

## **Self-portrait by Peter Paul Rubens:**

This painting is an oil on wooden panel, rather than canvas. It's nearly 3 feet high and 2 feet wide, that's 85.7 x 62.2 cm. It is a half-length self portrait of the artist Peter Paul Rubens, painted in 1623 when Rubens was 45 years old. Rubens was a Flemish artist working in the Southern Netherlands, that's modern-day Belgium. He was born 1577 and died in 1640 at the age 62.

Rubens was arguably the most influential artist from the Flemish Baroque tradition. Baroque is a style identified with Counter Reformation and Catholic Revival, beginning around 1600 and continuing throughout the 17th century, although popular in Protestant states as well as Catholic, throughout Western Europe. Baroque art is characterized by great drama, rich, deep colour, and intense light and dark shadows.

This painting shows a long-faced, auburn-haired man with beard and moustache, wearing a bulky black cloak and magnificent broad-brimmed black hat. If you were to split the picture into three horizontal thirds, you would see, from top to bottom, hat, face, shoulders.

The background is indistinct. Most of it, from the right-hand side, across more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the painting is brown and rock-like. Down the far left-hand side there is a small slither of what could be the outside world with a touch of blue sky amongst an otherwise cloudy setting. Rubens' head is practically in the centre of the painting.

He faces right, but turns to look at us so that the light, coming from the left, catches the side of his face nearest us. His eyes are brown, and open wide – you can see a tiny speck of white in the black pupil, showing life, and he is looking right out at us, with a bold, penetrating stare. His auburn, slightly grey-tinged, eyebrows are somewhat raised, perhaps challenging us. There is a slight puffiness below his eyes. His face is pale, but luminous, not sickly, with a hint of red tones visible across his large straight, triangular nose, where we can see his wide

right nostril. This blush of colour extends to his right cheek. His lips, his fuller bottom lip more visible than the top, obscured slightly by his moustache, are slightly redder still.

He has an auburn handlebar moustache, with long ends that curl up, with perhaps just a hint of grey under the nose. His beard, is goatee like at the chin, and we can see it extending up the along the bottom of his right-hand cheek to meet his hair-line just in front of the ear. Just like the moustache, there is a touch of grey in his beard, on the chin, under his bottom lip. The curl in his moustache is echoed in the pointy clump of beard on his chin, and again in his auburn hair which curls just above and behind his right ear. There is a hint of grey at the hairline by his temple.

On his head, as I mentioned, is a broad-brimmed black hat that is set at an angle up towards the top left of the picture. It points diagonally downwards from left to right. The hat is very much of the period, it looks very Dutch. The underside of the brim appears very flat. Just above Rubens' forehead, sitting on the brim of the hat, are what look like four bronze-coloured beads with the slightest hint of a black feather or tassel. It's hard to see what it is, but suffice to say there is some simple decoration on the centre of the hat. The hat sits very high on his head, with the brim resting on his crown. The crown of the hat sits above the crown of the head. What you wouldn't know from looking at this piece, but what we do know from studying other portraits of Rubens is that the hat hides a receding hair line – this is visible in a portrait of him in the Uffizi, from 1615.

Rubens' clocked shoulders and chest take up the bottom third of the portrait. The black cloak could be fur, there is a definite fur like texture around the shoulders. Peeping out the top of the black cloak is a delicate ivory, white lace collar. A type very much associated with the period. It has that doily pattern effect with pointy edges that would have required more time-consuming, tricky, craftsmanship – so it is a sign of wealth. A slither of pale neck is visible above the collar, whilst below the collar, in the centre, below his pointy beard, is a gold chain – it's not obviously a gold chain, but our Collection records state that it is.

Rubens is portrayed as a courtier and diplomat, his black robe is sombre, but was fashionable and expensive. He carries no obvious attributes alluding to his profession, no paintbrush, no easel, although the gold chain, had since the mid-sixteenth century had come to symbolise an artist's success and wealth.

Letters from the period describe Rubens as having 'a tall stature, a stately bearing, with a regularly shaped face, rosy cheeks, chestnut brown hair, sparkling eyes but with passion restrained, a laughing air, gentle and courteous'.

That's the end of the description of the Rubens self-portrait. We'll move on to some information about the artist himself.

### Who was Peter Paul Rubens?

The self-portrait suggests a well-dressed, wealthy man. Yet he was born as a refugee, some way from his homeland, the Low Countries. In 1568, his parents escaped religious persecution in Antwerp, settling in Germany. Unfortunately, his father Jans Rubens was imprisoned after his affair with the wife of the ruling prince was discovered. Eventually Jans was freed, thanks to the persistence of his wife. It was into this shamed family that Peter Paul Rubens was born in 1577. When his father died his mother returned to Antwerp with her children. Rubens had a good education in the classics and humanities and then surprised his family by wanting to be an artist. He was apprenticed to three local artists and once he'd become an independent artist left for Italy, the centre of the art world and magnet for all artists.

Once there he landed on his feet by becoming a court artist to Vincenzo de Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, a renowned collector. Rubens was able to study the greats – Leonardo, Titian, Michelangelo – travelling around Italy, and not only painting but getting to know his sitters and their families, a trusted friend, not just an artist. In 1608 his mother became seriously ill and Rubens returned to Antwerp. Unfortunately, she died but Rubens decided to stay in the city, just as a Twelve-Year Truce brought peace between the protestant Northern provinces and the catholic southern provinces,

ruled by Spain, where Rubens lived. Rubens also became court artist to the Governors of the southern provinces, Albert and Isabella. He re-established himself in his home city – buying and converting a house in such a magnificent way that it was locally known as a ‘palace’, and marrying the daughter of a local worthy, Isabella Brant. He not only painted but produced preparatory work for statues and designs for tapestries, wrote on a wide range of subjects, and took an interest in architecture and garden design. He became renowned throughout Europe, including Britain.

His fame grew so much that he had to turn down aspiring apprentices wishing to join his studio, as he wrote in a letter – *‘with no exaggeration, I tell you quite sincerely that I have had to refuse more than a hundred, and some from my own and my wife’s family and in so doing I have caused great displeasure to many of my best friends.’*

Rubens was a savvy businessman, turning out art quickly. And yet that ‘busyness’ could have proved his downfall - in 1623 Lord Danvers, a friend to Charles, Prince of Wales, commissioned a painting from Rubens, *A Lion Hunt*. Rubens apparently didn’t know the work was intended for Charles, and worse, it was seen to be not entirely the work of Rubens. To make amends, Rubens sent this self-portrait to Charles.

Through the flushed cheeks (a pun on Rubens, ‘reddening’ in Latin) the artist appears to be apologising. And yet, in its depiction of himself, his wealth and status conveyed through that fur wrap and hat, Rubens also seems to be sending another message – yes, I did wrong, but this level of artistic brilliance is what *you* can have if you employ me as an artist.

Later, as King, Charles would have an opportunity to meet the sitter in person because for Rubens being an artist was not quite enough – he wanted to bring peace to his homeland.

An opportunity to do that in a big way, as an envoy, came just a few years after the self-portrait, when he was sent from Spain to England to start negotiations for peace. Rubens was actually key to the success of this, and in 1630 he walked with the new Spanish ambassador into

Charles's Banqueting House. And Charles rewarded him by knighting him, giving him a hat band and sword, as well as a ring from his finger. So, in answer to the question.... Who was Peter Paul Rubens was, this desire to bring peace, to be at the centre of not only art but also current affairs, reveals the man and artist. He capitalised on all the experience he'd gained as an artist; on all the contacts he'd made in his career since his time in Italy.

And despite the apology to Charles, Prince of Wales, in this self-portrait, in the end Rubens came out of it very well – he received more commissions from Charles, including in the 1630s the paintings on the ceiling of the Banqueting House, a permanent reminder of Rubens' wide-ranging talents and connections, as an artist and diplomat.