

Rubens and *The Holy Family with Saints Elizabeth and John the Baptist*

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Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), *The Holy Family With Saints Elizabeth and John the Baptist*, c1615, Flemish. Oil on panel. 114.5 x 91.5cm. Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois (<http://www.artic.edu>); photograph © 2001, The Art Institute of Chicago; Major Acquisition Endowment.



Eugene Delacroix was one of his greatest admirers, yet in his private journal he described the pictures of his Flemish predecessor, Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), as being like "public meetings where everybody talks at once." It is an apt description; it applies not only to the paintings, but to the man, his studio, his entire career. Like his paintings, he often seemed larger than life. His appetites were enormous, his capacity for work seemingly unlimited, his output prodigious. His love for all things—family, country, goodness, beauty—was equally unlimited. One suspects he loved many things for no reason other than that they existed; whatever existed possessed beauty if only by the fact of that existence.

Rubens managed a large studio, where he trained apprentices, supervised assistants, and even employed masters. In the idiom of the 20th century, he was the quintessential multitasker. A contemporary Danish physician who visited Rubens in his studio one day recorded the experience in his travel diary. Rubens, he said, maintained a polite and courteous dialogue with him, answering questions put to him as well as putting others to his visitor, meanwhile continuing work on a large canvas. Simultaneously, he also listened to a passage from Tacitus being read to him by a studio assistant and dealt with his considerable correspondence by dictating to another assistant.

Rubens was also court painter to dukes and kings in three countries (two of which knighted him) and religious painter to the Jesuits; more importantly (at the time) he was employing his considerable diplomatic skills in an official capacity to help secure the Peace Treaty of 1630 between England and Spain. He married Isabella Brant, who bore him three children; when she died he mourned for several years and then, when he was 53, married the 16-year-old Helene Faurment who bore him five more children. But if his joys were great, so were his sorrows. Besides Isabella, he also lost his oldest daughter, Serena when she was 12 and his beloved brother Philip, a noted Humanist scholar, in the flower of his manhood.

Relatively private and diminutive when compared with his other works is *The Holy Family With Saints Elizabeth and John the Baptist*. It was painted sometime around 1615, when Rubens was living in Antwerp and at the peak of his career. The times were also auspicious for painters. Under the patronage of Spain, churches were being reopened, ruined ones restored, new ones being built. All needed decoration. A painting such as *The*

Holy Family With Saints Elizabeth and John the Baptist, while not a literal description of any narrative known from scripture, is a plausible scene useful for either private or public devotion.

Occupying the center of the work are Mary and the two children. Flanking her on either side are her husband, Joseph, and her cousin, Elizabeth. As befits the narrative, Elizabeth is shown as being considerably older than Mary, although the two children were conceived just months apart, John coming first. Mary and the two children occupy a strong diagonal, imparting vitality to the composition. Mary's figure, like all of Rubens' women, traces a lovely serpentine pattern. Meanwhile, the Christ child sleepily reaches for his mother's face, while the slightly older John, identified by his attribute of an animal skin, stands at his feet, reminding viewers of John's later comment in the desert: "I am not fit to unloose his sandal." A lamb rests his head and a foot against John, suggesting another statement of John's in the desert when he identified his cousin as "the Lamb of God." Completing the composition are two roughly square shapes: one, in the upper left-hand corner, is a window through which one sees a dark, stormy sky; the other, placed diagonally opposite, in the lower right-hand corner, is a wicker cradle. Its role is not only to balance the composition, but to raise poignant contrasts in the viewer's mind of the serene present against the stormy future.

Over the centuries, Rubens' stock has risen or fallen with the vagaries of taste and culture, but Rubens himself never diminished. Watteau nearly deified him by making an altar for one of his paintings. Perhaps in an acknowledgment of some professional envy, a Rubens contemporary, Guido Reni, swore he mixed his pigments with blood. Ingres warned spectators to "put on blinkers like those a horse wears" when they found themselves in front of a Rubens. Some were less circumspect: Henry Fuseli found his work pompous; William Blake found all of the pictures "the most wretched bungles" and the shadows "the color of excrement"; Lord Byron was disgusted with his "eternal wives and infernal glare of colors." But perhaps Delacroix, his great admirer, should have the last word: Rubens, he said, is "the Homer of painting." In a nice irony, the Master of the Baroque has become classical. In an age that worships Minimalism, Rubens may seem overdone and excessive—even anachronistic. But he is never dull.