

# Artistic transmission in the Low Countries

## *De Grebber's creative imitation of Rubens*

MARLOES W. HEMMER

Marloes Hemmer studied Art history at the University of Amsterdam where she gained her MA (cum laude) in 2009 with the thesis 'The "force" of Rembrandt's light. A study of the period appreciation of the depiction of light in Rembrandt's paintings'. During an internship in New York she assisted in the departments of European Paintings and Drawings and Prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and was active as registrar and research assistant at The Leiden Gallery. In December 2009 she started in the research project 'Cultural Transmission and Artistic Exchanges in the Low Countries, 1572–1672. Mobility of Artists, Works of Art and Artistic Knowledge', funded by NWO under supervision of Prof. Dr. P.A. Hecht, Prof. Dr. E.J. Sluiter and Dr. K.J. De Clippel.

Marloes.Hemmer@me.com

### Abstract

This article will focus on the transmission of artistic ideas and the importance of personal networks as an active force in shaping artistic phenomena. In this contribution I will concentrate on the transmission of Rubens's artistic ideas and knowledge from the Southern to the Northern Netherlands, concentrating on the work of Pieter de Grebber. My contribution will emphasize how this young artist from Haarlem had access to Rubens's artistic ideas and knowledge in a period that his work was not yet widely spread in the Northern Netherlands. It will give new insights into how networks and objects led to creative imitation with innovative results that constituted a vital contribution to history painting in the Northern Netherlands.

*Keywords:* artistic transmission, creative imitation, artistic ideas, Peter Paul Rubens, Pieter de Grebber, Low Countries

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This article will examine the artistic dialogue between the Southern and the Northern Netherlands within the genre of history painting and focus on the transmission of artistic ideas, one of the cornerstones of the nwo-project 'Artistic Exchange and Cultural Transmission in the Low Countries, 1572-1672' ([www.artisticexchangeproject.wordpress.com](http://www.artisticexchangeproject.wordpress.com)). Clearly, the Antwerp painter Peter Paul Rubens is the key figure in the development of history painting in the Low Countries. Therefore, I will trace how artistic ideas introduced by Rubens were transferred to the Northern Netherlands. Simultaneously I will draw on a case study of Pieter de Grebber, to comprehend the process of artistic transmission.

### *The transmission of artistic ideas and knowledge in the Low Countries*

For long the artistic transmission between the two regions has been neglected. 'How is it that art historians, instead of trying to provide an appropriate sketch of a period, remain completely mesmerized by the accidental borders of their own time?'<sup>1</sup> Albert Blankert alluded twenty years ago to the demarcated categories of Dutch and Flemish art that had been dominating art historical studies of the Low Countries for many years. Geography has always been an important factor for the classification of art, going back as far as Pliny the Elder. In the sixteenth century Vasari introduced geographical borders in Italian art history, and this was taken further on a local scale in seventeenth-century art literature. However, this was not the case for the art of the Low Countries. Whether from the Northern or the Southern Netherlands, artists from the Low Countries were, for example, denominated as *Fiamminghi* by the Italians and Spaniards. Also for the biographers like De Bie and Houbraken no distinction was made: they were all *Nederlanders*.<sup>2</sup> The distinction between the Flemish and Dutch became current only in the nineteenth century as a result of the widespread nationalism found across Europe and of the Belgian independence of

1 A. Blankert, G. Luijten et al. (eds.), *Dawn of the Golden Age. Northern Netherlandish art, 1580-1620*, exh.cat. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Zwolle 1993, in: *The Art Bulletin* 77 (1995), p. 148 (review article).

2 See the contribution of Abigail Newman to this volume.

1830 in particular.<sup>3</sup> The majority of today's seventeenth-century art historians as well as museum curators still make a distinction between Dutch painting on the one hand and Flemish painting on the other. Moreover, since the publication of Haak's influential book *Dutch painters of the seventeenth century*, it has been commonplace to make sub-categorizations in the form of local schools, such as the Haarlem School and Delft School.<sup>4</sup>

The classification in local and national schools starts from the assumption that every town and every country distinguishes itself by a specific production with specializations in iconography, material, technique and/or style, and it has the effect that artistic innovations tend to be explained as a result of local or regional circumstances. Such explanations are, however, too restricted. Already in 1935 Wilhelm Martin stated that artists in the Northern Netherlands were active in various cities, and that there was no dominating artistic centre like Antwerp for the Southern Netherlands.<sup>5</sup> Even though Martin made this statement in 1935, it is still accurate. Gerrit Verhoeven argues in his recent research that within the Low Countries artists could travel rather easily from one city to another thanks to improved overland- and water transport.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, early modern artists were much more mobile than previously assumed. I contend that this mobility of people and of (luxury) products was of great importance for the transmission of artistic ideas between the Northern and Southern part of the Netherlands. Apart from the conference 'Art on the Move' which was organized in the context of the NWO project mentioned above, art historians have, during the last decade, called into question the role of local schools and borders in early modern Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Studies in the field of circulation of technical knowledge may serve as a point of departure to examine similar processes of artistic circulation. In a 2006 contribution Hilaire-Pérez and Verna stress that

3 N.C.F. van Sas, 'Dutch nationality in the shadow of the Golden Age. National culture and the national past, 1780-1914', in: F. Grijzenhout and H. van Veen (eds.), *The golden age of dutch painting in historical perspective*, New York 1999, p. 49-68; E. Koolhaas and S. de Vries, 'Back to a glorious past. Seventeenth-century art as a model for the nineteenth century', in: *ibidem*, p. 69-90.

4 B. Haak, *Hollandse schilders in de Gouden Eeuw*, Amsterdam 1984.

5 'Is er één stad, die de leiding heeft? Stellig niet. Evenmin als er één meester is, naar wien allen zich richten. In de Zuidelijke Nederlanden was Antwerpen de kunststad bij uitnemendheid en Rubens de vrijwel alle vormen beheerschende kracht. Hier te lande is het juist andersom: hier telt men ettelijke steden, waar meesterwerken van den eersten rang ontstaan, en tevens een aantal groepen van schilders die, vaak in verschillende steden wonend, zich rond één meester scharen of uitgaan van eenzelfde opvatting en zodoende kunstwerken voortbrengen, die onderlinge verwantschap vertoonen.' W. Martin, *De Hollandsche schilderkunst in de zeventiende eeuw*, Amsterdam 1935, p. 64.

6 G. Verhoeven, *Anders reizen. Evoluties in vroegmoderne reiservaringen van Hollandse en Brabantse elites (1600-1750)*, Hilversum 2007; Idem, "'Een divertissant somertogje.'" Transport innovations and the rise of short-term pleasure trips in the Low Countries, 1600-1750', in: *Journal of Transport History* 30 (2009), p. 78-97; E.J. Sluijter, *Neat concepts and messy realities. On local schools, tastes and identities*, lecture symposium 'City Limits', University College Dublin and National Gallery of Ireland, April 24-25, 2009.

7 Symposium 'City Limits', University College Dublin and National Gallery of Ireland, 24-25 April 2009; and 'Crossing Boundaries', Conference Historians of Netherlandish Art, Amsterdam May 2010. See also F. Scholten et al (eds.), 'Art and migration. Netherlandish artists on the move, 1400-1750', in: *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 63 (2013).

technical circulations involved constant adaptations and translations in accordance with the needs and choices of the actors. Diversions, delays, slowdowns, and failures were current, undermining all attempts by historians to discover any straightforward routes or instances of homogeneous diffusion. Although pools of techniques could be shared across long distances, territories were not abstract entities but human constructs.<sup>8</sup>

According to these authors, the channels through which knowledge could be transferred were not related to geography, borders and territories but to personal networks. Furthermore they argue that ‘the creation of hybrids – “creative imitation” – was intrinsic to dissemination, as each locality followed its own path. This challenges any notion of a universal pattern of growth.’ With regard to the transmission of artistic ideas it becomes evident that artistic knowledge or ideas were almost never linearly adopted (copied) but as a result of local needs, were adapted and transformed to hybrids. Art historians commonly use the terms *imitatio* and *aemulatio* (to imitate and emulate) in order to explain how artists used artistic ideas from other artists in the process of artistic competition. Another contemporary term used is *rapen*: to use or maybe even steal ideas from other artists.<sup>9</sup> But as Hilaire-Pérez and Verna also mention: ideas were adapted and transformed to local, or personal needs. ‘Creative imitation’, a term introduced by the authors, is to my opinion more appropriate and modern and can analogously be used in the field of art history.

Furthermore, the authors reaffirm that studies on the dissemination of technical knowledge have pointed out that it is important to reappraise geography and boundaries, bearing in mind the weight of social networks and the human mobility. Already in 1972, Cipolla suggested a similar point of view, arguing that the main channel for the transfer of knowledge was the migration (mobility) of people and not the printed page.<sup>10</sup> I believe the same holds true for the circulation of artistic ideas, as has already been shown in other contexts.<sup>11</sup>

### *Artistic transmission in the Low Countries: history painting*

In the field of the visual arts only preliminary research on artistic exchange and transmission in the Low Countries has been done. In his standard survey on Flemish art

<sup>8</sup> L. Hilaire-Pérez and C. Verna, ‘Dissemination of technical knowledge in the Middle Ages and the early modern era. New approaches and methodological issues’, in: *Technology and Culture* 47:3 (2006), p. 536–565, spec. 565.

<sup>9</sup> For the use of these terms, see E.J. Sluijter, *Rembrandt and the female nude*, Amsterdam 2006, esp. chapter 9, ‘Imitation, artistic competition and “rapen”’, p. 234–265. See also E. Cropper, *The Domenichino affair. Novelty, imitation, and theft in seventeenth century Rome*, London 2005.

<sup>10</sup> C.M. Cipolla, ‘The diffusion of innovations in early modern Europe’, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 14 (1972), p. 46–52, spec. 48.

<sup>11</sup> B. Aikema has shown that the mobility of persons, objects and ideas enabled artists to bring together a variety of artistic ideas and motifs in order to adapt them to a local market; B. Aikema et al., *Renaissance Venice and the North. Crosscurrents in the time of Bellini, Dürer and Titian*, exh.cat. Palazzo Grassi Milaan, Milaan 1999, p. 19–25.

of 1998, Vlieghe referred to comparable motifs and developments in the artistic production of both areas and postulated the titillating question: 'Flemish art does it really exist?'<sup>12</sup> On a more specialized level, Karolien de Clippel published her findings on the differences and similarities within genre painting in both regions.<sup>13</sup> These studies probably would not exist without the groundwork done by Jan Briels. Briels stresses the idea that immigrants from the Southern Netherlands initiated the Dutch Golden Age of painting.<sup>14</sup> Although his work contains a wealth of archival information, many of the artists he mentioned were second generation, having arrived as children with their parents, or were born in the Netherlands. There is no doubt that a relation exists between the Dutch Golden Age of painting and the immigrants from the South, but Briels's work does not answer the current questions on artistic exchange and transmission within the Low Countries. Going back to Martin, he noticed the difference between the artistic productions and the artistic development of the two regions. According to him, artists in Flanders were far ahead of their Dutch colleagues at the end of the sixteenth century: their artistic production was continuous and flourishing. Acknowledging these differences, Martin is clear about the fact that the artistic developments of both regions were related. He stated that during the first quarter of the seventeenth century a shift took place and that even though the Flemish were far ahead of the Dutch, the full development of landscape, seascape, still life, the architectural piece and the depiction of contemporary life, was attained in the Northern Netherlands.<sup>15</sup>

Remarkably, Martin does not mention history painting – why? How were the regional developments in this genre related? History painters did not come in large numbers to the Northern Netherlands.<sup>16</sup> David van der Linden emphasises in this volume that a large part of Antwerp's artists did not flee at all: they choose to stay, and history painters in particular. Van der Linden emphasises they had good reasons not to leave Antwerp. The Counter-Reformation imposed by the Spanish Crown supplied many of them with commissions to redecorate the Catholic churches. Altarpieces had been destroyed during the iconoclastic riots and the paintings that survived, were in many cases no longer considered appropriate after the Council of Trent. As a result,

**12** H. Vlieghe, *Flemish art and architecture, 1585-1700*, London 1998; H. Vlieghe, 'Flemish Art, Does It Really Exist?', in: *Simiolus* 26 (1998), p. 187-200.

**13** K. De Clippel, 'Two sides of the same coin? Genre painting in north and south during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in: *Simiolus* 32 (2006), p. 17-34.

**14** See e.g. J.G.C.A. Briels, *Vlaamse schilders in de Noordelijke Nederlanden in het begin van de Gouden Eeuw, 1585-1630*, Antwerp 1987; Idem, *Vlaamse schilders en de dageraad van Hollands Gouden Eeuw, 1585-1630*, Antwerp 1997.

**15** 'Vlaanderen was Holland vooruit door de continuïteit in de ontplooiing zijner kunst. Maar het heeft de uiteindelijke ontwikkeling van landschap, zeestuk, genre, architectuurstuk en stilleven moeten overlaten aan de Noordelijke Nederlanden'; W. Martin, *De Hollandsche schilderkunst in de zeventiende eeuw*, Amsterdam 1935, p. 35.

**16** See the contribution of David van der Linden to this volume. For the most recent literature on the refugees from Antwerp see F. Vermeylen, 'Greener pastures? Capturing artists' migrations during the Dutch Revolt', in: *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 63 (2013), p. 40-57.

history painting in the Southern Netherlands flourished. But, exactly for the opposite reason, the situation in the North was less promising. All the Catholic churches were closed down and by consequence, the main patron for history painters disappeared.<sup>17</sup> These circumstances compelled painters to focus on new subjects that were suitable for an open market and popular with the private consumers. Samuel van Hoogstraten pointed out this particular issue in his 1678 treatise on the beginning, rise and decline of the art of painting:

But in the middle of the fierce war, our *Nederland* has nourished countless excellent spirits. *Brabant* can count on the great Rubens, his noble disciple Antony van Dijk; the industrious Jordaens, [...] and countless others, [...]. To demonstrate that the art, since the Iconoclasm in the previous century, is not completely destroyed in Holland – though the best career possibilities, to wit [working for] the churches, have been cut off and most painters therefore have strayed into painting minor matters, yes, even trifle – I will point out a few names of those who mainly applied themselves to the art in its entirety and to the most noble inventions. There was Strazio Voluto or Gilliam Fermout, Lastman, Mierevelt, Theodorus Babuere: Pieter Fransen de Grebber, Hondhorst, Ravesteyn, the *verzierlijken* Rembrant, after my fathers death Theodoor my second master: Jaques de Bakker, Govert Flink, Gerrit Douw, Stokkade, Jan Lievens, Mieris, Doudeins, de Baen.<sup>18</sup>

Samuel van Hoogstraten is clear about the effects of the war and the iconoclastic fury on history painting in the Northern Netherlands. But as he emphasizes, history painting in the Northern Netherlands was not completely destroyed and fortunately, there were still painters who were trained in this speciality. However, none of them would surpass Rubens in the field of monumental histories, and this might be the reason Martin listed only these 'lower' genres. Dutch history painting with the exception of Rembrandt's biblical and mythological paintings was for a long time neglected, and as such the artistic transmission in history painting between the two regions. Both had their own traditions with diverging styles and themes when in 1609 the situation was completely stirred up when Rubens returned from Italy, and straight away dominated

<sup>17</sup> It should be remarked that a notable amount of Catholic art was made for clandestine churches in the Northern Netherlands; X. van Eck, *Clandestine splendor. Paintings for the Catholic church in the Dutch Republic. Studies in Netherlandish art and cultural history*, Zwolle 2008.

<sup>18</sup> 'Maer ons *Nederland* heeft, in't midden van den woesten oorlog, in deeze laetste tijdt overvloed van treflijke geesten gevoed. *Brabant* mach zich verhoeverdigen op den Grooten Rubens, en zijnen edelen discipel Antony van Dijk; op den beezigen Jordaens, [...] en ontellijke andere, [...] Om echter te toonen, dat de konst, sedert de Beelstoring in de voorgaende eeuw, in Holland niet geheel vernietigt is, schoon ons de beste loopbaenen, naementlijk de kerken, daer door geslooten zijn, en de meeste Schilders zich dieshalven tot geringe zaeken, jae zelfs tot beuzelingen [nietigheden] te schilderen, geheelijk begeeven, zoo zal ik eenige met naemen aenwijzen, die meest op 't gros der konst en de edelste verkiezing hebben gezien. Als daer is geweest Strazio Voluto of Gilliam Fermout, Lastman, Mierevelt, Theodorus Babuere: Pieter Fransen de Grebber, Hondhorst, Ravesteyn, den *verzierlijken* Rembrant, nae de dood van mijn Vader Theodoor mijn tweede Meester: Jaques de Bakker, Govert Flink, Gerrit Douw, Stokkade, Jan Lievens, Mieris, Doudeins, de Baen.' S. van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst*, Rotterdam 1678, p. 256–257. See [http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/hoogoo6inleo1\\_01/hoogoo6inleo1\\_01\\_0076.php?q=](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/hoogoo6inleo1_01/hoogoo6inleo1_01_0076.php?q=)].

the Antwerp high-end art market for history painting.<sup>19</sup> With his monumentality, the expression of emotion, the involvement of the spectator, the colouring and ordonnance (*ordonnantie* – arrangement in space), Rubens brought a completely new baroque style to the Low Countries. Simultaneously in 1609 – as a result of the Twelve Years' Truce – the borders between the Northern and the Southern Netherlands opened and made it even easier for artists and art lovers from both regions to be in contact with each other and admire history painting with Italian allure much closer to home.

As a result of the recent growing interest in history painting in the Northern Netherlands from the 1980's onwards, research concentrates today more and more on the artistic exchange and transmission between both regions regarding this genre.<sup>20</sup> Kerry Barrett's study on Pieter Soutman gives insight in the effect on the artistic choices of the artist as a result of his traveling from the Northern to the Southern Netherlands and back.<sup>21</sup> Filip Vermeylen and Karolien De Clippel have published on the prolonged affairs between Haarlem and Antwerp and specifically on the relation between Peter Paul Rubens and Goltzius.<sup>22</sup> Christian Tico Seifert devoted a chapter in his monograph on the history painter Pieter Lastman to the possible exchanges between this artist from Amsterdam and his Antwerp counterpart Peter Paul Rubens.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless transmission of new artistic ideas from the Southern to the Northern Netherlands in early seventeenth-century history painting and the creative imitation that followed deserves more attention.

### *Pieter de Grebber: creative imitation of Rubens*

Pieter de Grebber was one of the artists mentioned by Samuel van Hoogstraten who still chose the noblest form of painting.<sup>24</sup> Especially his work dating from his early

**19** At the end of the sixteenth century history painting in the Northern Netherlands matured in a mannerist style, with leading artist like Hendrik Goltzius, Cornelis Cornelisz van Haerlem, Abraham Bloemaert en Joachim Wtenwael. The style of this artistic generation described by Van Mander deviated strongly from that of their southern counterparts Maerten de Vos (1532-1603) and Otto van Veen (1556-1629). On Rubens return from Italy see F. Vermeylen, 'Antwerp beckons. The reasons for Rubens' return to the Netherlands in 1608', in: *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 55 (2004), p. 17-33.

**20** A. Blankert et al. (eds.), *Gods, saints and heroes. Dutch painting in the age of Rembrandt*, exh. cat. The Hague – National Gallery of Art, Washington – The Detroit Institute of Arts, Amsterdam – Rijksmuseum 1981; A. Blankert (ed.), *Dutch classicism. In seventeenth-century painting*, exh. cat. Rotterdam – Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Frankfurt – Städelsches Kunstinstitut 1999; Ecartico project University of Amsterdam on seventeenth century history painting in Amsterdam; E.J. Sluijter refers often to Rubens in: E.J. Sluijter, *De 'heydensche fabulen' in de schilderkunst van de Gouden Eeuw. Schilderijen met verhalende onderwerpen uit de klassieke mythologie in de Noordelijke Nederlanden, circa 1590-1670*, Leiden 2000.

**21** K. Barret, *Pieter Soutman, life and oeuvre*, Amsterdam, Philadelphia 2012.

**22** F. Vermeylen and K. De Clippel, 'Rubens and Goltzius in dialogue. Artistic exchanges between Antwerp and Haarlem during the Revolt', in: *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 28 (2012), p. 138-160.

**23** C.T. Seifert, *Pieter Lastman*, Petersberg 2011.

**24** Briels, *Vlaamse schilders en de dageraad van Hollands Gouden Eeuw* (n. 14).

career is closely related to that of Rubens. This is corroborated by visual evidence, but what concerns us here is that his social network gives us insight into the transmission of the ideas that took place.

Despite the fact that, before 1620, few works by Rubens were present in the Northern Netherlands, Pieter de Grebber (born around 1600 in Haarlem) must have been familiar with Rubens's artistic ideas. He was the eldest son of the Haarlem Catholic history- and portrait painter Frans Pietersz. de Grebber and after an apprenticeship with his father (whose personal relationship with Rubens I will address later) he trained with Hendrick Goltzius – one of the most famous artists of the Netherlands in those days.<sup>25</sup> Vermeylen and De Clippel argued convincingly that these two highly esteemed artists had a relation going back to the early beginnings of Rubens's career.<sup>26</sup> Goltzius was a shining example to Rubens who most likely went in 1612 to Haarlem to learn from Goltzius's print production.<sup>27</sup> Vice versa, Rubens was Goltzius's superior regarding the art of oil painting, a technique that Goltzius only began to use in 1600. Therefore, history painting in Haarlem must have received a new impulse when Goltzius broke – possibly inspired by Rubens – with the mannerist tradition of the late sixteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Van Mander tells us that Goltzius instructed his pupils, among them De Grebber, passionately with stories about Italian painting and it is very plausible he brought Rubens to their attention as well, since Rubens was undoubtedly considered the most Italian painter in the north.<sup>29</sup>

Goltzius was a learned artist who was well embedded in the scholarly community of Haarlem. The director of the Latin school Schoneaus and his successor Schreveilius, were well acquainted with Goltzius and were also in close contact with kindred spirits in Leiden who were connected by the neo-stoic ideas of the former Leiden

**25** For the most updated biography on Pieter de Grebber, see I. van Thiel-Stroman, 'Pieter Fransz de Grebber', in: N. Köhler (ed.), *Painting in Haarlem 1500–1850. The collection of the Frans Hals Museum*, Ghent 2006, p. 168–172.

**26** Vermeylen and De Clippel, 'Rubens and Goltzius in dialogue'.

**27** For the exact date of Rubens's visit to Haarlem see R. de Smet, 'Een nauwkeuriger datering van Rubens' eerste reis naar Holland in 1612', in: *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* (1977), p. 199–220.

**28** Albert Blankert marked Goltzius's paintings as the first turn from the mannerist tradition; Blankert, *Dutch classicism* (n. 20), p. 16–17. For the most recent literature on Hendrick Goltzius see M. Leesberg and H. Leeflang, *The new Hollstein Dutch and Flemish etchings, engravings and woodcuts, 1450–1700. Hendrick Goltzius*, Ouderkerk aan den IJssel 2012. For Goltzius's career as a painter see E.J. Sluijter, 'Goltzius, painting and flesh. Or, why Goltzius began to paint in 1600', in: M. van den Doel et al. (eds.), *The learned eye. Regarding art, theory and the artist's reputation. Essays for Ernst van de Wetering*, Amsterdam 2005, p. 158–177. For his painted oeuvre see L.W. Nichols, *The paintings of Hendrick Goltzius 1558–1617*, Doornspijk 2013.

**29** 'Het was den Schilders eenen lust en voedsel, hem [Goltzius] hier van te hooren spreken: want zijn woorden waren al gloeyende carnatiën, gloeyende diepselen, [...]'; Van Mander, *Het schilder-boek (facsimile van de eerste uitgave, Haarlem 1604)*, Utrecht 1969, fol. 285v. Moreover prints after Rubens's work started to appear after his visit and, above all, Goltzius painted work shows a strong resemblance with Rubens's work from around the same time, as has been pointed out by F. Vermeylen and K. De Clippel, 'Rubens and Goltzius in dialogue'.

professor Lipsius. Justus Lipsius had moved from Leiden to Leuven where Philip Rubens belonged to his inner circle, as did Peter Paul Rubens himself, for whose thinking and work the neo-stoic ideas were of major importance.<sup>30</sup> Most evident are the expression of emotion and the involvement of the spectator, which he achieved through dynamic compositions, colouring and ordonnance.<sup>31</sup> The scholars from both regions appreciated Rubens's work highly because of the well-integrated neo-stoic ideas. As I will demonstrate elsewhere, there existed a lively intellectual network that held close contact with the art world; humanists from this circle, based in Leiden and Haarlem, with contacts in Leuven and Antwerp, were also the first to promote Rubens's work in the Northern Netherlands. I argue that Pieter de Grebber was aware of the discussions and ideas that were current among these humanists. Scholars did appreciate De Grebber's work as can be deduced from Schrevelius's writings: he wrote that Pieter was not only his father's superior in the art of painting, but had to be counted among the best painters of the century.<sup>32</sup>

It is very plausible that Schrevelius had in mind De Grebber's most ambitious and highly innovative work: *Belshazzar's Feast* (1625) now in the Museum Kassel (fig. 1). The painting has been marked as a stunning masterpiece and as a key work in Dutch classicism, displaying a grandeur that was unprecedented in Dutch art.<sup>33</sup> De Grebber's textual source for the painting is the Old Testament Book of Daniel. It tells the story of Belshazzar's banquet, in which the King of Babylon used vessels stolen from the Temple of Solomon. During the feast a hand appeared and wrote a phrase on the wall that only Daniel could translate: 'Thou hast been weighed in the balance and found wanting.' Belshazzar died the same night.

The painting – which is recently restored and cleaned – shows an unusual strong emotional expression. De Grebber successfully represented in his painting how the dinner party was suddenly beset by fear when God's hand started writing on the wall. The characters cast their eyes upwards, toward the hand of God. Belshazzar's wide-open eyes and clenched fists reinforce the notion of fear. The use of light and shadow contributes to the dramatic atmosphere in a way that Rembrandt would exploit to its

**30** I am currently preparing an article on this network of intellectuals in Leiden, Haarlem, Leuven and Antwerp and the importance of this network for the transmission of Rubens's artistic ideas to the Northern Netherlands in the first quarter of the seventeenth century.

**31** On Rubens and Neo-stoicism see U. Heinen, 'Peter Paul Rubens. Barocke Leidenschaften', in: *Peter Paul Rubens. Barocke Leidenschaften*, exh. cat. Munich Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig 2004; M. Morford, *Stoics and neostoics. Rubens and the circle of Lipsius*, Princeton 1991; J. Papy, 'Lipsius and his dogs. Humanist tradition, iconography and Rubens's four philosophers', in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 62 (1999), p. 167-198.

**32** 'Maer Pieter Grebber heeft sijn Vader Grebber verder over-tref, dit heeft ook den vader niet schaemroot gemaect maer verheught om dat hij Goltzius ook tot Meester ghehadt heeft want deze Pieter de Grebber is soo geluckigh in inventie als suyter in't schilderen dat hij bij de beste Schilders onser eeuwe menteert gestelt te worde.' Theodorus Schrevelius, *Harlemias, ofte, om beter te seggen, de eerste stichtinghe der stadt Haerlem, het toe-nemen en vergrootinge der selfden, hare seltsame fortuyen en avontuer in vrede, in oorlogh, belegeringe*, Haarlem 1648, p. 382.

**33** Blankert, *Dutch classicism*, p. 20.



Fig. 1 Pieter de Grebber, *Belshazzar's feast*, 1625, panel 151 × 223 cm, Kassel, Gemäldegalerie.

fullest in the 1630s. The scale of the figures and their arrangement in space is another striking feature. De Grebber opted to position a few close-up characters around a table that is set on a podium. He placed them not on a horizontal line but gradually piled them up. The figures fill the entire picture space, leaving little room for background. The scene takes place in the direct foreground, and as such imposes itself on the viewer in contrast to his master Goltzius who usually painted just one or two full-length figures in a parallel to the picture surface, with hardly any movement in space and emotional expressions.<sup>34</sup> De Grebber's work is also diverging from that of Pieter Lastman – at that time the leading history painter in Amsterdam who had a great impact on many younger painters. The latter had used, like De Grebber, in his *David und Uria* of 1619 architectural elements and a platform; nevertheless, it is quite different from De Grebber's painting.<sup>35</sup> Lastman leaves much more air in the composition; his figures are not in the immediate foreground, and are positioned parallel to the picture plane in a clear narrative which can be read from left to right, while the background shows a landscape with staffage. Therefore, the viewer is not as directly involved, nor does the painting have the same grandeur as De Grebber's *Belshazzar*. De Grebber's work measures one-and-a-half meter high on more than 2 meters wide, and,

<sup>34</sup> For example Hendrick Goltzius', *Venus and Adonis*, 1614, oil on canvas, 141 × 191.5 cm, Munich, Alte Pinakothek.

<sup>35</sup> Pieter Lastman, *David handling over a letter to Uria*, 1619, oil on panel 50 × 62 cm, private collection.

Fig. 2 Peter Paul Rubens and studio, *Judgement of Salomon*, c. 1611–1614, oil on canvas, 184×218.5 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



as a consequence, immediately impresses the viewer. Such large-scale work was highly unusual. Established masters of a much older generation, like Goltzius and Cornelis Cornelisz, had painted monumental pictures, but Lastman for example did not work on this scale nor did most other artists in the 1620s.

Observing De Grebber's *Belshazzar*, one cannot but consider Rubens's impact on the young master. His *Judgment of Salomon* (c. 1611–1614) makes another Old Testament scene come to mind (fig. 2). It depicts, similar to De Grebber's composition, a group of monumental figures, placed on the foreground and cut off on the sides. The focus on a figure at one side of the picture plane is typical for Rubens's classical phase and present in De Grebber's *Belshazzar* as well. The same is true for the compositions that are similarly structured by architectural elements (the platform with the canopy) and the characteristic view from inside an interior to an outdoor landscape. Resemblance is also to be found in the prominent vertical axis: the peacock in De Grebber's and the executioner in Rubens's painting. In both pictures the figures are harmoniously distributed over the picture plane. The spatial arrangement suggests a movement towards the viewer. De Grebber attained this effect by stacking his figures and grouping them in a curved composition that starts with God's hand in the upper right corner, then moves down to the left side (Belshazzar's eyes) and from there further down to the centre of the foreground (at the feet of Belshazzar). Like Rubens, De Grebber paid great attention to the richness of the opulent draperies, the jewels and other details. Although De Grebber did not borrow motifs, compositions or figures directly from Rubens, his knowledge of the work of the Antwerp master is evident in this painting. This is underlined by his focus on the expression of vehement passion and emotions and his emphasis on the purpose of art as moving the viewer, which originated as a Neo-Stoic precept.

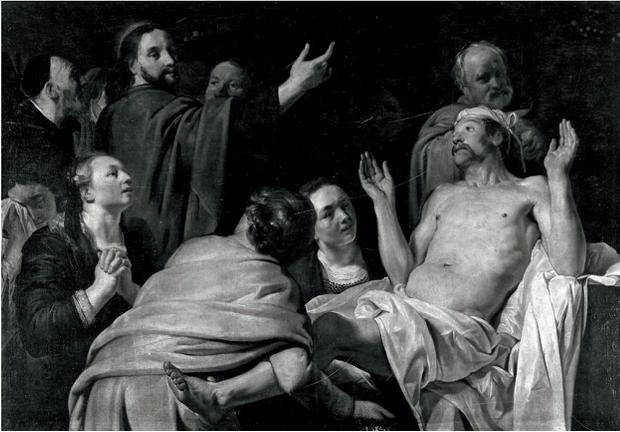


Fig. 3 Pieter de Grebber, *The resurrection of Lazarus*, 1623, oil on canvas, 136×198 cm, Bruges, St. James' Church.

Similar elements can be noted when we observe one of De Grebber's earliest signed and dated paintings (1623) depicting a resurrection of Lazarus, which is located in the Butcher chapel of the St. James's Church in Bruges (fig. 3).<sup>36</sup> Peter Sutton, who is preparing a monograph on Pieter de Grebber, assumed that the *Raising of Lazarus* was originally made for the Bruges Chapel.<sup>37</sup> Inventories reveal that Pieter de Grebber signed the painting, but also show that the painting was donated to the church in 1806.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, evidence for a Flemish commission is missing. However the resemblance with Rubens's *Lamentation* of 1613–1614 indicates that De Grebber – already in 1623 – was well aware of the Antwerp master's work, of which it is highly unlikely that he saw it in the Northern Netherlands (fig. 4).

In Rubens's version of the *Lamentation*, we see Christ on the stone of unction, a motif he reintroduced in northern painting.<sup>39</sup> The resemblance of De Grebber's painting with Rubens's is striking. Most evident is the identical but mirrored composition:

<sup>36</sup> Pieter de Grebber, *The resurrection of Lazarus*, 1623, oil on canvas 136×198 cm, Bruges, St. James' Church.

<sup>37</sup> P. Sutton in: Blankert, *Dutch classicism*, p. 116–118. Peter Sutton is preparing a monograph on the artist. Sutton wrongly located it in the Church of Our Lady in Bruges. This information is repeated by Van Thiel-Stroman, 'Pieter Fransz de Grebber' (n. 25), p. 168–172. To my knowledge there is no proof for a direct commission from Flanders as was suggested by these authors.

<sup>38</sup> L. de Vlieghe, *Een West Vlaamse inventaris uit 1824*, *Bulletin van de Koninklijke Commissie voor Monumenten en Landschappen*, Bruges 1968, nr. 102; A. Couvez, *Inventaires des objets d'art, qui ornent les églises et les établissements publics de la Flandre occidentale, dressés par des Commissions officielles et précédés d'une introduction ou précis de l'histoire de l'art dans cette province Bruges*, Bruges 1852, N\*17. The traceable provenance of the painting ends in 1774 when it was possibly offered in a sale from the collection of P.J. Waepenaert at the auction house P. de Cock For another possible Flemish commission, *The assumption of the virgin*, 1648, Saint Peter's church, Ghent, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent, the provenance is not traceable either; Vermeylen and De Clippel, 'Rubens and Goltzius in dialogue' (n. 22), p. 158–159, n. 45.

<sup>39</sup> R.J. Judson, *Rubens. The passion of Christ (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard VI, 1)*, London 2000, vol. 1, p. 216–217, no. 61.



Fig. 4 Peter Paul Rubens and studio, *The Lamentation*, c. 1613–1614, oil on canvas, 150×205 cm, Vienna, Liechtenstein Museum.

a full-length figure, placed on a stone diagonally in the centre of the picture plane. A shroud encircles his hip and is picked up by Joseph on the left in Rubens's painting, whereas the shroud in De Grebber's painting rests on the stone on the right. Furthermore, we see how the figures in both pictures are harmoniously placed around the protagonist. Prominent is the resemblance of St. John and Christ respectively; both dressed in a red cloak, reaching their arm upwards. In Rubens's work we see a crying Mary Magdalene holding her hands to her face and behind her the Mary turning her eyes upwards. In De Grebber's painting we see similar figures: a woman turning her eyes upwards, and behind her another woman crying, not yet aware of the miracle that just happened.

Notable in this context is the drawing after Rubens's composition, made by De Grebber's former peer at Goltzius's studio: Pieter Soutman (fig. 5).<sup>40</sup> Soutman left Haarlem in 1616 to start working in Rubens's workshop. He made the drawing presumably in Rubens's studio, where the painting might have been available as an example for pupils. Soutman's drawing was reproduced in print, but only after 1636 when the latter

<sup>40</sup> Pieter Soutman, after Peter Paul Rubens, *The Lamentation*, 1618–1624, black and red chalk, brush and grey wash, white heightening, touched with brush and brown ink 26.6×39.0 cm, whereabouts unknown.



Fig. 5 Pieter Soutman, after Peter Paul Rubens, *The lamentation*, 1618–1624, black and red chalk, brush and grey wash, white heightening, touched with brush and brown ink, 26.6×39.0 cm, whereabouts unknown.

had returned to Haarlem.<sup>41</sup> De Grebber's painting is dated 1623, and since Rubens's drawings and other works in the studio were not accessible to outsiders, the question presents itself whether De Grebber did have entry to the studio. De Grebber did not settle in Antwerp – as he had no reason to leave Haarlem, where he had to run his father's successful workshop – but a visit to Antwerp and to Rubens's studio is most likely, the more so since his father Frans de Grebber was closely connected with Peter Paul Rubens himself.

Rubens trusted Frans de Grebber in 1618 to be his agent in the famous art deal with the British envoy, Sir Dudley Carleton who was located in The Hague. In the course of this deal Rubens received antique sculptures from Carleton's collection in exchange for paintings by his hand. Rubens and Frans de Grebber were clearly well acquainted. In his letters to Carleton, Rubens introduced Frans de Grebber as 'a trustworthy, good and sincere man', as 'his friend' and 'agent' who would act on behalf of him.<sup>42</sup> It is not known how Frans de Grebber and Rubens became

<sup>41</sup> K. Barret, *Pieter Soutman* (n. 21), drawing cat. DL-17, p. 180, print cat. Pr-9, p. 187.

<sup>42</sup> 'Questo galanhuomo si chiama François Pieterssen de Grebbel nativo et habitante di Harlem, persona onorata et da benè della cui singèrità'; Rubens to Sir Dudley Carleton, March 17, 1618, cited in M. Rooseen en C. Ruelens (eds.), *Correspondance de Rubens et documents épistolaires concernant sa vie et ses oeuvres*, *Tomme*

acquainted; most likely this was a result of Rubens's visit to Haarlem.<sup>43</sup> On 1 June 1618, Frans de Grebber arrived in Antwerp with Carleton's statues and left with Rubens's paintings for Carleton. Rubens wrote that Frans de Grebber was astonished when he saw all paintings intended for Carleton nicely finished and lined up.<sup>44</sup> In art historical literature, Pieter de Grebber is always assumed to have accompanied his father on this trip. However, the sources do not support this: Rubens wrote that Frans's visit was short as he was hurried, while Pieter was never mentioned in his correspondence.<sup>45</sup> Although some caution is appropriate, the resemblance between Rubens's *Lamentation* and De Grebber's *Raising of Lazarus* supports the argument that Pieter De Grebber joined his father or was shortly after present in Rubens studio.



Fig. 6 Pieter de Grebber, *Reading Paul*, 1625, oil on canvas, 63 × 49 cm, Sotheby's 1986-06-05-1986/06/05, lot 30.

Pieter de Grebber's access to models from Rubens's workshop becomes even more plausible when examining De Grebber's *Reading Paul*, dated 1625 (fig. 6). Intriguing is the physiognomic resemblance with Rubens's *Bearded man* (c. 1613/15), a *tronie* (a character head study) and the type of preparatory work that did not leave the studio (fig. 7).<sup>46</sup> The hooked nose, long dark beard, deep orbits and arched brows show that both paintings depict the same man. *Reading Paul* underlines Rubens's impact on De Grebber also in another way. This kind of large apostle portraits was then a new type of painting, introduced by Rubens's apostle series now in the Prado; copies of the series were offered, though not accepted by Sir Dudley Carleton.<sup>47</sup>

Pieter de Grebber most likely saw the paintings which were eventually sent to Carleton; if not in Antwerp, it would have been in The Hague where Carleton gave some

*deuxieme 1609-25 Juillet 1622*, Soest 1887-1909, p. 130. Rubens to Sir Dudley Carleton, April 28th, 'mi commissario', in: *Ibidem*, p. 136. Rubens to Sir Dudley Carleton, 20 May, 'mio amico', in: *Ibidem*, p. 161.

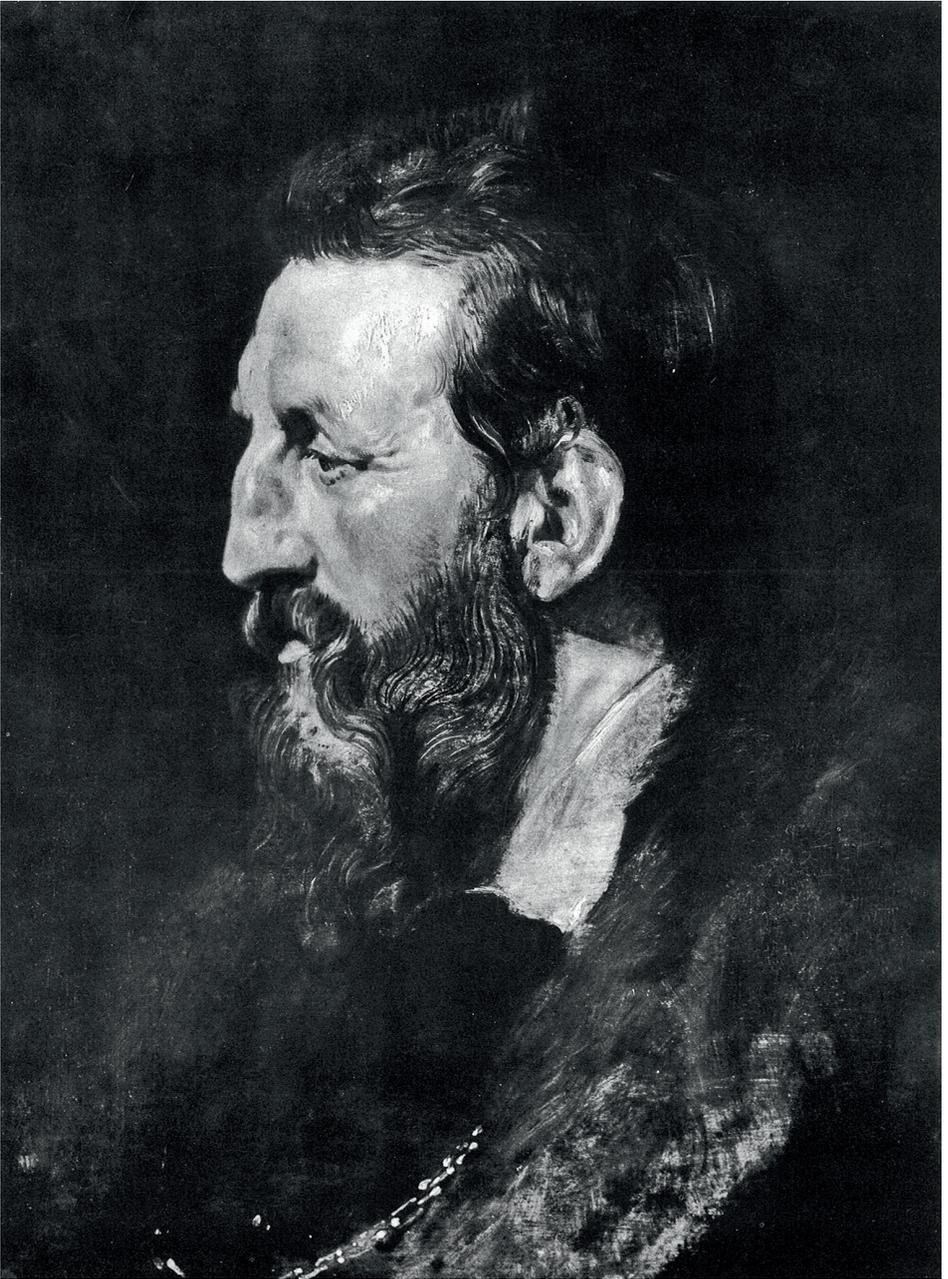
<sup>43</sup> On the exact date of Rubens's visit, see De Smet, 'Een nauwkeuriger datering van Rubens' eerste reis naar Holland in 1612' (n. 27), p. 199-220.

<sup>44</sup> '[...] Sigre Pieterssen sene stupi vedendoli tutti finiti con amore i posti alla fini in ordine'; Rubens to Carleton, cited in Rooses and Ruelens, *Correspondance de Rubens*, p. 181.

<sup>45</sup> P. Sutton in: Blankert, *Dutch classicism* (n. 20) p. 116-118; Van Thiel-Stroman, 'Pieter Fransz de Grebber' (n. 25).

<sup>46</sup> Rubens did use this model for at least two other paintings; these might have been the example for De Grebber as well.

<sup>47</sup> Letter Rubens to Carleton, April 18<sup>th</sup>, in Rooses and Ruelens, *Correspondance de Rubens*, p. 135-138.



*Fig. 7 Peter Paul Rubens, Head of a bearded man in profile, c. 1613-1615, oil on panel, 51 × 38 cm, New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery (loan from Barker Welfare Foundation).*



Fig. 8 Pieter de Grebber, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1620, oil on canvas, 103×78.5 cm, Sotheby's (Amsterdam) 2001–05–08, lot 130 (copyright Sotheby's).



Fig. 9 Hendrick Goltzius, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1607, oil on panel, 67×94 cm, Douai, Musée de la Chartreuse.

the popular Old Testament story *Susanna and the Elders* (c. 1620) (fig. 8). De Grebber used Goltzius's painting depicting the same subject of 1607 as his starting point (fig. 9). It shows unmistakable similarities in the way Susanna casts her eyes upwards, places her hand on her chest and is flanked on both sides by an elder. The main difference is that De Grebber has cut off the sides, and filled the picture plane with the three figures. Rubens's picture of Susanna that went to Carleton – and was most likely known by De Grebber – comes to mind. Although the original painting is lost, we know the composition through the print by Lucas Vorsterman (fig. 10). The original measurements of the painting were mentioned in Rubens's correspondence and have a similar proportion, but double the size of De Grebber's painting.<sup>49</sup> It is very plausible that De Grebber recalled Rubens's work when he chose to let one of the elders actually pull aside Susanna's clothing, a detail that was not seen before in Dutch art, but was picked up later by Rembrandt. Although Rubens's painting is lost, we learn from the print that Rubens must have used a strong contrast between light and dark. Susanna's body and the elders's heads are set against a dark background, this *clair-obscur* is not to be found in Goltzius's version, but De Grebber's use of light is similar to that of Rubens. Again, we notice how De Grebber tries to involve the beholder in the violent emotions of

<sup>48</sup> May 23rd 1618, Carleton wrote to Chamberlain that the Dutch painters were sorry he traded his collection, suggesting they knew the collection: 'I am now saying to my Antiquities Veteres migrate coloni having past a contract with Rubens [...] which is a good bargain for us both, onely I am blamed by the painters of this country who made ydols of these statues and heads.' See Rooses en Ruelens, *Correspondance de Rubens*, p. 167–186.

<sup>49</sup> Letter Carleton to Lionel Wake, May 29th 1618: 'Mr Wake, the bearer herof Frances Pieterson of Harlem, is the father to the young man I mentioned in my letter which I sent you yesterday [...], he going expressly to bring hether the pictures and hangings which I am to have of Mr Rubens in exchange of my statues and other antiquities all which I have this day fully delivered to the bearer himself in Mr. Rubens behalf.' See Rooses en Ruelens, *Correspondance de Rubens*, p. 179.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 137: 'Una Susanna 7×5.' Counting from an Antwerp foot the Susanna should have been 198.1×141.5 cm. For the size of Antwerp foot see J.S. Held, 'Prometheus Bound', in: *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 59 (1963), p. 16–36, n. 8.



Fig. 10 Lucas Vorsterman, after Peter Paul Rubens, Susanna and the Elders, 1620, engraving, 385×280 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

the story depicted. De Grebber might have known Vorsterman's print, but taking our departure from the idea that De Grebber had access to Carleton's collection, it seems plausible that he knew the original work by Rubens as well.

### *Conclusion*

What new insight into the transmission of artistic ideas does the preceding discussion of the early works of the Grebber offer us? As we have seen, Pieter de Grebber was about to start his training when Rubens visited Goltzius in his hometown. A few years later Goltzius became his master and Goltzius undoubtedly advised De Grebber to look at the work of the Antwerp master. Furthermore, De Grebber's peer Pieter Soutman left Haarlem for Antwerp to start working with Rubens. On top of that his father Frans de Grebber became an agent in the service of Rubens in an extraordinary art deal which gave him access to his works (in Antwerp or at least in The Hague at Carleton's collection). Finally, we have to be aware of the intellectual network of humanists who were steeped in neo-stoic ideas, and were also the first to spread knowledge about Rubens in the Northern Netherlands. Goltzius, Carleton and the De Grebbers were in close contact with this circle of humanists and Pieter would have had the opportunity to study real work by Rubens as well. It is clear that Pieter de Grebber applies important neo-stoic notions – the expression of vehement passions and the involvement of the beholder – in his *Belshazzar*. It seems no coincidence that these issues are particularly apparent in many of Rubens's paintings that were delivered to Carleton. Not only in his *Susanna*, but even more prominent in the *Prometheus*.<sup>51</sup>

One may argue that De Grebber's work diverges in technique and colouring from Rubens; with regard to these aspects he stayed closer to Lastman and Goltzius. However, as shown above, De Grebber appropriated Rubens's ideas, but did not use exact motifs or compositions directly. Stimulated by Rubens's inventions he created completely new and ambitious works that were a novelty in Haarlem, or in any other Dutch city. He did not have the illusion to emulate the Flemish master, but creatively imitated his work.

Transmission of Rubens's artistic ideas and knowledge took place between the Northern and Southern Netherlands through networks and objects and have led to creative imitation with innovative results that constituted a vital contribution to history painting in the Northern Netherlands.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Paul Rubens/Frans Snijders, *Prometheus*, 1611–1612, oil on canvas 242.6×209.5 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.