

Theodoor Rombouts

Virtuoso of Flemish Caravaggism

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From 21 January 2023 until 23 April 2023, the Museum of Fine Arts Ghent (MSK) will host the very first monographic exhibition of work by the virtuoso of Flemish Caravaggism, Theodoor Rombouts (1597-1637). A respected member of Antwerp's art circles at that time, he produced paintings that were widely appreciated during his lifetime. But only until his artistic legacy was prematurely eclipsed by those of Antwerp's founding fathers of baroque painting: Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Antoon Van Dyck (1599-1641). Now, the MSK aims to rectify this with an exhibition that reveals Rombouts' artistic personality and places his work in a new perspective.

A short but successful career

Having trained with Abraham Janssen (ca. 1573-1632), the young Rombouts left Antwerp for Italy, where he found inspiration in the works of revolutionary painters Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) and his most important successor, Bartolomeo Manfredi (1582-1622). Rombouts developed an artistic identity entirely of his own after returning to his home city, combining northern and southern influences to sublime effect. He soon established a firm reputation in the art circles of Antwerp.

Working from a studio on the Meir, Rombouts responded adroitly to the tastes of his time by becoming a specialist in Flemish Caravaggist genre painting. With an eye to the popularity of Rubens' paintings among art collectors, Rombouts infused his own work with Rubenesque touches. But his career came to an abrupt end with his death in 1637, aged barely 40.

A key figure in genre painting, with a unique style

Some of the most interesting works in Rombouts' highly diverse oeuvre are the lively, sometimes moralising genre scenes that he often painted on a monumental scale, and peopled with musicians and other groups of elegant characters. His scenes were devised according to the Manfrediani method, after Bartolomeo Manfredi (1587 - 1620/1621), a painter who also drew from the great example of Caravaggio for his own works. Rombouts' paintings are remarkable for their play of light and dark, a feature of southern European painting known as *chiaroscuro*. Drawn in a naturalist style, the works are full of drama, with some figures truncated and others shown from a very close angle.

Rombouts added typically southern hues to his own palet of reds, blues and purples. As the son of a tailor he had a particular appreciation for textiles, which he depicted with wondrous accuracy. Musical instruments were yet another area in which he excelled. His carefully composed, rather theatrical stagings present common folk who seem almost ennobled by their elegant mien and refined garments. Rombouts had his favourite models, some of whom appeared in his paintings time and again. His own visage also turns up occasionally, as do those of his wife and daughter, seated at the table.

Rombouts was extremely skilled at producing highly refined yet accessible pictures of ordinary people. Yet he was also a master of monumental religious scenes, and of allegories infused with hidden political messages. As a Flemish Caravaggist, he brought together northern and southern traditions in his work, and while this style itself proved to be a short-lived trend, Rombouts' influence on genre painting in the Spanish Netherlands should not be underestimated.

A new perspective on Rombouts as a Flemish Caravaggist

This exhibition and the catalogue that accompanies it are the first to focus squarely on Theodoor Rombouts. For the sake of both, the MSK conducted a major search to locate the most important works from his oeuvre. Paintings have been brought to Ghent from private collections, churches and museums across Europe and the United States. And with the museum's support, several have been restored especially for this exhibition.

The result is a surprising and completely new perspective on Theodoor Rombouts. For the very first time, visitors can stand face to face with his most impressive paintings, seeing them in the context of works by important contemporaries such as Bartolomeo Manfredi, Valentin de Boulogne (1591-1632) and Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588-1629). In a thematic presentation, the exhibition illuminates Rombouts' painting in all its diversity. We discover the man behind the easel: an intelligent artist who is willingly transported by the talents of his colleagues, yet confident enough to develop his own very individual artistic identity - one that is just as appealing to us today as it was to his clients during his own lifetime.

Rombouts at the MSK

The MSK has very special ties to this painter from Antwerp. In 1860, Rombouts' work 'Allegory of the Five Senses' (1632) was the first work by an Old Master that the museum purchased, and it has remained a firm favourite among visitors ever since. The MSK has two more major works by Rombouts in its collection: his largest painting, 'Allegory of the Court of Justice of Gedele' (1627-28), and 'The Tooth Extractor' (ca. 1628), a typically Caravaggist warning against fraudsters. This painting was among those restored especially for the exhibition.

Exhibition: Theodoor Rombouts

Curator: Dr. Frederica Van Dam

With support from: Dr. Johan De Smet, Valentine De Beir

Academic committee: Professor Manfred Sellink (MSK Ghent), Dr. Liesbeth Helmus (Centraal Museum Utrecht), Professor Koenraad Jonckheere (Ghent University), Professor Joost Vander Auwera (Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium), Dr. Sabine Van Sprang (Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium / Academia Belgica Rome), Dr. Bert Watteeuw (Rubenshuis)

Publication

To accompany the exhibition, the museum has produced the first monographic overview of the work of Theodoor Rombouts. Published by Snoeck, the volume includes contributions by Dr. Frederica Van Dam, Valentine De Beir, Professor Joost Vander Auwera, Professor Gert Jan Van der Sman, Dr. Liesbeth Helmus, Dr. Timothy De Paepe, Professor Wayne Franits, Professor Astrid Harth, Christine Braet, Professor Irene Baldriga, Lien Vandenberghe, Geert Van Eeckhout, Dr. Michèle Frederick, Professor Manfred Sellink, Dr. Anne Delvingt and Dr. Bert Watteeuw.

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