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**Published on** H-Catholic (October, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Carolina Armenteros

Peter Paul Rubens's (1577-1640) altarpieces of early saints and martyrs have always been admired for their vibrant colors, dramatic staging, and expressive *furia del pennello* (paintbrush fury). In *The Catholic Rubens*, Willibald Sauerländer demonstrates that Catholics living in northern Europe looked to these moving and at times unsettling images to strengthen their devotion in the face of opposition from the Protestants, who rejected the cult of images in violent iconoclastic riots, where mobs desecrated and destroyed images of Catholic saints, the Virgin Mary, and Christ. Using primary documents to support a formalist analysis of Rubens’s altarpieces, this book reconsiders his reputation throughout Europe as a “Catholic painter,” and invites the reader to question the power of sacred art in the seventeenth century.

*The Catholic Rubens* is divided into nine chapters, each of which discusses in detail the evolution of Rubens's sensuous artistic style, its ability to captivate viewers, and above all its capacity to touch and move congregations in countries affected by wars of religion. In chapter 1, the author argues that Rubens infused his paintings with a sense of *gravitas* by referencing classical sculptures. Sauerländer understands Rubens's sacred altarpieces as hybrid works that transformed classically inspired figures into early Christian saints and martyrs in an artful balance of antique and Catholic culture. He demonstrates how Rubens harnessed the intense emotionalism and theatricality characteristic of some ancient statuary in a way that fit the criteria of religious reform discussed at the Council of Trent (1545-63) and by treatise writers, such as Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti (1522-97), Andrea Gilio da Fabriano (d. 1584), and Raffaello Borghini (1538-88).

The better part of *The Catholic Rubens* considers the various religious orders that commissioned Rubens precisely for his affective style. In chapter 2, Sauerländer explores his commission to paint the high altarpiece for the Freising Cathedral, the *Mater Ecclesiae* under the control of the Wittelsbach dynasty, the electors of Bavaria. He argues that the painting of *The Woman of the
Apocalypse, like many of Rubens's other altarpieces, served a religious and political function. On one hand, the image portrays a glorious victory by the Archangel Michael blessed by the Virgin and Child. On the other hand, underneath the surface, it praises the Catholics' victory over the Protestants at White Mountain in Bohemia under the command of Duke Maximilian (1573-1651) in 1620. Sauerländer maintains that the altarpiece reinforces the community's triumph through its dramatic spiral-like composition and vibrant colors, and by including figures that evoke mythical deities and classical heroes. For instance, Sauerländer describes the Archangel Michael as a Christian Achilles destroying the seven-headed dragon while a wise, Minerva-like Virgin Mary holds the Christ child as he blesses the victory. According to Sauerländer, the altarpiece employs the language of ancient Roman triumphs to glorify Catholicism. Indeed, this message of religious and political victory was so important that the company of advisory clerics (known as the chapter) of the Freising Cathedral renovated the entire retable so that it evoked ancient triumphal architecture. Throughout this chapter, Sauerländer convincingly demonstrates that Rubens's references to antiquity in The Woman of the Apocalypse pleased his patrons because they articulated the triumph of Catholicism over Protestantism. Yet although the text references ancient art and architecture, it does not focus on the painter's studies in Rome or his connection to other seventeenth-century artists working in Rome. Nevertheless, Sauerländer touches on Rubens's passion for collecting antique sculpture.

The Catholic Rubens also broaches the subject of the economics of art, suggesting that Rubens's paintings were considered popular commodities in the seventeenth century. Owning one of his works cost a considerable sum of money not only because his altarpieces were large, but also because they were executed by a man known during his time as “the most famous [painter] in Europe” (p. 41). At various points in chapters 4, 5, and 6, Sauerländer discusses how the most important religious orders of the seventeenth century coveted his work for its powerful emotionalism. For example, among Rubens's most powerful patrons were the Jesuits in Antwerp, who commissioned two altarpieces depicting the miraculous deeds of two of their preeminent members, Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier, shortly before both were canonized. The Miracles of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and The Miracles of Saint Francis Xavier glorify Jesuit missionary work. By conducting a detailed formalist analysis of the tortured figures in these paintings, Sauerländer argues that these works succeeded in convincing viewers of Ignatius of Loyola's and Francis Xavier's ability to perform miracles. More broadly, however, the author demonstrates that the Jesuits chose Rubens to execute their most significant paintings precisely because he was the most prestigious Catholic painter. Indeed, Sauerländer believes that, aside from Rubens's ability to paint impossible miracles and horrifying exorcisms with a turbulent sense of emotion, the Jesuits requested he portray their most important members because his reputation became a source of “propaganda” (in the modern sense of the word) for the Jesuits of Antwerp.

Rubens transformed rich color, serpentine figures, and dramatic compositions into an international style, a visual language that communicated devotion. The painterly quality of Rubens's work expresses gruesome torture and bloody physical punishments with palpability. In chapters 7, 8 and 9, the author discusses his most violent altarpieces, examining how these depictions of horrendous corporeal anguish not only captivated viewers' attention, but also helped to affirm a local culture of Catholicism. Moreover, Sauerländer argues that these scenes invited worshippers to imitate Christ (imitatio Christi) and the suffering of these early Catholic martyrs. In Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata, painted for the Capuchin church in Cologne, the author notes, the composition and coloring of the flesh provokes viewers to contemplate Francis's mutilated body.
and pain. Yet these revolting punishments were not intended to repel the viewer entirely; in fact, Sauerländer demonstrates that such heightened violence could also be enticing. The mirrored transfer of Christ’s wounds to Francis’s body—the slash from the *coup de lance* and gashes from where Christ was nailed to the cross—are rather balletic as both figures face each other, frozen in a choreographed dance.

Sauerländer convincingly argues that Rubens’s altarpieces of minor martyrdoms, legends, and local saints taught local hagiography and cultivated a sense of local religious pride within communities. Rubens’s *Miracle of Saint Justus*, for instance, depicts the martyrdom of a Roman Catholic saint who was decapitated at nine years of age for his devotion to Christ. The painting was commissioned to honor Justus’s relics, which had recently been stolen and nearly destroyed by Protestant rebels in the Dutch town of Zutphen. Similarly, the *Martyrdom of Saint Livinius*, commissioned by the Ghent Jesuits, invites viewers to gaze at the painting as a visual account of a local hagiographic legend. Indeed, Sauerländer sees a strong parallel between Rubens’s altarpiece and the *Vita of Saint Livinius*, which chronicles the way the soldiers removed the preacher’s tongue as punishment for spreading Catholicism. The author includes a transcription and translation of the original text, which states: “One of them, Walbertus by name, afire with devilish inspiration, forced iron tongs into the saint’s mouth and ripped out his tongue. He held it up before the people and said, ‘Behold the tongue of this seducer who, speaking falsehood, alienates our people. It deserves nothing less than to be thrown to the dogs as food’” (p. 162). Rubens magnified these details in his painting: blood dripping from the early British Christian preacher/missionary’s mouth, the *Landsknechte* caught in the act of pinning Livinius down while a small dog sniffs his tongue as it dangles from hot irons. By including these repugnant details in paint, Sauerländer argues, Rubens was literally retelling Livinius’s story in a way that incites religious fervor while fostering a sense of local pride and community.

Although the author never connects the violence in these sacred altarpieces to the wars that ravaged northern Europe throughout the seventeenth century, *The Catholic Rubens* suggests that the painter looked to his surroundings for inspiration. In particular, Sauerländer associates Rubens’s two versions of the *Massacre of the Innocents* with the rise of baroque theater. The author sees a direct correlation between such profoundly unsettling subjects—the brutal murder of baby boys by smashing them onto the ground in the version displayed at the Art Gallery of Ontario, for example—and the kinds of expressive gestures and movements traditionally used in sacred dramas (known as the *theatrum sacrum*). In particular, Sauerländer compares both versions of the *Massacre of the Innocents* to Giambattista Marino’s (1569-1625) play, *La strage de gl’innocenti* (published in 1632), staged in private homes of the poet’s elite patrons. In considering the way in which Rubens appropriated elements of the theater in his sacred paintings, the author points more generally to a universal language of affective art, which developed as a result of the increasingly fluid interaction between various forms of art, such as poetry, music, and drama.

Sauerländer is a German art historian known for his important work on medieval French sculpture, and thus approaches Rubens’s religious paintings with fresh eyes. His *Catholic Rubens* is a work of well-composed prose, impressively reworked by the translator, David Dollenmayer. The text presents a series of complex ideas clearly and concisely, and thus serves as an important addition to any study on Rubens. Ultimately, Sauerländer’s assessment of Rubens’s altarpieces demonstrates that a “Catholic painter” indeed existed in seventeenth-century Europe; his works were coveted, cherished, and collected—as they are today—for their affective power.
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