

ELIZABETH RIPLEY



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# RUBENS



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*A Biography by*  
ELIZABETH RIPLEY

**PURPLE HOUSE PRESS**  
Kentucky

Art History Biographies from  
*Elizabeth Ripley*

**BOTTICELLI**  
**GOYA**  
**LEONARDO DA VINCI**  
**MICHELANGELO**  
**RAPHAEL**  
**REMBRANDT**  
**TITIAN**  
**VINCENT VAN GOGH**  
**WINSLOW HOMER**



THE HOLY FAMILY SKETCH, c. 1615-1620  
The British Museum, London

Title page: DIANA CAZADORA (THE HUNTRESS), c. 1620, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid  
Painting titles are taken from the museums where they reside and may differ from the 1957 edition

Published by Purple House Press, PO Box 787, Cynthiana, Kentucky 41031  
Classic Living Books for Kids and Young Adults, purplehousepress.com

Written in 1957 by Elizabeth Ripley  
Text is unabridged, with corrections  
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One day in 1590, **PETER PAUL RUBENS** set out on horseback toward a castle outside of Antwerp. The year before his older brother, Philip, had left home to become secretary to the Mayor of Brussels. Now fourteen-year-old Peter Paul was to serve as a page to a Flemish countess.

The countess was charmed by the gracious manners of her tall handsome page, who spoke four languages and could recite pages of Latin poetry. Although the boy's father had died when his son was very young, Peter Paul's mother had managed to send him to a good school, where the eager boy learned quickly.

Peter Paul spent many hours waiting on the countess, but he sometimes found time to hunt on the countess' fine horses. His happiest hours were spent reading and copying pictures from the beautiful books in the castle library. He wrote his mother that he wished to become a painter, and persuaded her to allow him to return to Antwerp to study art.

From his first teacher Rubens learned the craft of painting and drawing. His next teacher taught him to love the art of ancient Rome, and urged his talented pupil to visit Italy.

Sadly twenty-three-year-old Rubens said good-bye to his mother who was far from well. For five weeks he rode over snowy mountains until he reached the brilliant city of Venice. The rich coloring of the Venetian paintings dazzled him and he began at once to copy many of them.

In Venice Rubens met the erratic Duke of Mantua, who invited him to become his court painter. Soon after Rubens arrived in Mantua the Duke invited him to accompany him to Florence, where beautiful Marie de' Medici was to be married to the King of France. Rubens noted every detail of the magnificent ceremony—the princess' jeweled gown, her small lap dog, and the glittering array of royal guests.

Rubens noted other things in Florence, too. He admired the works of the Italian painters who had lived one hundred years before. He copied a tumultuous battle scene by the great Leonardo da Vinci. Today Rubens' drawing is all that remains of Leonardo's famous picture.



RUBENS' DRAWING AFTER LEONARDO DA VINCI'S  
BATTLE OF ANGHIARI, c. 1603  
Louvre, Paris

In the spring of 1603, the Duke of Mantua wrote to his ambassador in Spain that he was sending “Peter Paul the Fleming” bearing gifts for the Spanish King.

As soon as Rubens returned from Verona, he started to make preparations for his journey. He gave careful instructions about the packing of rare paintings, sparkling crystals and brightly polished guns, and about the care of the seven spirited horses which were also presents for the king. Early in May, Rubens and his train of horses and carriages set off over mountainous roads toward the harbor where a ship waited to take them to Spain. Terrible storms rocked the ship carrying Rubens’ precious cargo. When the crates were unloaded on the shore of Spain, torrential rains poured down upon them. Rubens and his caravan struggled along muddy roads until they arrived at the Spanish court. But King Philip was away, and Rubens was told he must wait until His Majesty returned.

Rubens set to work unpacking the Duke’s paintings, but when he opened the rain-soaked crates he found that the glowing canvases had rotted. Brusquely the Duke of Mantua’s ambassador ordered him to make copies of the paintings before the King’s return. Rubens set to work immediately, and in just two months the copies had been completed.

On a sunny July day the King and Queen received Rubens in the royal gardens. Graciously the Flemish painter presented the guns, the crystals and the sleek horses. When he held up the freshly painted canvases, King Philip never suspected that they were copies.

One member of the court was especially impressed by the talented Flemish painter. This was the king’s prime minister, the Duke of Lerma. He asked Rubens to paint his portrait. Rubens sketched the Duke astride a prancing horse. Daringly he showed the horse head-on, instead of from the side as other artists had done. When the portrait was finished, the Duke of Lerma was so pleased that he offered Rubens more commissions.

For one whole year Rubens painted pictures for the court of Spain, but he was homesick for Italy. At last the Duke of Mantua ordered Rubens to return.



EQUESTRIAN PORTRAIT OF THE DUKE OF LERMA, c. 1603  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

When Albert Rubens was four years old his younger brother was born. His father named him Nicholas for an Italian nobleman he had met in Genoa. This same nobleman commissioned Rubens to paint an altarpiece for a church in Genoa. It was a big picture showing the Spanish Saint Ignatius healing the insane. That same year Rubens told the story again in an altarpiece for a church in Antwerp.

Austere Saint Ignatius, dressed in white and gold, stood before the altar of a sumptuous church, hand outstretched toward the mad people below him. A brilliant light shone on the tortured group of sick people on the left; while on the right, a quiet group of mothers and children waited to receive the saint's blessing. Floating under the arched ceiling in the background were the evil spirits which the saint had cast out.

Every day orders for religious paintings came to Rubens' workshop. He painted two enormous pictures of the last judgment, filled with magnificently painted nude figures cascading into hell. As each canvas was finished Rubens began another, always striving to make it better than the one before.

Then one day Rubens informed the Archduchess Isabella that he would have to make a trip to Paris, for Marie de' Medici, widow of King Henry IV of France, had commissioned him to paint pictures of her life for the walls of her new palace. The Archduchess was delighted that her gracious court painter was planning to visit the French court. Since Archduke Albert's death, one year before, the Archduchess had often called on Rubens for advice in governing her country. Now, she believed, he would be able to help her make friends with the powerful rulers of France. So one day in 1621, Rubens set off for Paris, taking with him a tiny lap dog with a beautiful enamel collar, a present from the Archduchess Isabella to Queen Marie de' Medici of France.



THE MIRACLES OF ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, c. 1615-1616  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

“Today I am so overburdened with the preparations for the triumphal entry of the Cardinal-Prince that I have time neither to live nor write,” Rubens wrote a friend.

In a few weeks Rubens designed lavish decorations for the Antwerp streets, while in his workshop assistants were busily carrying out Rubens’ designs for elaborate arches and an ornate triumphal car. The gout in his foot gave him such pain that he often had to be pushed about his workshop in a wheelchair.

One warm April day, guns boomed and trumpets blared as Cardinal-Prince Ferdinand rode into Antwerp. As he passed through the city gate, a carriage shaped like a ship, filled with beautiful girls dressed like goddesses, rode to meet him. On a pedestal in the center of the wagon stood a tower of spears, armor and banners. Bound prisoners of war knelt at the foot of the pedestal. As the triumphal car stopped before the Cardinal-Prince, one of the lovely girls who represented Antwerp offered him a laurel wreath on a golden plate.

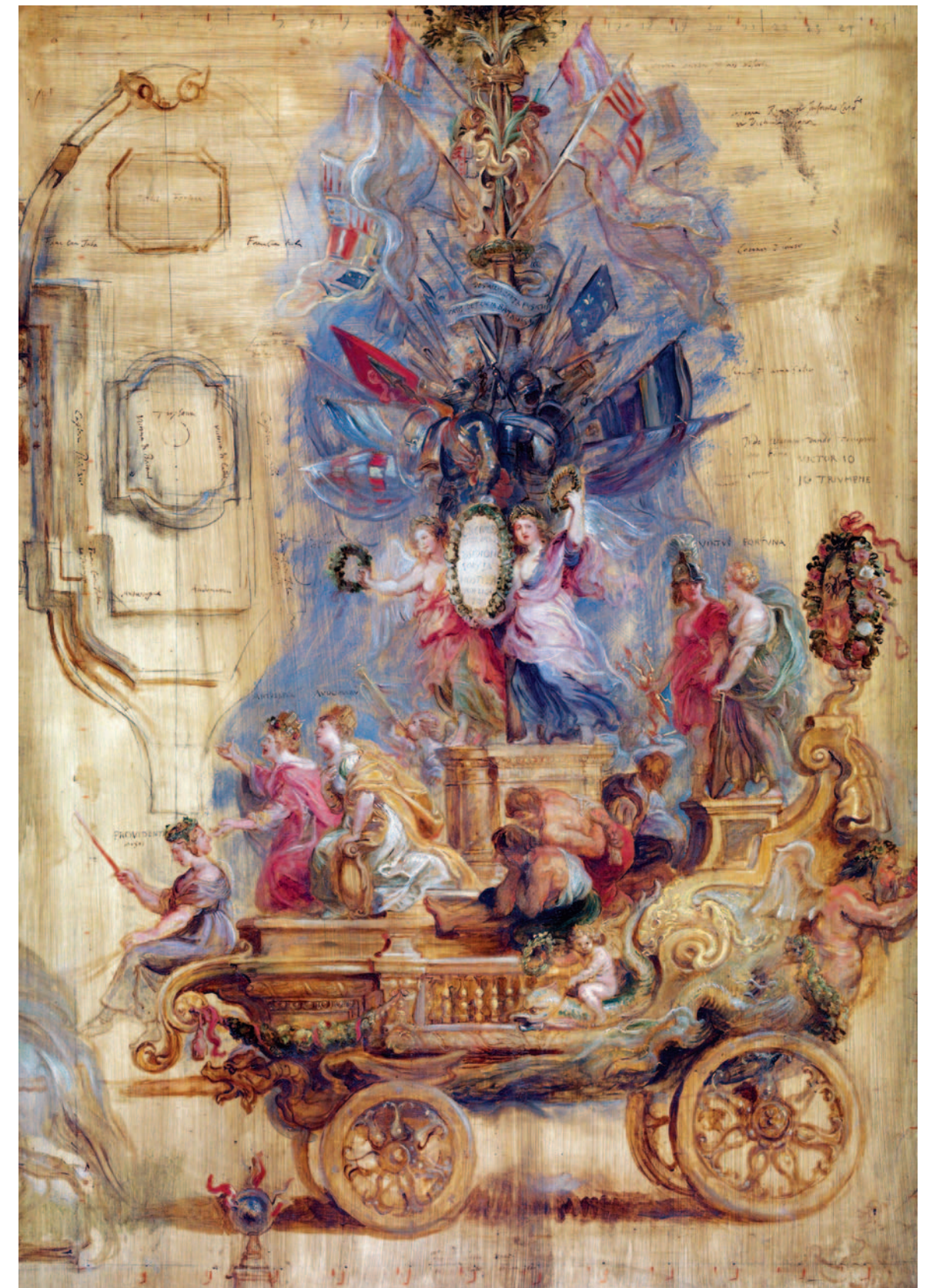
On toward the center of town rode Ferdinand, passing under a row of ornate triumphal arches. On a magnificently decorated stage in front of the Town Hall, the city governors waited to receive their new ruler.

When the welcoming speeches were over, Ferdinand asked if he might meet the famous artist who had designed the brilliant decorations in his honor. But Rubens, tortured by an agonizing attack of gout, was unable to leave home.

The next day a royal coach drove into the courtyard of the Rubens’ home. Excitedly Helena rushed to tell her husband that Cardinal-Prince Ferdinand had come to congratulate Rubens on the grandeur of his work.

Ferdinand admired Rubens’ art collection and inspected the busy workshop. He visited the artists’ studio which was filled with glowing oil sketches, and he was charmed by the lovely Helena.

Before he left, he offered Rubens a big salary and invited him to become his court painter.



THE TRIUMPHAL CAR OF KALLO, c. 1638  
Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp