

Travels with Rubens' *Last Judgement*

Andreas Burmester,* Nina Schleif and Melanie Eibl

ABSTRACT This paper focuses on three practical issues which are of major relevance for large format paintings: handling, transportation and presentation. Peter Paul Rubens' *Last Judgement* is an excellent example with respect to the implications of large size and heavy weight. Wherever this painting has been in its c.400-year history, the difficulties with its handling and transportation have caused damage. Indeed, projected locations for presentation had to be changed. Taking Neuburg as an example, numerous newly discussed documentary sources such as travel or annual reports illustrate these processes. For the first time, the work's historical presentation at the Neuburg Jesuit court church is discussed by means of a photomontage. The paper exemplifies that careful study of documentary sources in the actual historic and topographic context will add valuable information to conventional art-technological studies. Moreover, it recalls the painting's other, often neglected, history of its life between the artist's studio and its present-day museum presentation.

Introduction

Large paintings are not only difficult to handle and to transport, but also challenging to present. This paper deals with all three aspects, and Peter Paul Rubens' (1577–1640) *Last Judgement* (Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 490, Fig. 1) is one of the best cases in point. Finished in 1617 in Antwerp with a height of 6.09 m and a width of 4.63 m, its heavy strainer and the canvas together amounted to a weight of around 270 kg. Added to that was a frame – now gilded – of another 230 kg. Although these weights are estimates, it is certain that handling, travelling and presenting the work created problems for those in charge.

A discussion of the handling, travel and presentation of this painting draws on a wide range of documentary sources, many of which have been compiled in a slim, but excellent catalogue by Konrad Renger.¹ A careful re-evaluation of these documents, new material, the *in situ* investigation of the location, and illustrations focusing on daily life and trade, as well as travel reports, have created a new story that may serve to outline a new field of research in the study of Old Master paintings. New stories raise new questions, lead to new answers and, in an interdisciplinary approach involving a scientist, an art historian and a conservator, produce unexpected results.

This contribution will not cover the nearly 400 years of the history of this important painting. Neither will it describe the (probable) 17 locations occupied by the painting, nor the 16 tours that sent the *Last Judgement* through Europe at its owner's instigation. We cannot know with certainty if it was transported on ships, horse-drawn carriages, motorised trucks or carried by men, but the *Last Judgement's* tours amount to approximately 3800 km, in good and inclement weather. During this time the painting was rolled up and

unrolled (at least) 17 times; the canvas was stretched on a strainer 16 times and nailed onto it with heavy hammer blows; nails were extracted, the canvas was rolled up and the strainer dismantled. At least 25 times the painting on its strainer was lifted up or laid down, put into or taken out of its



Figure 1 Peter Paul Rubens, *Last Judgement*, 1617. Oil on canvas, 608.5 × 463.5 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen Munich, inv. no. 490. Photo: Bruno Hartinger © Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.



Figure 2 Anton Gunther Gheringh (c.1645–1675) (attr.), *Courtyard at Rubens' House*. Oil on canvas, 109 × 140 cm, Buckinghamshire County Museum, Aylesbury. Photo: © Buckinghamshire County Museum Collections.



Figure 3 South Netherlandish School, Antwerp, *Market Day on the Meirbrug in Antwerp*, c.1600. Oil on panel, 90 × 140 cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, inv. no. 2244. Photo: Grafisch Bureau Lefevre, Heule © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.



Figure 4 Wencel Hollar, *The 'Mäuseturm' in the Pfalz*, 1636. Watercolours brushed over pen drawing in ink, 10.6 × 23.5 cm, Chatsworth Castle, Derbyshire. Photo © Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees.

frame, and on 14 occasions presented in a vertical position in different environments. What a tedious and risky life!

Antwerp

In 1615, Duke Wolfgang Wilhelm of Palatine-Neuburg commissioned a painting for the high altar of what was to be the court church at Neuburg. However, the exact dates as well as the circumstances of this commission are unclear. No known documents relate exactly where this large painting was created. If we assume that it was painted in an upright position, its enormous height would have required a large wall around 6.5 m high. One obvious possibility is Rubens' studio, located in his house in Antwerp (Fig. 2), which was built according to his plans. Rubens and his family moved into this impressive home in late 1616 or early 1617.² The studio extended over two floors and had two walls with several windows facing east and north. The northern wall, facing south, must have received excellent light from early morning until late afternoon. As is well known, the Rubenshuis today is a reconstruction dating from the 1940s. It is therefore uncertain whether the original south wall was large enough for the entire painting to have been installed there.³ The painting was stretched with ropes on a wooden construction that provided the required strain to stretch the huge canvas so it could be painted on without giving way. A movable wooden scaffold and one or more ladders may have completed the studio set-up.

On the road

In 1617, Duke Wolfgang Wilhelm requested that the painting should be sent down to Neuburg, and it made its way from Antwerp to Frankfurt, and then via Augsburg to Neuburg. To leave the lively town of Antwerp (Fig. 3), horse-drawn carriages or ships would have been used. So-called Hessen-Wagen connected Antwerp with the German hinterland on a regular basis in a west–east direction. A wider wheel track and specially prepared roads allowed for a swift and less bumpy transport of goods.⁴ An alternative was the ships embarking from the Antwerp wharf, using the Schelde river and several other waterways, artificial or natural, such as the Rhine, Main and Danube rivers. Horses would pull the ships upstream (Fig. 4). The watershed between the rivers Main and Danube forced transport firms to unload the goods from the ships and load them onto horse-drawn carriages.

A better idea of the circumstances surrounding this long journey through half of Europe can be gained from the correspondence concerning three later commissions from Rubens. The artist was asked by Hans Oberholzer, a middleman, that 'once they [the canvases] have dried he [Rubens] shall send them up.'⁵ This allows the conclusion to be drawn that not much time elapsed between the last brushstroke and the packing for transport. Rubens himself wrote to Oberholzer: 'I shall send to you in writing all the names of merchants

to whom they [the canvases] are addressed from place to place'⁶

Unlike today, when a single company would be responsible for the transport and all the packing and paperwork associated with it, in Rubens' time this was in the hands of many, both skilled and unskilled. However, the duke was fully conscious of the ubiquitous risks looming on roads and of those caused by adverse weather: 'if there is no danger caused by the road or the weather [it may be] sent to Augsburg in cerecloth and well cared for.'⁷

To protect the rolled-up painting, in all likelihood stored in a box or a long barrel, rainproof cloth and other precautions were used to ensure that the masterpiece arrived safely in Neuburg. Despite this, it did not survive the journey intact, as Wolfgang Wilhelm wrote to Philipp von Milkau, a rich Dutch merchant and subsequent father-in-law of the painter and literary figure Joachim von Sandrart, on 14 November 1617: 'the painting [the *Last Judgement*] having been executed at Antwerp was sent from Augsburg. Meanwhile we found, opening the same, that it had acquired some damage ... [and the duke wonders] whether the same has been opened in Frankfurt and shown publicly.'⁸ We have no confirmation, so far, of the duke's report that the canvas was unrolled, publicly shown, rolled up again and thereby damaged.

Neuburg

The final entry for 1617 of the *Historia Collegij Soc. Iesu Neoburgi*, the chronicle of the Neuburg Jesuits, reports the arrival of the painting: 'Already arrived is a very prominent picture for the high altar, most excellent painting by Peter Paul Rubens.'⁹

This remarkable entry underlines the delight and the admiration of the Jesuits, although at this point the canvas may still have been rolled up. The importance of the painting and the impending consecration of the church on 21 October 1618 greatly advanced plans to install the painting on the high altar as soon as possible. This took place in January: cold rain, wet snow, icy winds and winter storms may have reduced the temperature inside the church to close to freezing – less than ideal conditions for the installation of this huge painting. The court architect (*Hofbaumeister*), Sigmund Doctor, reported on 23 January 1618: 'Regarding the large altarpiece, it is mounted on the frame in such a way that the painting may without damage be taken down again in the future and the framework be disassembled into four pieces.'¹⁰

The first part of Doctor's description is not yet fully clear. It seems the idea was to install the painting in such a way that it could be easily taken down and the strainer dismantled. Although the Thirty Years' War had not yet broken out, this rather unusual precaution has to be considered in light of the numerous tensions that had overshadowed Europe in the previous decade. In nearby Donauwörth, the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants created, from 1606, on the eve of the Thirty Years' War, a political powder keg that impacted on Neuburg. Understandably, a speedy evacuation of the precious artworks in the possession of the Jesuit Collegium would have been a major concern. Sigmund Doctor

continued: 'Concerning the installation of such a picture, the same, according to the above mentioned painter's suggestion, could be placed within at least half, if not a whole foot (*schuch*) away from the wall, which would in my humble opinion be the safest.'¹¹

Doctor's assessment of the *in situ* situation corresponds with Rubens' advice to hang the painting at a distance from the wall. We do not know whether this advice was generically given by the artist. Due to the fact that the *Last Judgement* was an important commission for a Jesuit fraternity (to which order Rubens had close relations) the artist's interest in the long-term preservation of the painting is understandable.

In light of the following description it is highly probable that Rubens was well informed about the situation in the choir of the Neuburg court church. In the annual letters of the Jesuits, the *Litterae Annuae* of 1618, it states: 'At the head of the choir the mother of God may be seen, in a halo of golden rays, with a crown, sceptre, and a heavenly assembly. Upon entering the church she attracts all glances.'¹²

Obviously the situation today differs from the original aspect. Now, neither the stucco relief *Madonna and Child in a Mandorla* nor the *Last Judgement* can be seen. Instead there is a late Baroque high altar from 1753–1756 with Domenico Zanetti's *Assumption of the Virgin*, painted in 1700–1705, as the altarpiece.

As described in the current local church guide, the *Madonna*, the angel heads and clouds surrounding her are now hidden behind the high altar. The proximity between the stucco work of before 1618 and the current altar corpus does not allow for taking proper photographs, but a contemporary copy of the *Madonna and Child in a Mandorla* in one of the side rooms of the court church gives an idea of the former situation (Fig. 5). A bull's-eye window and a long narrow window – both facing east – below the *Madonna* complete our understanding of the situation behind today's high altar. High temperatures on summer mornings, wet and even frosty periods in autumn and winter, would create a local microclimate that must have been known not only to the court architect but also to Rubens. Sigmund Doctor continued: 'and afterwards the tarred backboards could be used in abundance.'¹³

Both artist and architect agreed to take precautions – the verso of the canvas would be protected by tarred and waterproof backboards as known from Rubens' *Descent from the Cross*.¹⁴ Since the former high altar is lost, we do not know if and how these backboards were mounted.

The reconstruction

Surprisingly, the extensive art-historical literature on Rubens, as well as that on Neuburg, does not provide any visual reconstruction of the historic situation around the high altar. Our findings, in combination with the documentary sources, provided the basis for a simulation made by placing an image of the *Last Judgement* in a Rubens sketch for the Antwerp Jesuit church altar (Fig. 6). Despite being hypothetical, the reconstruction fully integrates our findings. First, both the bull's-eye window in the east wall at the end of the choir and



Figure 5 Contemporary copy after the stucco *Madonna and Child in a Mandorla* hidden today behind the corpus of the high altar, c.1618. Photo: Andreas Burmester © Doerner Institut.

the *Madonna in a Mandorla* above it are visible. Second, the shield of the archangel Michael in the *Last Judgement* bears the only painted highlight that might be a reference to identifiable local light sources, namely the bull's-eye window and the large window below. Third, the shallow choir, originally built to host the far smaller altar of a Protestant church, allows little distance from the back wall (a fact of which Rubens was obviously aware) and does not allow much light to enter. Light from the bull's-eye window was therefore most welcome since the two narrow windows – one on each side of the altar – only let in sparse light. Rubens' composition takes both factors into account. Finally, the unusual subject of a *Last Judgement* in a church dedicated to Mary is explained by Sandrart in 1675: 'Mary's intercession with Christ or rather, the last judgement.'¹⁵

The theme of Mary as intercessor is depicted on the canvas slightly higher than the level at which the duke's family was sitting during services, on the left side of the choir. While Christ seems to face the nobles, the bodies ascending to heaven on the same side appear to suggest that the rulers may be assured of redemption.

One thesis we would therefore like to propose for further discussion is that Rubens knew – either first- or second-hand – of the precise positioning of the *Last Judgement* within the choir and, more specifically, of the light and architectural situation. Moreover, we would also like to suggest that he knew about the rigorous Marian iconographic programme pursued in the church. Whether he ever visited Neuburg (for example on his return trip to Antwerp from Italy in 1608 or at a later date) cannot at this point be proved or disproved. There is no evidence to suggest that he did in the letters that survive on the Neuburg project. However, Rubens must have known the required proportions and measurements for the painting because it is highly unlikely



Figure 6 Computer reconstruction of the Neuburg court church high altar in 1618. Photomontage: Melanie Eibl © Doerner Institut.

that he would have painted such a format had there been any chance of it not fitting. In all likelihood he exchanged letters relating to the format of the high altarpiece such as those he later received from Wolfgang Wilhelm concerning the measurements of the side altarpieces. Furthermore, Rubens would have been informed of the light situation *in situ*, especially the bull's-eye window that would have been visible above the altarpiece and that, facing east, would let morning light into the choir.¹⁶ For other cases, Hélène Dubois has assumed that the artist's studio was set up so that: 'Rubens was able to anticipate to some extent the lighting conditions as they existed at the location for which the paintings were intended.'¹⁷ The light from the bull's-eye window must have suffused the upper – the heavenly – realm of his painting with great luminosity. The vantage point from which the duke would view the painting, namely from the iconographically determined side of those saved by Christ and with Mary acting as intercessionary between the duke and Christ,¹⁸ must also have been known to Rubens. That he was aware of the Marian iconography dominating the church is evidenced by the selection of the four scenes that he designed apart from the *Last Judgement*, i.e. the two side altarpieces depicting the

Adoration of the Shepherds and the *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, as well as the two stucco reliefs situated opposite these two scenes depicting the *Birth of Mary* and *The Assumption of the Virgin*. Mary is at the centre of all of these scenes as indeed she is in the entire church.

The descent

The exuberant reception of Rubens' painting at the time of installation gave way in the mid-seventeenth century to an indecisive attitude possibly caused, on the one hand, by the artist's fame and, on the other, by strong cross-currents in the church, the Jesuit fraternity and even in Rome. The Jesuit priest and poet Jacob Balde (1604–1668) expressed this in 1654: 'looking at Rubens's original in the Neuburg Jesuit church ... there you see it on the high altar, whenever it is uncovered, in its enormous dimensions.'¹⁹

On 22 September 1660 another Jesuit, Daniel Papebroch (1628–1714), historian and theologian, travelled through Neuburg:

... our church has been added to, [whose tower] is similar to our tower in Antwerp ... The interior of the church is very pretty and spacious, lit on both sides by four windows ... Nowhere a place that is not wonderfully decorated with stucco. In the spacious choir with three large windows oratories are located, one of which [on the left] is reserved for the Duke ... A space in the shape of a half circle rounds off the church's interior in this part ... The black marble altar beneath it is heathen work like the entire church. This is proven sufficiently by Rubens' altarpiece ... with its nude bodies. Usually we [Jesuits] cover it with a less important picture.²⁰

Papebroch's derogatory opinion reflects church dogma averse to nudity. This, again, is expressed by Uditore Giacomo Fantuzzi (called Elefantuzzi) in 1652:

[The church] is covered with stucco throughout and the vaulted ceiling endows the eye with a feeling of spaciousness. On the high altar is one of the largest paintings that was ever executed by the now famous and important Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens. It depicts a *Last Judgement*, with a plethora of figures, among them some very well painted female nudes. Because the patres hold the opinion that this is a profane rather than a sacral subject, they have agreed with his Excellency, the young Duke and prince Philipp Wilhelm [the son of Wolfgang Wilhelm] to give this painting to him.²¹

The painting mentioned as having been used to hide the *Last Judgement* was *The Assumption of the Virgin*, painted by the Jesuit Paul Bock in 1653 (Fig. 7). The 1653 entry in the *Historia Collegij Soc. Jesu Neoburgi* describes Rubens' fall from Jesuit grace as follows:



Figure 7 Paul Bock, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1653. Oil on canvas, today 474 × 451 cm, Neuburg court church. Photo: Andreas Burmester © Doerner Institut.

The painting on the high altar depicting the Last Judgement and having been painted by Peter Paul Rubens with a skilled brush (this painting, however, appearing less suited to triggering piety in viewers because of the all too obvious nudity in the depicted bodies) was hidden in the same year by another painting of the same size but of unequal artistic quality. It shows the glorious triumph of Mary's Ascension. The painter is Brother Paul Bock.²²

The size of Bock's painting today is 4.74 × 4.51 m, but it was at some point trimmed at the bottom and slightly reduced in width by folding the canvas at the right edge in order to make it fit the small side room in which it currently resides. Rubens' *Last Judgement* remained behind Bock's painting in the dark for decades.

As late as 1691 the painting was sold to the duke's grandson, Duke Johann Wilhelm (1658–1716), and was then sent from Neuburg to Düsseldorf: 'the mentioned painting [was] taken down without any damage yet not without great difficulty from the high altar and [was] packed up by the decorator Daniel!²³ Another long tour began but it was not the last for Rubens' *Last Judgement*.

Conclusions

The 30 volumes of the *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* span a remarkable range of Old Master studies. Between the two poles of 'meaning' and 'making' are embedded countless valuable art-technological, scientific and art-historical contributions, and more is to be expected in the future. However, the first stages in the life of a masterpiece – its creation in the artist's studio, its meaning at the time of commission as well as in the present day – are just as interconnected as London tube stations. What is missing is the painting's other 'life' – its whereabouts between its creation and our search for meaning – including handling, travelling and presentation, all three of which determine its present condition, again influencing its meaning. The objective of this paper has been to examine this other life.

Although there are a great many publications on Rubens, technical aspects of handling, travelling or presentation are largely neglected. This, however, is true not just of Rubens. As in other cases, primary documentary sources add valuable information. Research on handling, travelling and presentation is interdisciplinary. During our research, we learned to think in processes rather than in static situations. These processes are embedded in a wide, topographic view. This encouraged us to look at the *Last Judgement* not only in a single static situation – such as its presentation in Neuburg, for instance – but in fluid processes. Research on processes seems to be most promising for prominent objects such as Rubens' *Last Judgement*. However, the search for written documentary sources has to take into account the fact that the historic division of labour has produced many documents that are mostly still hidden somewhere in archives. As demonstrated here, archival and travel reports as well as every-

day correspondence add bits and pieces to our knowledge of handling, travelling and presentation. This, however, is time-consuming research and often not necessarily of interest to traditional art historians. In conclusion, we would like to predict that research of the type demonstrated here, firmly based on the careful study of documentary sources and embedded in the actual historic and topographic context, will add valuable information to conventional art-technological studies.

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- 'je vous envoydray par escrit tous les noms des marchands auxquels ils sont adresses de lieu en lieu', Rubens to Hans Oberholzer 3 April 1620; Renger 1991 (cited in note 1) 94, document 25.
- 'im fahl es des wegs und des wetters halbe keine Gefahr hatt, auf Augsburg mit Waxtuchern und sunsten wol versehen geschickt werden', Duke Wolfgang Wilhelm to Hans Oberholzer 28 January 1620; Renger 1991 (cited in note 1) 92, document 16.
- 'das zu Antorf verfertigte Gemähl von Augsburg auß zugeschickt worden. Diewiel wir aber in eröffnung desselben befunden das es etwas schadhafft worden, und uns vorheren [?] ob selbsten solchen zu frankfurt eröffnen und offentlich haben lassen', Duke Wolfgang Wilhelm to Philipp von Milkau 14 November 1617; Renger 1991 (cited in note 1) 88, document 4.
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- 'Anlangendt die große Althar Tafl wirdt solche albereits uff vom werckh gezogen, solchergestalt, daß man ins kunfftig das gemähl ohne schad widerumb herab thun, umnd das ramwerckh zue vier stuckh zerlegen khan', Siegmund Doctor to Governor Wonsheim 23 January 1618; Renger 1991 (cited in note 1) 88, document 4.
- 'Andreffendt die Uffrichtung solcher Tafl könte die selbige nach ob angedeuten malers vorschlag, an die wandt, aber uffs wenigste ein halben, wonicht gar ein ganzen schuch, herdan gesetzt werden, welches meines underthenigsten erachtens das sicherste sein würde', Siegmund Doctor to Governor Wonsheim 23 January 1618; Renger 1991 (cited in note 1) 88, document 4.
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- In late autumn 1660, the Jesuit Daniel van Papebroch (Papenbroek) (1628–1714) passed Neuburg: 'ist unsere Kirche angebaut, [dessen Turm] unserm Antwerpener Turm ähnelt ... Das Innere der Kirche ist überaus schmuck und geräumig, beiderseits von vier Fenstern [erhell] ... Nirgendwo eine Stelle, die nicht mit Stuck herrlich verkleidet wäre. Im weiträumigen Chor mit drei mächtigen Fenstern befinden sich Oratorien, von denen das eine [das linke] dem Herzog reserviert ist ... Ein halbkreisförmiger Raum schließt von hier aus das Kircheninnere ab.' ... 'Der schwarze Marmoraltar darunter ist wie die ganze Kirche ein Ketzerwerk. Dies beweist zur Genüge das Altarblatt von Rubens, ... jeweils mit nackten Leibern. In der Regel verdecken es die Unsern mit einem unbedeutenderen Bild.' Quoted from Dussler, H., *Reiseberichte aus Bayerisch-Schwaben*, Vol. 2, Konrad Weißenhorn (1974) 108.
- '[Die Kirche] ist ringsum ganz stukkiert, und die Gewölbedecke gibt dem Auge ein Gefühl von Weite. Am Hochaltar ist eines der mächtigsten Gemälde, das der heute so berühmte und bedeutende flämische Maler Peter Paul Rubens je gemacht hat. Es stellt ein jüngstes Gericht dar, mit einer Unzahl von Figuren, und dessentwegen sind auch einige sehr gut gemalte nackte Frauen darunter. Da die Patres der Meinung waren, daß dies eine mehr weltliche als geistliche Sache sei, sind sie mit Seiner Durchlaucht, dem jungen Herzog und Fürsten Philipp Wilhelm, übereingekommen, ihm dieses Bild zu übergeben', travel report by Uditore Giacomo Fantuzzi, quoted from Dussler, H., *Reisen und Reisende in Bayerisch-Schwaben und seinen Randgebieten in Oberbayern, Franken, Württemberg, Vorarlberg und Tirol*, Vol. 1, Konrad Weißenhorn (1968) 139.
- 'Das Gemälde des Hauptaltars, das das Weltgericht darstellt und das Pater Paul Rubens mit kunstfertigem Pinsel gemalt hat (das jedoch wegen der allzu betont dargestellten Nacktheit der abgebildeten Körper weniger geeignet zu sein schien, in der Kirche die Betrachtenden zur Frömmigkeit anzuregen), wurde dieses Jahr durch ein anderes Bild zugedeckt, von gleicher Größe, freilich von ungleichem künstlerischen Wert; darauf ist der glorreiche Triumph der Himmelfahrt der Jungfrau zu sehen. Der Maler ist Frater Paul Bock.' *Historia* 1617 (cited in note 9).
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Authors' addresses

- *Corresponding author: Andreas Burmester, Doerner Institut, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, Germany (burmester@doernerinstitut.de).
- Nina Schleif, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, Germany (schleif@pinakothek.de).
- Melanie Eibl, Doerner Institut, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, Germany (eibl@doernerinstitut.de)