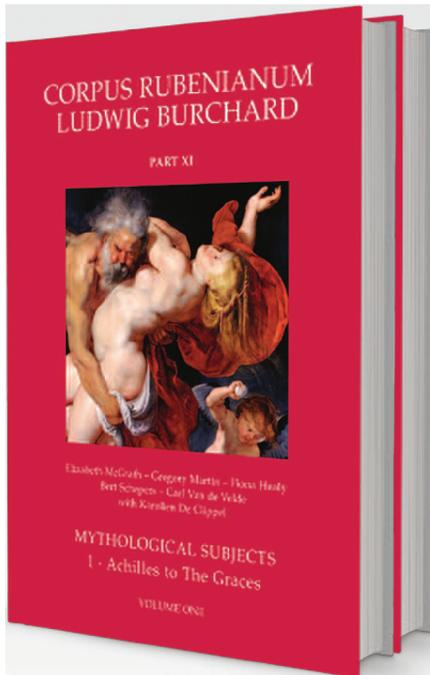


Review

Elizabeth McGrath et al., *Mythological subjects. Achilles to The Graces* (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, part XI (1)), 2 vols., London and Turnhout, Harvey Miller Publishers/Brepols, 944 pp. ISBN 978-0-905203-67-6.



The *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* aims to bring order to Rubens's immense oeuvre by cataloguing the complex jumble of works – oil sketches, preparatory drawings, original paintings, all kinds of studio works with or without Rubens's direct intervention, many contemporary copies, and numerous variations and derivations – that exist for virtually every subject with which Rubens engaged. The *Corpus* is arranged according to an iconographic categorization consisting of twenty-nine parts, which, in turn, are divided over forty-eight titles. This huge project started as long ago as 1963, but it has gained new momentum in the last few years. Since 1968, twenty-seven titles have been published (many of them consisting of two to four volumes); another twenty-one are planned to appear before 2020. The eighteen titles that were published before 2002 are now available online.

In 2016 the first title of part XI on mythological subjects – one of three comprising this part, which is arranged in alphabetical order according to the name of the primary protagonist – appeared. It runs from Achilles to the Graces and consists of two hefty volumes, one with the introduction and catalogue, the other with plates and indices. Simply put, it is a magnificent achievement. Such extremely thorough scholarly research by the best specialists in the field has become rare, and it is miraculous that such undertakings are still organized and published. For the first time in the *Corpus's* history, a title results not from the research of a single scholar but from a team. The subjects are divided among six renowned Rubens specialists: Elizabeth McGrath composed the beautiful and impressive

introduction, and Gregory Martin, Bert Schepers, Fiona Healy, Elizabeth McGrath, Carl Van de Velde and Karolien de Clippel (in order of the number of pages that each author contributed) wrote the catalogue entries.

Rubens did not occupy himself with classical mythology as merely one of many subject categories of his paintings. One might safely say that no other European artist of the time possessed such an intimate knowledge of classical literature and visual representations of classical subjects, both in antiquity and in the renaissance. This distinguishes Rubens's involvement with classical mythology from that of his colleagues. Elizabeth McGrath's 55-page introductory essay begins with a very concise but exemplary discussion of the depiction of classical mythology in early modern art and culture in general, and subsequently manages to present a brilliant characterization of Rubens's attitude towards mythological subjects; his choice of subject matter; his iconography and invention; and his audience, fame, replication and marketing. She also pays attention to Rubens's exceptional familiarity with classical texts, his awareness of the differing ways in which the myths had been read in the past and were used in his own time for moral and political purposes, his empathy with the poets of antiquity (especially Ovid), and his knowledge of artistic traditions. McGrath demonstrates how this enabled Rubens to deviate from traditional manners of depiction to capture narratives' essential elements or to give a witty twist to familiar subjects. She argues convincingly that Rubens himself was responsible for the choice and treatment of mythological subjects and that he would have rarely executed them on commission. Even very large paintings, several of them between two and a half to more than three meters wide, seem to have been made without prospective buyers. The subjects were often new or unusual within the visual tradition, some of them not even based on specific texts but inspired by a few poetic lines from one or more classical authors (the Bacchus scenes, most of the Diana pictures, the Courting and Mating Centaurs, for example). Others were conceived to rival the works of painters from antiquity or great predecessors of the renaissance. High-class connoisseurs, even Rubens's most eminent clients, bought works from the available stock. Rubens kept quite a substantial number of his best paintings of mythological subjects for himself.

Above all, mythology allowed Rubens 'expressive license in depictions of love, dramatic passion, nature and unclothed beauty.' (vol 1, p. 43). These paintings, made for private consumption and therefore practically inaccessible to a wider public, were less well known than many of his religious works. Moreover, only two prints were executed after them under Rubens's supervision. Nonetheless, numerous artists must have been able to see, and to make drawn or painted copies after, his mythological inventions or their many studio derivatives in private collections. Quite a few of those inventions greatly impacted paintings with mythological subjects in both the Southern and the Northern Netherlands.

In the book's introduction and several of its catalogue entries, it is shown that Rubens must have been fascinated by ancient themes of nature and its mysteries (see especially *The Discovery of Erichthonius*). Rubens's celebration of love, fertility and female beauty is apparent in almost all his depictions of classical myths, and, as McGrath remarks, he had 'very little of that fear of lurking dangers of sensual excess in the study of classical antiquity which periodically troubled and inhibited so many Renaissance devotees of ancient literature and culture' (vol 1, p. 67). This seems to be an elegant way of saying that Rubens's obvious

pleasure in depicting sexually-charged violence against women – subjects that might cause some uneasiness in the present-day viewer, mostly scenes of rape and abduction – is truly remarkable. In the introductory essay of Part XIII on Subjects from History (published in 1997 and written entirely by McGrath), the author extensively discussed the themes of the Rape of the Sabines and the Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus in the context of Ovid's *Art of Love*. Some catalogue entries in the present volume also refer to this Ovidian context. However, I would have liked a discussion of Rubens's striking depictions of love, lust and sexual violence, contextualized within his dealings with classical literature and art, as well as within a larger cultural perspective of that period, to better understand his preoccupation with such themes. Nobody would be better situated to do this than McGrath. But perhaps we may expect this in a subsequent volume? It would be a great boon to have, in the final volume on Rubens's mythologies, a more elaborate examination of Rubens's choice of subject matter and his possible motives in depicting the episodes he selected.

As fits in the tradition of the *Corpus Rubenianum*, iconological issues occupy a substantial proportion of the catalogue entries. Every art historian who proposed something valuable about sources and interpretations receives her or his due. The catalogue entries by McGrath and Healy, in particular, demonstrate beautifully and with deep understanding Rubens's great erudition, without giving the reader the feeling that they are projecting their own learnedness into his work. Their interpretations are always convincing, showing how Rubens brought to bear a variety of classical sources on the depiction of specific subjects. Marvellous examples are their discussions of the Andromeda paintings (Healy), the *Discovery of Erichthonius* (Healy), *Boreas Abducting Orithyia* (McGrath) and *The Three Graces* (McGrath).

An important task of the *Corpus* is to distinguish between originals, replicas, copies and variants, and to organize related sketches and drawings. Moreover, these are connected, where possible, to documents, and to the huge amount of data on provenance. Still, the reader will grow easily confused in this tangle of works when wading through the individual catalogue entries. Therefore, every subject of which multiple depictions exist should have, in my opinion, an introduction consisting of an overview of the paintings and sketches, the relations to replicas and variations from the studio (with or without a contribution by Rubens himself), and Rubens's literary and pictorial sources. This has only been done with the themes of Andromeda and Perseus (Healy) and The Graces (McGrath). It would make the catalogue much easier to handle for the reader, would prevent tiresome repetition (as with the many Diana scenes), and could result in shorter entries. In a few cases, they are excessively long. The entry for no. 8, the *Battle of the Amazons* in Munich, for example, consists of 27 double-column pages, including 173 footnotes. Though excellent in many respects, it could have been edited more severely.

One would also wish for a bit more rigour in the description of the paintings' condition and in discussions concerning attribution. Regarding the first: the extensiveness of such descriptions, mostly at the beginning of the entry (but not always), depends too heavily upon the different author's priorities. Naturally, the material available differs widely, as well as the circumstances under which each painting could be studied. But even where technical documentation is abundantly available, remarkably little is said about the physical

execution of the works (though there are excellent exceptions) and how this affects matters of attribution and views on studio collaboration.

Workshop versions could be found even in the most important collections, such as, for instance, that of the Duke of Buckingham. If an original was not available, one seems to have been willing to own at least a studio version of one of Rubens's many spectacular inventions. If possible, however, it was very important for the wealthy connoisseur to acquire a work by Rubens's own hand, which meant that it was also important for him/her to be able to distinguish between such works and paintings which were, in different degrees, executed by studio assistants (and to evaluate the concomitant prices). We know from Rubens's famous letter to Sir Dudley Carleton how he himself classified various degrees of execution. No wonder that for our times, a period even more preoccupied with authenticity, this remains a pressing issue for public and private owners.

The distinction between works by Rubens's own hand and those in which the studio collaborated (retouched by Rubens, partly retouched by Rubens, entirely painted by collaborators in the studio, or a variant/copy made outside the studio, et cetera) is infernally difficult. In the preface it is emphatically stated that every author is individually responsible for the views expressed on attribution (and other matters). Previous opinions are always referred to in the entries, but the judgement of the author him/herself is too often unsatisfactorily, and sometimes even hardly, argued. More precise comparisons and more searching examinations of a painting's genesis – so important for works produced in a large studio – would be welcome. Especially in the section about the many paintings of scenes of Diana, more insight into the execution of the different versions and a more solid argumentation when attributing or, in particular, dismissing paintings as studio works would have been opportune.

Finally, there are some minor remarks about the way the volumes have been published. The volumes have always retained the same lay-out; perhaps it is time for a few things to change. There is one point I would like to put strongly: no scholarly books on art history should be published without recording the material and size of the artworks in the captions of the illustrations. In the case of Rubens in particular, whose paintings vary immensely in size, the lack of such information is maddening, all the more so because the illustrations appear in a separate volume. Furthermore, it would be a great help to the reader if on every page of the often lengthy catalogue entries a heading be placed with the title of the painting under discussion. This would prevent a lot of thumbing through the book.

Apart from such quibbles, however, this volume, in itself an incredible feat of production, deserves only awe and admiration for the huge amount of information conveyed and for the exceptional standard of scholarship in terms of views, judgements, interpretations, ideas and insights.

Eric Jan Sluijter, University of Amsterdam