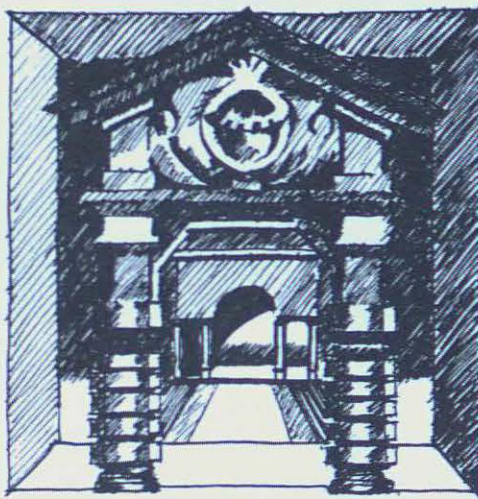


*Examining the role of the painter as
innovator in the formulation of 17th
century architectural ideals...*



RUBENS as architect

by Thomas Glen



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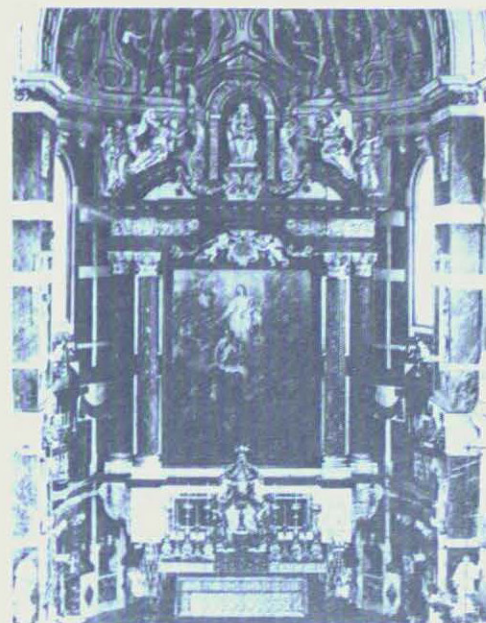
SIR PETER PAUL RUBENS is probably best remembered by the general public today for his colourful paintings of plump women who seem barely contained by their clothing, if indeed they are wearing any, or who frolic in the nude in mythological landscapes with absolutely no regard for the patient viewer. Fewer of us are perhaps aware that Rubens was hailed as the Apelles of his times, in reference to the Ancient Greek painter;¹ that he was one of the most effective spokesmen for the Counter-Reformation movement in Europe during the first half of the seventeenth century and that he was knighted twice, once by English King Charles I and again by Phillip VI of Spain for service to his country. In fact, in praising Rubens's abilities as a statesman and ambassador, the famous General Spinola once said that painting was the least of Rubens's accomplishments.²

We might also quite properly consider Spinola's statement in yet another context; that of the artist's involvement as an architect. Although it is true that what architecture Rubens may have done is far outweighed by his painting, scholarly and ambassadorial projects, most general books on Flemish art of the seventeenth century do not fail to mention his great house in Antwerp or his several important grand-scale decorative schemes for the interiors of churches and important public buildings. But surprisingly enough there has not been a single study devoted exclusively

to Rubens's activity as an architect. What follows, here, is a very brief - and I stress only preliminary - investigation of some of the evidence which might allow us to call Rubens an architect, at least in terms of the thinking of his day.

During the first half of the seventeenth century in Europe a number of important Baroque artists, like their Renaissance forefathers Raphael and Michelangelo, did not limit their creative talents to one medium only. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, for example, is best known as a sculptor, well-known as an architect, and less-known as a painter, though we know that he was responsible for over one hundred and fifty paintings. The great Pietro de Cortona is equally famous for his painting and architecture as he is also for his tapestry cartoons. The point is that both Bernini and Pietro de Cortona were primarily designers and builders; it is a question of emphasis. Rubens, too, should be regarded in exactly the same manner, since he also designed paintings, tapestries, sculpture, and architectural monuments of which some of his earliest pure essay is his own house in Antwerp.

In 1609, Rubens returned home from Italy where he had been working for the last eight years. In fact it was in Rome that he completed his first major official project, the High Altar for the Chiesa Nuova, the church of Sta. Maria in Vallicella. With his design for the altar, Rubens began to develop his ideas on a new and exciting type of altarpiece, the so-called Baroque Portico Altar, which combines painting and architecture and



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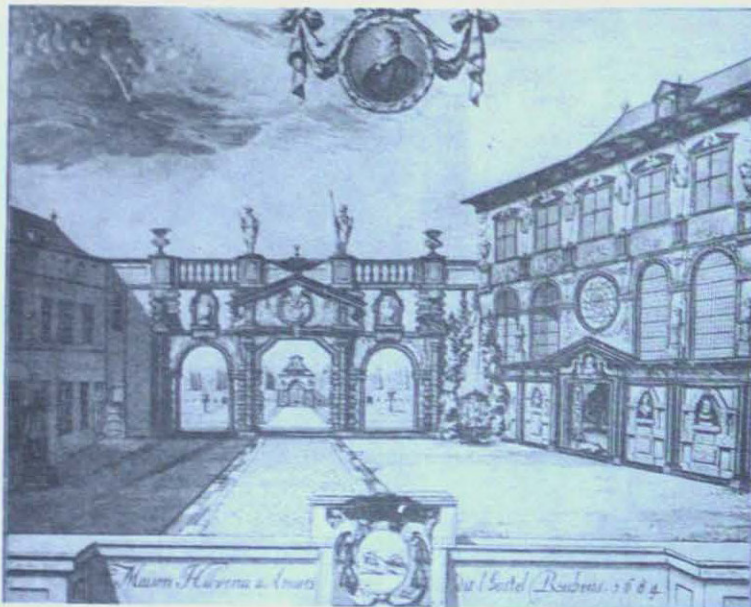
1. Rubens, High Altar, Sta. Maria in Vallicella

2. Rubens, High Altar, Jesuit Church, Antwerp

Note: The painting today framed by the portico is not the original.

which was to have an enormous influence on the later seventeenth-century altarpieces, including Bernini's work of the 1640's in the Cornaro Chapel, the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. We know from documentation that Rubens was much concerned with the actual framing of his altar paintings as he was with the religious picture itself.³ What he began with the Chiesa Nuova and developed to full maturity for the High Altar of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, was to set the religious painting into a marvelous portico of exciting architectural elements. In many ways Rubens's portico altars are not unlike a Baroque church facade composed of richly decorated columns, broken pediments, and scrolled buttresses, all enhanced by individual monuments of sculpture. Though we are perhaps not able to describe the portico as architecture in the strict sense of the word, we can appreciate Rubens's keen understanding of design and classical architectural vocabulary. Indeed, Rubens's Portico altars demonstrate so solid a knowledge of structure that we may move easily from here to a brief discussion of his house.

On the first of November, 1610, Rubens purchased an estate situated in Vaarstraat, now Rubensstraat. It was here that he built his fabulous house and studio which, according to the Antwerp humanist van de Wouver,



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3. Rubens, *The House in Antwerp, inner court, from a print of 1684*



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4. *The great gate as it is today with a view through to the garden*
 5. Rubens, *detail of Rubens and His Family in Their Garden, 1632*



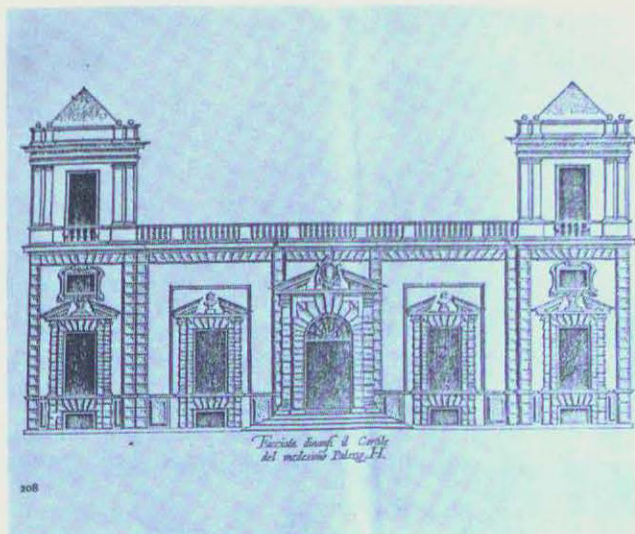
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writing in 1620, was a monument that evoked the astonishment and admiration of visitors.⁴ And, indeed it would have, since there was nothing else remotely like it in Northern Europe at the time. Rubens began with an already existing, but modest house and then proceeded to transform it into a uniquely Baroque edifice that has more in common with Italian palatial design than it does with then contemporary Flemish style. When one considers, for a moment, the massive portico of the inner court through which access to the garden is gained, one becomes instantly aware that only an artist intimately conversant with Mantuan architecture could have conceived of this structure with its marvelous sculptural and pictorial forms. The balustrade, surmounted by urns and statues, is also an Italian motif and one that was to become increasingly popular in both Italian ecclesiastical and palatial architecture in the seventeenth century. The massive, banded Doric columns suggest that Rubens, the scholar, had more than just a casual knowledge of the sixteenth-century Italian architect and theorist, Serlio, and especially of his book, *Extraordinary Doors*, which was published in Lyons in 1551. It is noteworthy, too, though perhaps only in passing, that Serlio wrote extensively on the problems involving the combining two already existing old houses into one unit, a subject that

would have been of particular interest to Rubens, given his present renovation project. We know for a fact that, in 1616, Rubens had bound at the Morteus Press a book which in the inventory of his library is called *Architectura Serlii*. But whether the artist brought this prized possession unbound with him from Italy, whether he purchased it about 1616, or what precisely were the contents of this book are questions to which we do not as yet have the answers.⁵ There is only one other source of which Rubens must certainly have availed himself and that is contemporary Genoese architecture, but more of this later.

Inside the house, one discovers a large circular room which was intended specifically to display Rubens's excellent collection of Antique statuary and which is itself a model of proper Antique architectural vocabulary.

Yet another innovative design feature of the house's interior are the monumental spiral columns that frame the great door to the entrance of Rubens's enormous studio. Rubens frequently employed twisted columns to support the porticos that offset any of his large altarpieces. They can, of



C E N S U R A.

QVOD praesenti Libro sumptuosae Aedificiorum fastigia, & ad miraculum stupenda Fabricarum moles, quibus SUPERBA hoc nomine Ligurum ciuitas GENVA ornatur, arte & ingenio Excellent. V. PETRI PAULI RUBENII, Belgicae nostrae Apellis, in imagine represententur: eaque ratione non modò ipsius urbis aliàs celebratissimae magnificentia, & notus orbi splendor magis innotescat; sed & omnibus Architecturae cultoribus & admiratoribus, ad noua & illustria operum miracula patranda, certum velut paradigma proponatur, proelo ac luce dignissimum censui. Antuerpiae, IV. Kal. Maij. Anno M. DC. XXII.

LAVRENTIUS BEYERLINCK, Canonici & Archidiaconi
Ecclesiae Cathedralis Antuerpensis, Librarius, Censor.

Cum Priuilegio Regis Christianissimi, Serenissimorum Belgicae Principum,
& Ordinum Bataviae.

FIN DES "PALAZZI DI GENOVA" EDITE LE 29 MAI 1622 PAR VERDUSSEN A ANVERS

6.

course, be traced back to the Early Christian columns in St. Peter's (once part of the old Basilica) and which were later actually incorporated by Bernini, who first realized the Baroque potential of the twisted column as an expressive, 'modern' feature and yet one also that was uniquely connected with the earliest beginnings of Christian architecture.

Just as the portico and court facades of Rubens's house could at the time be acclaimed as modern or even 'astonishing', so also could the lovely garden that opened up beyond the great gate. In fact, it was entirely new in terms of Dutch and Flemish landscape architecture, and not surprisingly composed of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century Italian garden vocabulary. In Rubens's painting of himself and his family in their garden, we are easily able to discern the neatly bordered beds separated by directed axes, the most important of which is accented at its end by a fantastic garden pavilion, complete with a fountain that is surely inspired by the Italian garden grotto and all of the iconographical meaning with which it is associated. Another novel element is the pergola which has a long tradition of importance in Italian gardens, originating, to some extent, with the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a box of woodcuts by Colonna, which tells the story of Poliphus's dream sleep.

Any doubt of Rubens being able to provide plans for the modernization of his own house, of his very ability to design in architectural terms at all, are surely erased by the mere survival of the master's publication, *Palazzi di Genova*, which appeared in 1622. This book consists of a collection of ground plans and facades, all drawn by

Rubens, of Genoese houses that he had admired during his sojourn in that Italian city.

Rubens's purpose in producing the *Palazzi di Genova* is made abundantly clear in his preface. Indeed, one is left with the distinct impression that he meant his drawings to be used as models for the renovation of Antwerp's important public buildings and noble private houses. He also notes in the preface that:

...the style of Architecture called barbarian or gothic is gradually waning and disappearing in these parts; and that a few admirable minds are introducing the true symmetry of the other style which follows the rules of the ancient Greeks and Romans to the great splendour and beautification of our country; as may be seen in the famous temples recently erected by the Venerable Society of Jesus in the cities of Brussels and Antwerp.⁶

Although nowhere in his preface to the *Palazzi di Genova* does Rubens claim any responsibility for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, he surely did mean to include himself among the "few admirable minds" as he did also the person of Pieter Huyssens, who was the actual architect. The Jesuit Church, ironically known as the 'Marble Temple', was described as "a marvelous thing" by the English Countess of Arundel during her visit in 1620.⁷ The facade with its coupled pilasters, niches for statuary, and scroll-shaped buttresses, though obviously inspired by the first church of the Jesuits in Rome, is much more ornate than the late sixteenth-century monument, more Baroque in its

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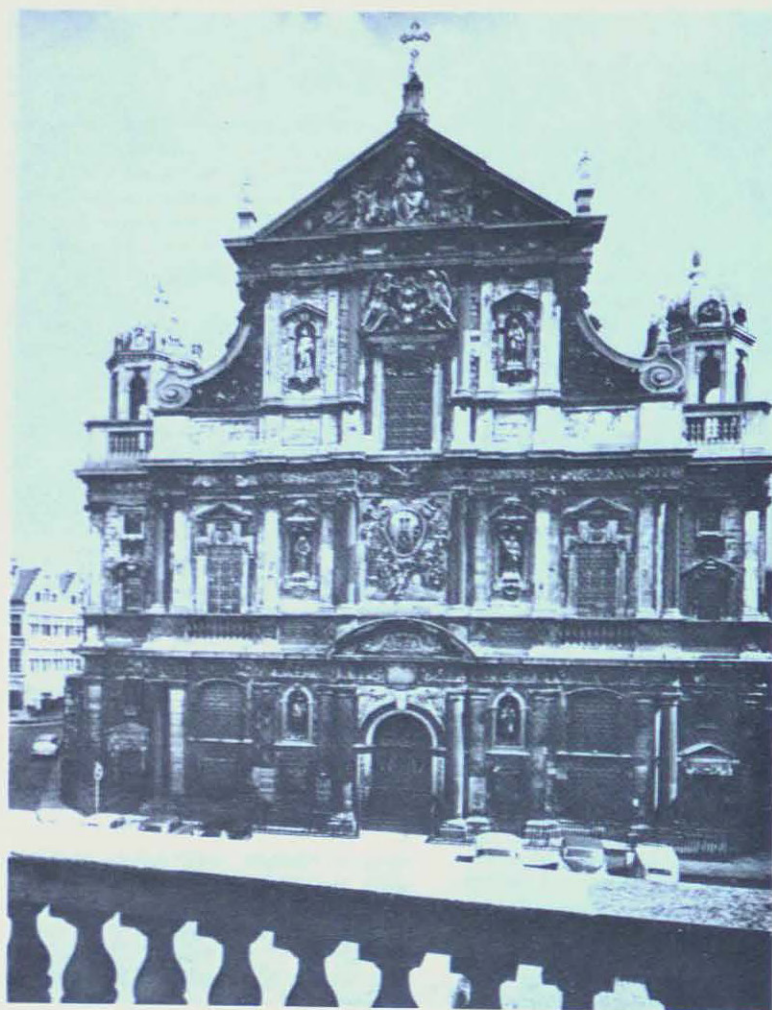
6. Rubens, an elevation taken from the *Palazzi di Genova*, 1622

7. The Royal Privilege and end of the *Palazzi di Genova*, where Rubens is referred to as the Belgian Apelles.

verticality and altogether new in terms of contemporary Flemish ecclesiastical architecture.

Rubens himself was deeply involved with the Antwerp Jesuits all his life and we do know that he worked closely with Huyssens on the interior decoration of the church. In fact, he was virtually wholly responsible for the magnificent ceiling and altar paintings as well as for the great portico above the high altar at the apse. Though no one today would say that he was, with Huyssens, a co-originator of the exterior architecture, it seems impossible, given his experience in Italy, that he would not have served in some advisory capacity. Certainly, he provided designs at least for some elements of the facade decoration. A drawing by his hand in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, of an angel blowing a trumpet was unquestionably made as a model for the sculpted angels over the main entrance to the church. Another sketch by Rubens for the relief decoration of the cartiuche supported by cherubs over the main entrance also survives today in the British Museum.

Appropriately enough, Rubens's greatest opportunity as an architect came in the last five years of his life. Befitting his enormous personality and artistic competence, he was asked to provide decorations that would suitably celebrate the triumphal entry into Antwerp of the Cardinal-Prince Ferdinand of Spain on 17 April 1635.



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Though the concept of joyous entry of a prince or monarch into the principal cities of his kingdom had long been an established tradition in France, Italy, and even in Flanders herself, never before had such truly monumental sets been designed to line the parade route. In the matter of a year, and in command of an army of painters, sculptors, carpenters, and masons, Rubens literally transformed both sides of the entry route with glorious 'pop-up' architecture that completely hid the view of all existing buildings. Not only did he supervise all phases of the decorative scheme, he was also instrumental in the formulation of the iconographic theme.

It is today almost impossible to appreciate the fantastic scale of this project. We can, however, comprehend something of its magnificence by considering, if only briefly, two of the principal features, the *Stage of Welcome* and the *Portico of the Emperors*.

As Prince Ferdinand proceeded along the Mechelse Plein, he would have

seen rising before him a stage of over twenty-two metres in height and of almost the same width. The illusion created by Rubens was one of massive stone architecture, though actually the stage was just a wooden-framed screen covered with architectural details of carved and painted wood, which housed three enormous paintings glorifying the Prince. The architectural vocabulary is at once fanciful and real. Yet it was an entirely successful conflation of forms that are dependent on both the Antique and Rubens's imagination. The structure appears solid and is undoubtedly convincing as architecture.

But the most spectacular of all the architectural sets was the *Porticus Caesareo-Austriaca* - the Imperial Austrian Portico. As J.R. Martin has rightly observed, Van Thulden's etching conveys little of the tremendous scale and splendour of this work, "with its multitude of colourful figures and emblematic devices...and its grandiose architecture."⁸ Indeed, so impressed was Prince Ferdinand when he rode through it, that he doffed his cap in reverence.

8. Pieter Huyssens with details by Rubens, the facade of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, begun in 1615

9. Rubens, *Angel Blowing a Trumpet*, pen and ink and black chalk drawing, c. 1615



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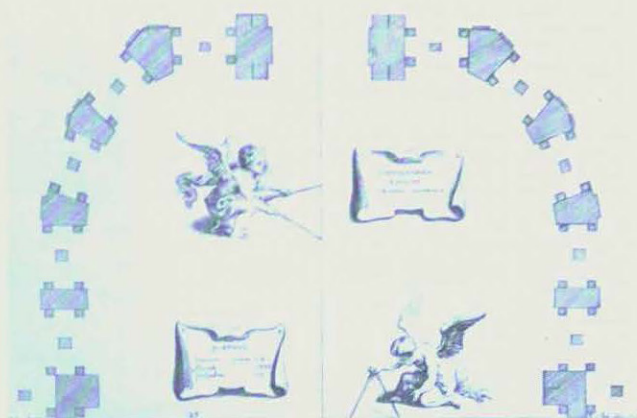
The architectural elements, like those of the *Stage of Welcome*, were carved in wood and painted, this time, to look like marble. The width of this enormous concave screen of simulated stone was more than thirty-one metres from side to side, while the centre portico was surmounted by an obelisk rising to a height of twenty-three metres. And yet, in the later project by Bernini for the *Fountain of the Four Rivers* in the Piazza Navona, Rome, the sense of the obelisk's obvious weight is diminished by the structure below. It is true that Rubens's obelisk was not, as was Bernini's, the real thing, but the message that Rubens wanted to convey is entirely similar. The motif, taken over from the Egyptians, is meant to be understood as signifying the glorious reign of the Austrian Monarchy, rather, in the case of Bernini's work, the glorious reign of the papacy.

There are in Rubens's *Portico* further parallels with the later projects by Bernini and others. It has not gone unnoticed, for example, that its

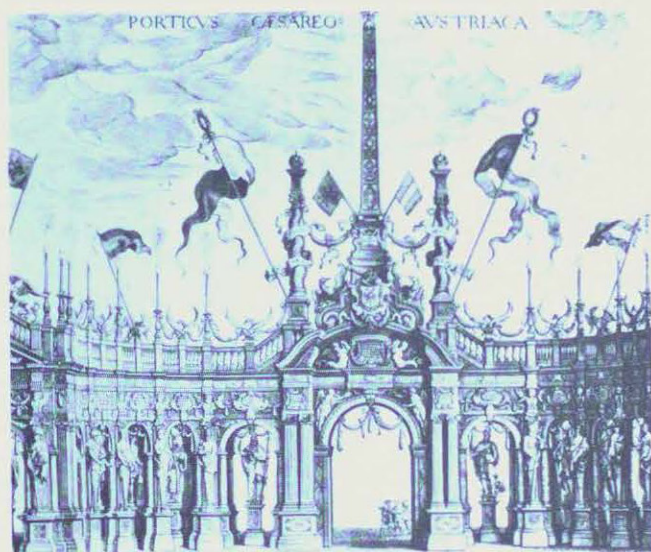
10. T. van Thulden, etching after Rubens's Stage of Welcome

11. T. van Thulden, etching after Rubens's Porticus Caesareo-Austriaca

12. T. van Thulden, etching after Rubens's plan of the Porticus Caesareo-Austriaca



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concave form and facade of columns (and paired, engaged pilasters) supporting an entablature accented at both extremities by pediments may seem to anticipate the massive columned wings or arms that Bernini planned for St. Peter's, Rome. It is further worth observing that the 'welcoming' effect of a concave facade became a most popular design element, particularly in Italian and French ecclesiastical architecture of the latter half of the seventeenth century.

Whether we can, at this point, really credit Rubens, as being a seventeenth-century originator of this feature remains to be seen, and would depend on more extensive research. We can say, however, that though Rubens was one of the first generation of Baroque artists whose most immediate task it was to translate into visual forms the dictates of Counter-Reformation theologians and scholars, he did not limit himself to this one duty alone. He was always an innovator in his painting. So much of what we usually think of as Baroque, as triumphant, and as

belonging to the generation of Bernini and Pietro da Cortona, was actually earlier the province of Rubens.

Sir Peter Paul Rubens was a skilled, inventive, and progressive artist as he was also a politician; this writer, for one, would like to think that Rubens in still another capacity, this time as architect, could well be recognized as having played no small part in the formulation of seventeenth-century artistic ideas. □

Notes

1. Even Rubens, in his preface to the *Palazzi di Genova* refers to himself as "...Petri Pauli Rubenii, Belgicae nostrae Apellis..."
2. L.R. Lind, "Vita Petri Pauli Rubenii," *The Art Quarterly*, Vol. IX, 1946, p. 39.
3. R.S. Magurn, *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, 1955, p. 56.
4. F. Baudouin, *Rubens House, A Summary Guide*, 1971, p. 3.
5. Sebastiano Serlio was one of the most influential and innovative architects and theorists of the sixteenth century. His books, for

instance, on the Orders, on perspective, and on extraordinary doors were widely read and some were even translated. Exactly which of Serlio's writings Rubens owned is, as I have mentioned, not known, though it is safe to assume that Rubens may have been familiar with all of them. It is important to point out that Rubens seemed to have owned an original Serlio and not one of the translations by Peter Cock, who illustrated his texts with rather ornate plates. Rubens actually owned several books of architectural interest, including Vignola's *Perspective* and one on the works of Scamozzi. For an inventory of Rubens's library, see Max Rooses in *Rubens - Bulletin I*, 1882, p. 68ff, and *Bulletijn II*, 1883, p. 176ff.

6. J.R. Martin, *The Ceiling Paintings for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp* (*Corpus Rubenianum* Ludwig Burchard), 1968, p. 25.

7. Martin, *The Ceiling Paintings*, p. 24.

8. J.R. Martin, *The Decorations for the Pompa Intriatus Ferdinandi* (*Corpus Rubenianum* Ludwig Burchard), 1972, p. 100.