Willibald Sauerländer

The Catholic Rubens: Saints and Martyrs. Translated by David Dollenmayer.

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For an art historian who, as he himself points out, does “not belong in the inner circle of authorities on Rubens” (10) nor is even a specialist in the early modern period, Willibald Sauerländer has produced a superb guide to the religious art of Peter Paul Rubens, at once vastly erudite and a pleasure to read. Having “admired [Rubens’s] paintings since [his] student days” (10), Sauerländer, an eminent senior scholar of medieval art, has brought to his task long decades of research into, and an extremely broad and deep knowledge of, Roman Catholic Church history, iconography, hagiography, liturgy, and theology—which he has now extended, with complete competence, into the seventeenth century. His goal is to help viewers today better understand Rubens’s religious canvases by thoroughly explicating their subject matter and contextualizing their message within their genesis amid the Counter-Reformation. This he does from an admirably wide range of interdisciplinary focal points (including practical issues of patronage and the original destination of the works in question) and with abundant recourse to the most relevant primary sources of all genres.

Sauerländer assumed the present task in reaction to what he sees as the near-complete and deliberate neglect of the specifically Catholic nature of Rubens’s work on the part of generations of scholars who, while admiring the technical accomplishments of his design, color, and narrative verve, found nothing appealing in the religious content of his art and so simply ignored it. Though skilled and respectfully objective in his elucidation of the “Catholicity” of these works of art, however, Sauerländer is no apologist: he does not shrink from calling a spade a spade (“Many post-Tridentine representations of purgatory are the repulsive products of the Church’s campaign of visual terror,” 112) and readily admits, for example, that “Rubens’s altarpieces of the saints and, above all, the martyrs of the Roman Church belong to an order of terrestrial and celestial things that is deeply foreign—and, in some instances, literally antipathetic—to us” (270). His command of Catholic culture, while extremely competent, is by no means infallible, but his errors here are all small: e.g., Franciscans are not “monks” (114) but “friars” and their houses are not monasteries but rather “friaries” (117). Hagiographer Laurentius Surius was not a Jesuit, but a Carthusian (78). It is a mistake to refer to the reformed Carmelites as “Barefoot” (78, 104, 108, etc.); they should be called “Discalced.” They did not wear shoes, but rather sandals (with stockings when necessary); they were never literally barefoot. The use of “Barefoot” may reflect, however, the decision not of the author, but of the translator Dollenmayer, who nonetheless has

produced a most admirable translation (apart from the “thusly” of page 164). Of typographical errors, I only noticed two: on page 178 “bachio” should be “brachio,” while “spulchro” should be ‘sepulchro.’

Since Rubens of course produced a multitude of “Catholic” works, Sauerländer restricts his discussion to altarpieces depicting the martyrs and other saints of the Catholic calendar, both universal (e.g., Stephen and the Archangel Michael) and local (e.g., Bavo and Livinus). Readers of this journal will be especially interested in his well-informed, illuminating pages on Rubens’s works for the Jesuits, most notably the monumental Antwerp altarpieces, *The Miracles of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* and *The Miracles of Saint Francis Xavier* (79–97). It was a surprise to learn that “at the time the two pictures were ordered from Rubens—probably in 1617—neither Ignatius nor Francis had yet been canonized” (80), while Xavier had not even been beatified. That took a lot of unabashed audacity on the part of the Jesuits, but such blatant visual propaganda was everywhere crucial if those controversial, highly politicized canonizations were to become reality. Sauerländer candidly characterizes the Ignatius altarpiece as an “extremely artful—if not artificial—painting” (82): what he does not point out is that both in the altarpiece and in Rubens’s other, smaller depiction of Ignatius (Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena), it is Ignatius’s exquisitely and, indeed, sensually reproduced red-and-gold chasuble that unfortunately steals the show. Both works are more a portrait of a chasuble than of a man. Was this simply accidental on the artist’s part?

Stealing the show in many of Rubens’s religious works is not merely the sensually reproduced fabrics and other luscious, sense-gratifying material surfaces but also the outright erotic: notoriously, there are considerable amounts of turgid naked flesh in Rubens’s religious art. Sauerländer somewhat euphemistically calls this element Rubens’s “erotic physicality” (271) and refuses steadfastly to problematize the often jarring juxtaposition of piety and eros. He would have us believe that this was simply not problematic for contemporary Catholics, but only for subsequent critics who could not (and cannot today) view these works through the proper eyes of faith—for example, Enlightenment critic Hippolyte Taine, who is scolded by Sauerländer for holding that “[w]hat is of the flesh cannot—must not—be religious” (272). But Sauerländer is simply wrong here and this is my one but significant objection to his work. Plenty of Catholics, before, during, and after the age of Rubens also believed that the sensual and the spiritual could not peacefully coexist, especially in the visual arts—most notably the army of mainstream preachers (from the Franciscan Bernardino of Siena to the Jesuit Gian Paolo Oliva) who across Europe and across the centuries delivered many a vehement sermon against

the grave dangers of the ever-troublesome flesh, especially as introduced by the devil into the soul through the eyes.

It is true, however, that seventeenth-century popes (except for Clement VIII and Innocent XI) and bishops seemed to have ignored the preachers and tacitly embraced even Rubens's intense brand of sensual ecclesiastical art—for, after all, was it not most useful in maximizing the effectiveness of the church's campaign of visual propaganda against the unbelievers or the tepid faithful? But what about the ordinary pious Catholic viewers of Rubens's works: were they ever troubled by the sensuality of his religious canvases? As far as I know, we have no documentation on this specific to Rubens, but we do for other periods and other populations and in those cases, the answer to the question is a resounding "Yes." Unfortunately, space does not allow proper exposition of this complex issue here; I refer the reader to my *Bernini: His Life and His Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), especially 161–65. But, to conclude on a justifiably positive note, this animadversion of mine notwithstanding, Sauerländer is to be commended for having produced what promises to be an enduring classic in Rubens studies.

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