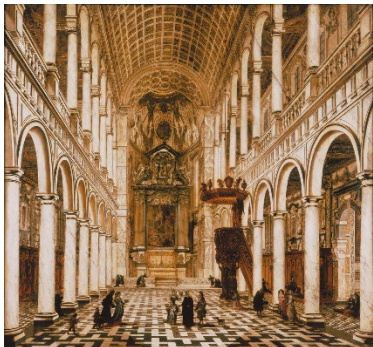


**Baroque Influencers:  
Jesuits, Rubens  
and the Art of Persuasion  
Exhibition  
Snijders&Rockoxhuis  
Keizerstraat 10, 2000 Antwerp  
22 April to 16 July 2023**

**The Jesuit church of Antwerp, once home to 43 gems by Rubens!**



© Schubert van Ehrenberg, Interior of the Jesuit church of Antwerp, City of Antwerp Collection, Rubenshuis

The former Jesuit church of Antwerp, today known as St Charles Borromeo Church, is a wonderful baroque church. It symbolizes the city festival Baroque Influencers, a festival initiated by the University of Antwerp and one that shows, through exhibitions, concerts and other events, how inspiring the baroque is and remains.

Thanks to the creativity of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and the Jesuits François d’Aguilon (1567–1617) and Pieter Huyssens (1578–1637), the church still counts as a veritable shrine. In addition to designs for sculptures and four altarpieces, Rubens produced a further thirty-nine ceiling paintings for this church. A fire in the summer of 1718 destroyed much of the building, including the famous ceiling paintings. The church was rebuilt, but unfortunately without these unique art treasures by Rubens. Fortunately, when preparing for these ceiling paintings, he made oil sketches, some of which are still kept in collections and museums worldwide. In the exhibition at the Snijders&Rockoxhuis, we zoom in on the importance of Peter Paul Rubens for this church as well as for the Jesuits.

St Charles Borromeo Church was once home to forty-three gems by Rubens. Few museums can match this. But alas, only one Rubens painting remains in the church today, and not coincidentally a painting that Mayor Nicolaas Rockox donated to the Jesuits, *The Return from Egypt*. That painting will remain in the church, but at the Snijders&Rockoxhuis, we have gathered twenty-seven masterpieces by Rubens for this festival!

**Rubens portrays the word of the Jesuits**

On 29 March 1620, a year and a half before the Jesuit church was dedicated, Rubens signed a contract promising to complete, within the specified time, thirty-nine paintings for the ceilings of the galleries in the church’s aisles. A tour de force! The thirty-nine paintings measured three by four metres. The ceilings of the upper galleries were to be decorated with eighteen scenes from the Old and New Testaments. On those of the ground floor, there were to be twenty-one paintings of saints:

the Latin and Greek Fathers of the Church, female saints and the patron saints of the archdukes, Albrecht and Isabella. Rubens prepared the oil sketches himself, but for the execution he was allowed to collaborate with Anthony Van Dyck and other young artists. The oil sketches served as a means of communication with the Jesuits, who exercised strict control and saw to it that their word was conveyed properly. It was also important to them that the message was intelligible to the general public at a glance. The emotion of the female martyrs who refused to renounce their faith and had to pay for this refusal with their death made a deep impression. The other scenes also highlighted the importance of the Catholic faith in a special way.



© Rubens, *Esther before Ahasverus*, oil on panel, 1620, London, The Courtauld Gallery



© Rubens, *Lucia*, oil on panel, 1620, Quimper, Collection du Musée des Beaux-Arts

Unfortunately, a fire on 18 July 1718 destroyed these ceiling paintings. The eighteenth-century artists Christian Benjamin Müller and Jacob de Wit were fascinated by the perspective applied by Rubens. They had visited the church before the fire to make copies of these paintings. Thanks to their records, the interior views of the church and some of the oil sketches Rubens made, we can get an idea of the grandeur of the artist's masterpiece.



© Christian Benjamin Müller, *Esther before Ahasverus*, drawing, 1718, Antwerp, Museum Plantin-Moretus, Unesco World Heritage Site

### **Why was Rubens given the honour of creating thirty-nine ceiling paintings?**

That Rubens received this commission, however, was predictable. He had had a solid Catholic education, was very well-read and spoke several languages, including Latin. Moreover, he had already worked successfully for the Jesuits in Rome, Mantua and Genoa, and for the Jesuit church of Antwerp he had previously produced the paintings depicting the miracles of St Ignatius and St Francis that were displayed alternately in the main altar. Rubens had a special relationship with the

Jesuits. They chose him for his talent and considered him suitable to translate their message into images in various ways.



© Peter Paul Rubens, *The Miracles of St Francis Xavier*, oil on panel, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie

### Rubens and sculptures

But Rubens also made drawings for some sculptures, for both the west façade and the interior of the church. These are finely detailed drawings of angels, a sphinx, the ceiling of the Houtappel Chapel and one of the versions of the main altar. Indirectly, Rubens also contributed to the architectural appearance of the church here.



© Rubens, *Angel Blowing a Trumpet, Facing Left*, ca 1617–20, drawing, inv. 1957.1 / I,233, New York, Morgan Library & Museum

### In conclusion

Besides twenty-seven paintings and drawings by Rubens, the exhibition features paintings and drawings by Anthony Van Dyck, Daniel Seghers, Schubert van Ehrenberg, Anton Günther Geringh, Gerard Seghers, Jacob De Wit and Christian Benjamin Müller. The works come from important museums in Belgium, the Netherlands, Britain, Germany, the Czech Republic, France, Austria and the

United States. Sam Dillemans, who holds a particular fascination for Rubens, has lent us, among other works, one of the versions of Rubens' self-portrait.

Exhibition curators: Nils Büttner, Ria Fabri, Piet Lombaerde, Hildegard Van de Velde and Bert Watteuw

The exhibition at the Snijders&Rockoxhuis is part of the city festival Baroque Influencers. With exhibitions, concerts and other events, the city festival shows how inspiring the baroque is and remains. Within the programme, the exhibition is part of a triptych that also includes exhibitions in the St Charles Borromeo Church and in the Nottebohm Hall of the Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library. You can visit all three exhibitions with a combi-ticket or separately.

[www.snijdersrockoxhuis.be/en/press](http://www.snijdersrockoxhuis.be/en/press)

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