by van Dyck simply because he observed them in Rubens' compositions, but it is more likely that van Dyck fully recognized and appreciated the iconographic details in Rubens' art. We should not forget that it was van Dyck who made the drawing for the engraving after Rubens' altarpiece *The Stigmatization of St. Francis*, a work which is full of so-called disguised symbolism.¹⁴ Van Dyck in his drawing carefully reproduced every passage of Rubens' picture and it seems unlikely and beneath his intellect that he would not have questioned the elder master regarding such obviously strange items as the salamander and the butterfly in the foreground.

It is not just in scenes of St. Sebastian that van Dyck featured the oak tree, for he includes it elsewhere in later themes of martyrdom or potential martyrdom, the most important example being *The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* (Fig. 4). Like the Louvre *St. Sebastian*, this canvas also demonstrates all of the ingredients that could be demanded of a religious work of art by the authorities of the Counter-Reformation. Martin and Feigenbaum and McNairn in their respective catalogues have discussed van Dyck's possible sources for the compositions.¹⁵ Van Dyck is careful to include all the elements of the Biblical narrative, but unlike earlier Mannerist renditions of the

theme, he has in accord with principles of the Counter-Reformation presented a simple and very direct version of the subject. He has omitted the huge crowds of onlookers and vast expanses of landscape so popular in earlier compositions. The main figures have been moved up to the front of the picture plane. Nothing distracts the viewer's attention from the solemn procession of Christ and his disciples. Also important for the purposes of persuasion is the incredible naturalism that van Dyck again employs in this work. Most impressive is the marvelous bending figure in the foreground, who seems barely contained by the limits of the canvas. One's eye is drawn more to this passage than to any other. In fact, what van Dyck really appears to be focusing on, is the action which the huge figure is performing – that of casting a branch under the hooves of Christ's little donkey. The branch then becomes a very important element in the painting. It is significant, too, that this is a large bough of oak and because of its prominence in the composition it was surely van Dyck's intention that it be read as a symbol of Christ's courage in the face of His voluntary sacrifice for the salvation of mankind.¹⁶ The large palm tree whose fronds unfold behind Christ's head like a halo not only suggests the geographical location of the *Entry* conforming to the iconography which is derived from the narrative of the Gospel of St. John (xii, 12-13) but also is emblematic of the triumph over death of the Christian martyr.

Several other plants, which can be identified such as the fern or the ivy in the murky lower left-hand corner may also be symbols which enhance the Christian message of this dramatic presentation.¹⁷

¹² For a reproduction of van Dyck's *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* in Edinburgh, see McNairn, fig. 34.

¹³ Glen, 45-46.

¹⁴ Glen, 169-170. For a reproduction of van Dyck's drawing for the engraving after Rubens' composition, see McNairn, n° 33.

¹⁵ McNairn, n° 48. J.R. Martin and Feigenbaum, *Van Dyck as Religious Artist* (Princeton, 1979), n° 18.

¹⁶ As with the Louvre *St. Sebastian*, it is worth considering in this context Rubens' *Raising of the Cross*. The crouching figure in van Dyck's *Entry* is not only proportionally much larger than the other figures in the composition, but he is also possibly meant to be understood as a demonic or evil force, much like the huge bald executioner with pointed ears in Rubens' altarpiece. While he lacks the peculiar ears, he does appear to have six toes on his left foot, the sixth appendage being smaller than others but clearly visible between the giant's large toe and the more usual second toe. It is over such an evil force as this being, that Christ's courage, symbolized through the oak, will ultimately triumph. On the forces of evil in Rubens' *Raising of the Cross*, see Martin, *Rubens*, 50 and Glen, 40-42.

¹⁷ See Glen, 45 and 145.

It is not the purpose here to review all the religious pictures of van Dyck's first Antwerp period that may be recognized to contain flower and animal symbolism. Suffice it to say that there are a number of examples which include the two paintings of *St. Jerome* in the Ottawa exhibition, and *St. Martin Dividing his Cloak*, in St.-Martinuskerk, Zaventem. All this suggests that we should not be too hasty to exclude the possibility that van Dyck, like Rubens, was fully conversant with the Flemish late mediaeval tradition of the language of Christian symbolism.

Van Dyck's association with Rubens was interrupted in 1620, when, after serving as the older master's senior assistant, he set off for England. After returning to Antwerp in 1621, he departed for Italy where he was to remain until at least 1627.

In Italy, van Dyck reinforced his understanding of Italian art and also established himself, particularly in Genoa, as a master portrait painter. By 1628, he was again back in Antwerp, brought home possibly because of his sister Cornelia's death in September of 1627.¹⁸ He returned as a highly successful painter and one who was entirely aware of his own merits. Van Dyck's return to Antwerp coincided with Rubens' absence. Rubens was away from Antwerp almost exclusively from the summer of 1628 until the fall of 1630. He had already contributed a wealth of unequaled altarpieces and now with the death of his first wife, Isabella, in 1626, it would seem that he meant to lose himself in his diplomatic duties and leave his sorrows behind. His absence left the field of religious painting open to van Dyck who was by this time more than a match for any local artist. One wonders if van Dyck's return to Antwerp upon Rubens' departure is not more than mere coincidence.

During the more than four years that comprise van Dyck's second Antwerp period, the artist proved himself to be the man most capable of fulfilling the continuing heavy demand for religious

pictures and altarpieces in the Catholic Southern Netherlands. There is substantial documentary evidence to indicate that several of van Dyck's commissions from this period such as the *Crucifixion* of 1628-29 in St.-Michielskerk, Ghent, had originally been awarded to Rubens, but had been passed on to van Dyck because of Rubens involvement abroad in political matters.¹⁹ Indeed it is interesting to speculate as to just how many projects van Dyck would have received in his own right had Rubens remained as active in Antwerp as he had been during the Twelve Years Truce.

During his second Antwerp period, van Dyck created his most important history paintings and monumental altarpieces. Martin and Feigenbaum have observed rightly that van Dyck's pictures treating the Crucifixion are among his most impressive works from this time.²⁰ He did no fewer than six major paintings representing some aspect of the Crucifixion and as Martin and Feigenbaum have remarked, because of certain recurring motifs in each, they form a tight group and must all have been painted within three or four years.²¹

It is true that van Dyck, more than Rubens, sought to emphasize in his works such human emotions as grief, torment and despair in the reactions of Christ's followers to His death. Perhaps this represents something of van Dyck's recent experience in Italy with more blatant, emotionally charged religious art complete, in some instances, with swooning virgins.²² But if in Italy he had managed to free himself partially from dependence on Rubens, it seems clear from an examination of the Crucifixion altarpieces from the second Antwerp period that van Dyck again availed himself with stunning results of his mentor's compositions and iconography.

In the altarpiece of *Christ Crucified Between Two Thieves* for the Church of the Minorities in Mechlin, and today in the Cathedral of St.-Rombouts in the same city, van Dyck demonstrates that he is entirely worthy of the title 'Religious Artist' (Fig. 7). This picture, later much admired by Sir Joshua Reynolds, painted about 1629 is completely in accord with the ideals of the Counter-Reformation.²³

There is a fine sense of decorum and immediacy. The action takes place to the front of the picture plane. The gesturing figure in the left foreground acts as a repoussoir element and leads us visually and psychologically into the painting. He is balanced on the right by the Virgin who seems to beseech us to become involved in the

¹⁸ Cust, 58.

¹⁹ Martin and Feigenbaum, 158.

²⁰ Idem, 148-149.

²¹ Idem, 149.

²² Crucifixion scenes from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in Italy commonly include the Virgin swooning at the foot of the cross. By 1610, however, this iconography was considered not to be in keeping with the ideology of the Counter-Reformation and the decrees of the Council of Trent; see E. Mâle, *L'Art religieux du XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1951), 8.

²³ Sir Joshua Reynolds remarked of this painting that 'it may be considered as one of the first pictures in the world, and gives the highest idea of Van Dyck's powers: it shews that he had truly a genius for history-painting if it had not been taken off by portraits.' *Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Knt.*, ed. E. Malone (London, 1797), II, 19.

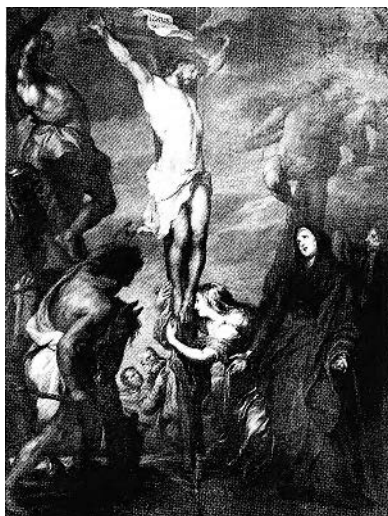


FIGURE 7. Van Dyck, *Crucifixion with the Two Thieves*. Mechlin, St.-Romboutskathedraal (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels).



FIGURE 8. Rubens, *Coup de Lance*. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten.

sacred drama on the cross. The rhythm, then, is from left to right in a circular motion that reaches out to include the spectator and commands his participation as a witness to the Crucifixion. Christ is depicted in a style which carefully balances the classically ideal and the real. His calm dignity is in marked contrast to the struggling thieves on either side of Him. Still, His torture is no less gruesome. He suffers crucifixion by nails, and as in all of Rubens' crucifixions, van Dyck shows the Saviour's upper limbs impaired to the cross through the wrists and not through the palms as the long tradition of crucifixion iconography would dictate. Rubens' and van Dyck's art is virtually unique in this respect. The motif demonstrates an accurate yet almost macabre understanding of anatomy *vis-à-vis* crucifixion. In van Dyck's work the blood running down Christ's forearms and the flesh at the wrists around the nails, pushed up against the weight of the Saviour's sagging body, contribute to the powerful naturalism. The Magdalene embraces the cross at Christ's feet. She is tormented by grief. She plays an essential part in this sacred drama as she personifies the sins of all mankind. She is the viewer's representative at the crucifixion.²⁴ And although she embraces the cross in an act of sorrow and of begging forgiveness, her passion is contained by reverence for her drapery and not her hands touch the wood of the cross.²⁵

The Virgin Mary, despite her obvious suffering does not collapse in a swoon, but rather in strict conformity to the doctrine of the Counter-Reformation she remains on her feet, a stance which

signifies courage.²⁶ Though her body is turned out to the viewer, she looks up and back at her dead Son. Her gestures and pose seem to say, this is my Son who has suffered for you. Her attitude conforms to the late mediaeval belief explained by such authors as St. Bonaventure or St. Bridget of Sweden, that the Virgin had long known of and had agreed to her Son's death.²⁷ Indeed the Virgin here must be recognized as the *Virgo Sacerdos*, as Priest, who shares in the work of redemption with her Son. The iconography of the Virgin as Co-Redemptrix or *Virgo Sacerdos* is late mediaeval, but it regained popularity during the Counter-Reformation through the writings of two important theologians, Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle and Jean-Jacques Olier.²⁸

In none of his Crucifixion scenes from the second Antwerp period does van Dyck show the Virgin swooning and in these paintings one is invited

²⁴ For a more complete discussion of the Magdalene in this role, see J. Białostocki, 'The Descent from the Cross in Works by Peter Paul Rubens and his Studio,' *The Art Bulletin*, x1.vi (1964), 514-522.

²⁵ In connection with this motif, I would point out that a drawing for the *Crucifixion* in the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, Paris (Inv. n° 1710), suggested by Martin and Feigenbaum (n° 40) to be a preparatory pen and ink drawing for the *Crucifixion* in the Musée des beaux-arts, Lille, could just as easily be associated with the St.-Rombouts *Crucifixion*. The Magdalene in both the St.-Rombouts painting and on the *recto* of the drawing holds drapery in her hands, while she does not in the Lille *Crucifixion*.

²⁶ See note 22.

²⁷ See Glen, 37-38.

²⁸ See Glen, 75-76.



FIGURE 9. Van Dyck, *Raising of the Cross*. Courtrai, Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels).

to view her as Co-Redeemer. This is the type of Virgin portrayed by Rubens. That van Dyck understood Rubens' conception of the Virgin is clear if we compare his iconography and composition to that of Rubens' *Coup de Lance* of 1620 (Fig. 8). Given the slight difference in moment their altarpieces are virtually mirror images of one another. There is the same horseman in each; similar naturalism and attention to detail and also the same viewpoint and involvement of the spectator. With the witnesses which appear behind the foot of Christ's cross, we also look up at the Saviour. We are drawn into the two-dimensional world of the painting to share in the important moment. We are instructed, and as the Magdalene receives the grace of God, so also do we.

Van Dyck's continuing interest in Rubens' composition and iconography is also apparent in his version of the *Raising of the Cross* in the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk (Church of Our Lady), Courtrai. This *Raising of the Cross* (Fig. 9), painted between 1630 and 1631, is very different from Rubens' great triptych of approximately twenty years earlier and yet at the same time the two altarpieces have some significant similarities.

Martin and Feigenbaum have commented that van Dyck's composition is 'almost relief-like in its adherence to the picture plane.'²⁹ There is little of

the sense of space that is found in Rubens' altarpiece but there is a corresponding immediacy in both works. In van Dyck's picture as in Rubens' earlier triptych, we see that if the cross with its precious burden were to be fully erect, it would exist in a space outside the upper edge of the canvas. The dog, the mounted officer and the executioners at the right who strain to push the cross upward, are all obviously dependent on Rubens' composition. As is common in Rubens' pictures van Dyck shows Christ's upper limbs impaled to the cross through the wrists. Even more interesting is the manner in which the Saviour's feet are fastened to the cross. As in all but one of Rubens' Crucifixions painted before 1620, van Dyck shows Christ's feet overlapping. The feet are separately nailed and partially crossed. This motif, though by no means unique to Rubens and van Dyck, is however unusual. Only a handful of artists from the sixteenth century on portray the feet of the crucified Christ in this manner. But whereas Rubens and van Dyck show the one foot placed over the other, almost all other representations, as far as I know, depict Christ's legs crossed, but with his feet side by side one another and fastened to the cross by one nail each.

For the origin of this particular Crucifixion iconography one must go back to the fifteenth century, to the writings of the great mystic St. Bridget of Sweden. In her book of *Revelations* St. Bridget recounts that one day she had a vision of Christ crucified in this way, with one foot over the other (*super aliam*) and affixed to the cross by two nails. Clearly Rubens' and therefore van Dyck's paintings demonstrate the most accurate interpretation of St. Bridget's text – one foot not completely crossed over the other, but simply overlapping, as St. Bridget writes, *super aliam*.³⁰ It would seem improbable that van Dyck was not fully cognizant of the iconographic significance of this peculiar rendering of the Crucifixion. We must conclude that van Dyck's iconography is more profound than has heretofore been supposed.

A great number of van Dyck's religious pictures include motifs that can be understood in the light of Rubens' revival of Flemish late mediaeval symbolism and his adherence to the aims that the authorities of the Counter-Reformation had established for painting.

Van Dyck's religious pictures, like those of Rubens, have a distinct appeal for sophisticated viewers. At the same time as visual manifestations of religious texts and as inspired examples to piety, they are 'Bibles of the Illiterate.'³¹

²⁹ Martin and Feigenbaum, 29.

³⁰ For a more complete discussion of Christ crucified by nails and St. Bridget's vision, see Glen, 53-55.

³¹ This phrase, first uttered by Pope Gregory the Great, was made popular again during the Counter-Reformation by such theologians as the Jesuit scholar, Gabriele Paleotti, who wrote that paintings should be easily legible since they serve 'principalmente per libro degli idioti alli quali bisogna sempre parlare aperto e chiaro.' See G. Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane* (Bologna, 1582), ch. 33.