Master of Shadows: The Secret Diplomatic Career of the Painter
Peter Paul Rubens
by Mark Lamster

Lamster’s historical account of Baroque master Peter Paul Rubens and his entire career is packed with detail and intrigue. He discusses how integral Rubens, court painter to the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia in Brussels, was to establishing peace and various treaty provisions between Spain, Holland, England and the painter’s homeland, Flanders. The reader gets a distinct feel for the political and economic environment Rubens was born into, with Lamster documenting how Rubens deftly navigated the treacherous (and advantageous) cultural waters.

Through Rubens’s letters and travels we glimpse King Charles I of England, William Prince of Orange, Marie de’ Medici, Diego Velazquez, Caravaggio, and Anthony van Dyck. Lamster’s book is all the more insightful for these character sketches, giving real energy and tension to the dangerous and delicate moments of the artist’s life. His personal joys, faith, and work ethic are all delineated, alongside his bureaucratic triumphs and disappointments. Lamster’s finished portrait is that of a Flemish artist and diplomat that lived fully, advocating for peace, prosperity, and moderation. Rubens’ immense talent and intelligently designed workshop produced over 500 works, 9 of which reside at The Ringling Museum and 4 of those are part of his famous Triumph of the Eucharist series. The Gathering of the Manna is pictured above, ca. 1625-1626, and hangs in gallery 2 of this museum.
Questions for the Club

1. How did you like the highly detailed book? Was it engaging? Overwhelming?

2. Lamster plays up the fact that this biography portrays new historical discoveries about Rubens’s activities as a secret diplomat. This discovery is not so secret after all and has been well-documented. But did the ploy work? Did you find yourself more fascinated with the story?

3. If you already knew something of Rubens, what did this teach you?

4. Lamster discusses the issues of copyright and Rubens’s workshop multiple times. Today our ideas about authenticity are very different, assigning the origin of a piece on an exact person. According to Rubens and his personal letters, he very much felt that the paintings produced by his workshop were his. What are your thoughts on this?

5. Did you really find Rubens to be a master of shadows? Or was he fulfilling a role that was somewhat commonplace?

6. The LA Times review of this book states that Lamster is “a brave writer” for publishing research that revolves around Rubens and his style, the “High Baroque…nowadays synonymous with pointless complexity”. As Lamster demonstrates, Rubens put a great deal of thought and symbolism into his jam-packed canvasses. Is this style so “thoroughly out of fashion”?

Further Reading


