Rubens adapts the poses of classical sculptures for deliberately ambiguous and other emotions

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Over two decades had passed since Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) last saw *The Aldobrandini wedding* (Vatican, Rome), yet as his letter from 1628 testifies, he distinctly remembered certain sections of this Roman fresco, including the emotions of the two leading figures. ‘Recalling it to [my] memory as well as possible,’ he described the bride as ‘draped in a long, white garment, somewhat yellowish, covering her from head to foot; her attitude is pensive and melancholy... the majority of the antiquarians in Rome considered the young man, half-nude and crowned with flowers, as the bridegroom ‘who full of impatience, casts longing looks at the bride, and lends an ear to the discourse of the matrons.’ As he recalled, the melancholy bride indeed sits quietly with her head lowered whereas the groom expresses impatience by the centripetal placement of his limbs and the sharp twist of his head in the bride’s direction. The effect of their poses remained in his memory.

During his eight years in Italy (1600-1608) Rubens spent considerable time in Rome, where he made numerous reproductive drawings of classical remains to keep as reference material (e.g. fig. 1). For the rest of his career classical art provided him with a repertoire of bodily positions he creatively adapted in his own works. Just as his extensive knowledge of classical literature enabled him to insert aptly chosen quotations from classical authors into his letters, so too his familiarity with classical sculptures provided a repertoire of poses and gestures. As has been observed, he introduced classical ‘quotations’ into paintings for their iconographical associations and compositional possibilities. In addition, I argue here, he occasionally used such classical borrowings to represent states of feeling otherwise difficult to convey.

This essay examines how Rubens adapted four classical sculptures to represent a simple emotion demonstrated by a specific type of person (figs. 2, 3), a rapid change to a contradictory feeling (fig. 6, 8), and even emotional indicators that viewers with opposed political agendas could interpret as each found satisfactory (figs. 12, 13 and 15, 16). These last, ingenious solutions will be the eventual focus of my essay. Comparisons with poses and gestures in common use to picture emotions, as well as ones of Rubens’s own devising will help define the possibilities he saw in the classical borrowings.
Characterization of emotions

To a degree that may seem surprising to readers today, a number of philosophical texts of the seventeenth century sought to characterize specific emotions and distinguish primary, simple emotions from their complex derivatives. For instance, René Descartes (1596-1650) devoted the bulk of his Les passions de l‘âme, 1649, to this task, which had as a goal the understanding as well as control of one’s own feelings. Judgments differed about the number and identity of the basic emotions. According to Descartes, ‘the number of those which are simple and primitive is not very great. For do but review all those I have cast up, and it may easily be noted that there are but six such, to wit, admiration, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness, and that all the other[s] are compounded of some of these six, or are sorts of them.’ By contrast, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) limited his primary group to three, ‘desire, joy and sorrow’, and Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) chose the same trio, ‘desire, joy, and sadness’.

Despite disputes about the number and identity of the basic emotions, agreement existed that distinctions could be made between basic emotions and the complex types that resulted from combinations or derivatives. Endless possibilities existed for mixtures, wrote Descartes because ‘there are as many kinds of pleasure, of pain, of desire, and of every emotion compounded of these, such as vacillations of spirit, or derived from these, such as love, hatred, hope, fear, &c., as there are kinds of objects whereby we are affected’. As a result ‘their number is indefinite.’ For instance, ‘derision is a sort of joy mingled with hatred’. Likewise for Spinoza, all emotions ‘can be combined in so many ways, and so many variations can arise, that no limit can be assigned to their number.’ Malebranche too concluded that ‘the number of passions compounded out of other passions must be infinite.’

In addition to describing internal states Descartes also pictured their external manifestations. ‘It yet remains that I should treat on divers exterior signs, which usually accompany them [passions], and which may be better noted when many of them are mixed together, as ordinarily they are, than when they are distinct. The chief of these signs are the gestures of the eyes and face, changes of colour, tremblings, languishing, swooning, laughter, tears, groans, and sighs’ (article 112). Faces come first in Descartes’ list, followed by changes in other parts of the body, and then by sounds. As part of the discussion he even remarked on people’s ability to mask their real emotions. ‘And generally, all the gestures as well of the face as eyes may be altered by the soul, when being willing to conceal her passion, she strongly imagines one contrary to it, so that they may serve as well counterfeit, as declared passions’ (article 113).

Whereas philosophical texts could discuss both the internal state and its physical manifestations, visual artists had to suggest the presence of feelings by only the physical manifestations of faces as well as bodies. Rubens’s fame rests more on his convincing depiction of motion rather than emotion, but significantly, the correlation between the two surfaced as an issue the one time he acknowledged that his prodigious inventiveness failed him. ‘I am ashamed of my sterility of invention, at