Rubens’ Pictorial Diplomacy at War (1637/1638)

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War and Peace Diplomacy

'I have never worked for war, [...] but have always procured, to the extent that I could, peace everywhere,' declares Peter Paul Rubens on 1 August 1631 to the King of Spain's leading minister, Duke Gaspar de Guzman de Olivarez (1587–1645). Such protestations, taken at face value, readily lend themselves as a key to a pacifistic interpretation of Rubens’ war and peace allegories. To do so, however, would mean to overlook the diplomatic tactics with which Rubens adds his recommendation that Spain ought to promote, militarily and logistically, an impending civil war in France on the side of Maria de’ Medici (1573–1642), French Queen Mother and friend of the Habsburgs. If the civil war should then turn out in favor of the friends of Spain and its Habsburg king, it would finally be possible 'to sign a favorable general peace not only in Flanders, but also in Germany and the entire Christianity.'

Using key concepts from the political doctrine of the frequently ill-regarded Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), Rubens urges the Spanish court, not to let such a beautiful opportunity [occasione] pass [...] to turn a necessity [necessita] into a virtue [virtu] and to sacrifice its blood for the reputation and the interests of the secured status [stato] of His Catholic Majesty [of the Spanish King, U.H.]. 'Rubens’ avowal of love for peace thus actually introduces the invitation for a concealed support of a civil war in the neighboring country. Out of such a war a stable global peace for the entire Christian world might emerge, guaranteed by a strengthened Spanish King.'

So Rubens recommends war as a means toward peace. In the same vein, Frederik de Marselaer’s (1584–1670) diplomatic tutorial (which Rubens purchased in its second edition in 1626 and a further edition of which he provided with a new title copper) explains that peace was prepared by war (‘Paratur pax bello’). While this is said in a chapter on war diplomacy, a chapter on peace diplomacy contains – not at all in contradiction thereto – a motto going back to Silius Italicus (around 26–101 AD): 'Peace is the best [thing]' (Pax optima rerum). Rubens’ statement on war and peace fits well in this framework. In matters of war and peace, according to de Marselaer, diplomats eventually have to attend to the interests of their sovereigns for the sake of the common welfare: on their loyalty depends the sovereign's welfare, but on his depends the welfare of everyone else, therefore did they carry high responsibility for the common welfare.