Longing for a Second Golden Age in Antwerp and Amsterdam. Comparing the Rubens and Rembrandt House Museums.

First of all, I would like to thank the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures here at the University of Pennsylvania and in particular its chair, Professor Simon Richter, for having granted me the Breughel Professorship for 2019-2020. Everyday once again it feels as a privilege to stay here in Philadelphia, to discuss my research with colleagues out of the most various fields in the humanities, to share my thoughts with really smart students, to read books for which I never had enough time during the busy semesters in Leuven, where I spend my time running from one lecture to the next meeting, and to talk this afternoon to you on a subject which is dear to me and which gives me the opportunity to take you to two mirror-cities whom I love both. I extend these words of gratitude to Martina Bale, the departmental administrator, who has assisted me to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles on my way to the United States and who took care of the organization of this event. I would like to thank as well the *Vlaamse Universiteiten en Hogescholen Raad*, the body that generously funds the Breughel Chair. Moreover, I feel honored that Nicolas Polet, the Director of Public and Academic Affairs of the Flanders Government Delegation in the USA made it from New York to Philadelphia. Furthermore, the Flemish delegation sponsors as well the reception we shall enjoy after my talk. Therefore, I am also grateful to all of you to have made it to the Max Kade Center in this very busy period of term and I hope I shall have the occasion to thank you personally during that reception.

In the mid-1980s, the Flemish government had started to sponsor chairs at American universities. Since 2007, there are three of them and they are all three named after famous painters and engravers: the Breughel chair here at Penn, the Rubens Chair at Berkeley and the Van Dyck Chair at UCLA. Apparently, the names of these painters embody the 'art and culture of Flanders'. However, why the names of those three early modern artists? What has made their reputation? – Apparently for a long time, Breughel's fame rested most and for all on the admiration of *literati*, W.H. Auden's

famous 1938 poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* is a case in point **(plaatje)**.[1] Only after the Second World War, his fame developed in Flemish popular culture. Then, Breughel's seemingly realistic rendering of village feasts and Brabantine landscapes seemed a perfect antidote against the rapid spread of consumerism and the devastation of the countryside around Brussels by the growing suburbanization **(zie Boerenbruiloft + de Parabel der Blinden)**. Anthony Van Dyck has always attracted a different crowd of admirers. Since the nineteenth century, he has been avidly collected by American steel magnates and the like, who considered themselves the successors of the Genoese patricians and the English aristocrats he had so lavishly portrayed. Henry Clay Frick for instance bought no fewer than eight of Van Dyck's canvasses. Whereas in 1897, Bernard Berenson provided his Boston friend Isabelle Stewart Gardner with this beautiful portrait of a Lady with a Rose (**plaatje tonen**). In Antwerp, by contrast Van Dyck is not so much considered as a great artist in his own right, but as Rubens' beloved pupil, a prominent member thus of the Antwerp school, along with for instance David Teniers or Jacob Jordaens and I 'll return to this point later onward (**zie plaatje**).

However, for the moment, I wish to focus on the cult of that third man, the dean of the Antwerp school of baroque painters, as he was portrayed by Nicaise de Keyzer in 1857, Peter Paul Rubens. Thereby I shall analyze how Rubens evolved from an Antwerp into a Belgian and finally into a Flemish icon. I shall do this by comparing Rubens' cult with the nearly simultaneous revival of Rembrandt van Rijn's reputation in nineteenth century Amsterdam. Both Rubens' and Rembrandt's renewed fame thus originated in their respective hometowns: Antwerp and Amsterdam. Later onward both became national heroes, whose supposed traits embodied the virtues of their nations. The acquisition by the Antwerp and Amsterdam city administrators of the houses of both artists played, as I shall argue, an important part in that process. Thereby lobbyists, art critics and local politicians in those twin cities carefully studied the moves that were made in the other place and competed with each other.

[1] Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles. How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names*, 2015, 97.

In the first six decades of the sixteenth century, Antwerp had grown into the foremost economic and cultural Metropolis of Western Europe **(kaart Bononiensis)**. In its heydays, the city had numbered more than 100.000 inhabitants, amongst them merchants from all over Europe. The magnificent city hall by Cornelis Floris de Vriendt, built in the early 1560s and modelled on the Roman Palozzo Farnese, was an expression of the accompanying civic pride.

Meanwhile, Amsterdam, situated about hundred miles to the north, functioned as the Dutch hub for the Baltic grain trade, the so-called *Moedernegotie* or Mother Commerce **(kaartje vroeg zicht in vogelperspectief)**. By the mid sixteenth century, Amsterdam had counted only about 20.000 inhabitants. In those days, the city functioned as a satellite in the Antwerp solar system. While in November 1576, Antwerp had been sacked by mutinous Habsburg troops and throughout the next few years the city, by then a Calvinist republic, took the lead in the Dutch Revolt **(plaatje)**, Amsterdam remained staunchly catholic until 1578. In August 1585, after a siege that had lasted for more than a year, Alessandro Farnese finally conquered Antwerp on behalf of the Spanish King Philip II **(plaatje)**. In the next few years, more than half of the population moved out of the city, mostly to the Northern Netherlands, and more in particular to Amsterdam, that by now rapidly evolved into the powerhouse of the nascent Dutch Republic. In order to avoid a renaissance of Antwerp commerce, the States General of the United Provinces blocked access to the river Scheldt and thus to the port of its southern competitor.

In 1609, the Dutch Republic and the Habsburg rulers, the Spanish King Filip III and the archdukes of the Low Countries Albert and Isabelle, concluded a Twelve Years Truce. Precisely at that moment and that is no hazard, Rubens returned to Antwerp after a long sojourn in Italy. Throughout the next few years, the painter received a series of commands that transformed Antwerp into the most northern bulwark of Counterreformation Europe: the Cathedral of Our Lady **(toon plaatjes van Maria-ten-Hemel opgenomen en/of de Kruisafneming)**, the Parish Church of Saint Walburgis, the Dominican Church of Saint Paul and the Jesuit Church, now known as

Saint Charles Borromeo, they all adorned their walls with Rubens's paintings and in some instances these canvasses can be still admired on their original spots.

In those same years, Amsterdam's economy and population grew rapidly. Whereas around 1580 about 2.000 ships a year had docked in its port, by 1650 this number amounted to more than 5.000 a year. Simultaneously its population increased in an even more spectacular way, from about 30.000 in the 1580s to 175.000 inhabitants in the middle of the seventeenth century, that is thus a more or less six fold increase. The new city hall, after a design by Jacob van Campen, which was constructed between the late 1640s and 1665, became a stunning monument of city pride conveying the message that henceforth Amsterdam, having surpassed Antwerp, dominated commerce across the globe **(plaatje Van der Heyden)**. Not only the architectural model referred to the Antwerp example, also for their decoration program the Amsterdam city fathers reached out to Antwerp artists. Artus Quellinus for instance provided a whole series of sculptures **(tympaan + plaatje Atlas)**, both for the exterior as for the interior and Jacob Jordaens, a former pupil of Rubens, contributed several canvasses for the *lunettes* at the edges of the sumptuous first floor *Burgerzaal* **(plaatje)**. However, for the same series on the struggle of the ancient Batavians against the Roman oppressors, the city fathers turned down the submission by the older and by then world famous, but highly controversial and not very manageable Rembrandt van Rijn. Later onward, Rembrandt reduced this painting in size and reorganized its central scene. That canvas survives as the *Conspiracy by Claudius Civlis* in Stockholm's National Museum **(plaatje)**.

Rubens by contrast, had been much more successful in his public commissions than Rembrandt was. Nearly fifty years earlier onward, at his return from Italy, he had enriched the Antwerp City Hall at the request of the Antwerp burgomaster Nicolaas Rockox with a beautiful *Adoration of the Magi* **(plaatje)**. The painting, symbolizing how envoys from different ethnical and religious backgrounds were united in their love for Christ, the King of Peace, was supposed to smooth the negotiations that eventually would result in the Twelve Years Truce, then taking place in Antwerp.

To what an extent Rembrandt really was haunted by Rubens's successes, as has been forcefully argued by Simon Schama in his 1999 biography *Rembrandt's Eyes* remains a matter of debate amongst art historians. According to Schama, Rembrandt must have been obsessed by Rubens. In that vision, artistic competition with Rubens was Rembrandt's prime inspiration and psychological driving force during most of his career. This self-inflicted competition did not bring Rembrandt personal happiness. By the end of his life, he was held in far lower esteem than Rubens had been. In fact, during the last years of his life, apart from Aert de Gelder, Rembrandt did not train any longer apprentices. Many of his contemporaries thought of him as a failed artist. In 1658, Rembrandt had gone bankrupt and until the end of his life, eleven years later, he struggled to pay off his debts. Rubens, by contrast had been ennobled, by both the Spanish and the English king. In 1640, he died as wealthy man who bequeathed to his wife and his children apart from his Antwerp urban mansion a countryside manor at Elewijt, halfway between Brussels and Malines. Moreover, the pupils trained by Rubens continued his reputation for about two decades or so, long enough in any case, as we have seen by the example of Jacob Jordaens to be commissioned in the 1660s to take part in the decoration of the new Amsterdam city hall.

However, by the end of the seventeenth century, when all its churches had been brought up to the Counterreformation fashion and also the trade in luxury had waned, the cork which had kept Antwerp's economy more or less thriving for another century, the city had become an artistic backwater. In the eighteenth century, Antwerp did not even succeed to benefit from the economic recovery that befell upon the Southern Low Countries, present-day Belgium. Henceforth, the east-west axis, running from Liège over Brussels to Ostend became the economic backbone of the country. The creation of coal mines and steel plants in Wallonia that brought about the Industrial Revolution even enhanced this process. However, in 1863, the Belgian government succeeded to buy off the duties that the Dutchmen had levied ever since Farnese's reconquista on all traffic on the river Scheldt from and to Antwerp **(plaatje)**. Nearly immeaditely, the port became buzzing once again. New dock yards were digged and within a few decades Antwerp became one of the most prominent

European ports along with Rotterdam, Hamburg or London. This sudden economic growth was accompanied by an explosion of building activitities and the creation of cultural institutions. Following the Viennese example, the city was dotted with a brandnew Ringstrasse, a boulevard along which amongst other palaces a new courthouse **(plaatjes)**, a branch of the national bank, a new theatre **(Vlaams theater; zoek plaatje)** and a new opera house were constructed.

On the grounds where in the 1570s the Duke of Alba had ordered the construction of a citadel, once the symbol of the hated Spanish tyranny, a new neighborhood for enlightened citizens was developed. There, members of the growing Jewish community worshipped in the new synagogue **(plaatje)**. The center of the new neighborhood became the monumental Royal Museum of Fine Arts **(zie plaatje)**. Its scale and its interior design, the way to guide the gazes of the visitors to Rubens's paintings and those of his fellow masters of the Antwerp School, I'll return to that point, were inspired by the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum, that had opened a few years earlier onward **(zie plaatje)**. Around 1900 Antwerp thus lived a second Golden Age.

This was also the case about hundred miles to the North, in Amsterdam. Here the opening of the North Sea Canal in 1876, symbolized a new start. After decades of standstill, the city once again gained a direct access to the North Sea. Stimulated by a booming economy, also here a self-conscious elite dotted the city with a series of magnificent new buildings and cultural institutions. I have mentioned already the Rijksmuseum. The Central Station (by the same architect as the Rijksmuseum, Pierre Cuypers), the Concertgebouw, the Vondelpark and the Crystal Palace for an Industrious Society (my rather free translation of het *Paleis voor de Volksvlijt*) that burned down in the 1930s and that was never reconstructed, are examples in point. They were all constructed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Quite deliberately, I have dropped a minute ago the term Golden Age, or *aetas aurea*, and indeed the inhabitants of Antwerp and Amsterdam must have experienced the sudden and intense flourishing of their cities in the last quarter of the nineteenth

century in this way. Therefore, they looked for anchor points in the past, when a similar astonishing blossoming had occurred.

The Dutch journalist and literary critic Conrad Busken Huet **(plaatje)** provided such anchor points. In the late 1870s and the early 1880s, so simultaneously with the great transformations that affected Antwerp and Amsterdam, he published two books in which he presented two books than can be considered to be syntheses of what he believed to be the cultures of the Low Countries: respectively *The Country of Rubens* and the even more famous *Country of Rembrandt* (*Het Land van Rubens* and *Het Land van Rembrandt*).

'To me Rubens is the perfect Belgian,' according to Busken Huet in the opening remarks of his Belgian travel account. A few pages further, he stated that 'the name of Rubens is as a point at the horizon, where all expressions of Belgian spiritual life encounter each other. The Walloons can take pride in Rubens, when someone reproaches them to dwell on the oddities of their Celtic race. The Flemings, in turn, can take pride in Rubens, when they seem to behave like Germans. In fact, all Belgians who doubt that their people has a right of existence should be proud on him. European history has seen few characters who have paired so much respect for their own nation with such empathy for mankind, as he has displayed,' in my rather poor English translation.

Meanwhile the continuation of the Belgian nation, on which Busken Huet, while acknowledging it was fragile, wrote with so much sympathy, by now has evaporated nearly completely (to borrow the language of some of our politicians who incline to Flemish nationalism). However, Busken Huet had sensed correctly how a community, in this case the Flemish one, and more in particular the Antwerp one, could boil down its past to one person and his works of art. Rubens and Antwerp, Antwerp and Rubens, henceforth they constituted a pair that in the next few decades would nearly become synonyms and this thanks to the writings of Busken Huet. As I have mentioned already, shortly afterwards, Busken Huet repeated the same trick with Amsterdam and Rembrandt.

Obviously Busken Huet fitted into a tradition. Upon his arrival, the population venerated already its local school of painters, a group of which Rubens was but the *primus inter pares* **(opnieuw plaatje De Keyser)**. So the Antwerp cult of painters, if I may borrow this term from religious study, orginally was not directed exclusively at Rubens. He was the leader of the gang, the most important member, the *maestro* of group to which belonged as well artists such as Antoon Van Dyck, Jacob Jordaens and David Teniers, to name but three painters for whom in the course of the nineteenth century statues were created in the Antwerp city center **(plaatjes tonen)**.

'The cult of the Antwerp painters' originated in the triumphal return, after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, in 1815, of the art treasures the French revolutionaries had looted and transported to Paris. There they had to become part of the planned *Musée français* or *Musée Napoléon*. Some of these paintings returned to the churches that still existed. Others, in practice those that had belonged to churches or religious institution that had been demolished or abolished during the revolutionary turnmoil, now became part of the urban, communal art collection. Orginally, they were put on display in the former Franciscan cloister, that meanwhile had been transformed into a primitive museum. That museum though was too small and above all it was a fire hazard. Therefore, in 1873 the city council decided to build an entirely new museum, in a newly developed neigborhood at the southern edge of the historic city center, more precisely on the grounds of the former Spanish citadel. Seventeen years later, the monumental building was completed **(toon opnieuw plaatje)**. Architects and aldemen made study trips to Amsterdam, Berlin, Munich and Vienna, all cities were recently impressive national art museums had been completed. There, they learned how to direct the gazes of the visitors to the most prominent artists of the collection. Therefore, just as Rembrandt's Nightwatch forms the apotheosis of a whole series of Golden Age paintings, all at the first floor of the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum, Rubens's paintings ended up in the centrally located 'Galery of honor' on the first floor.

Indeed, meanwhile Rubens stood center stage, henceforth the spotlights focused on him. This is nicely illustrated by the following fragment:

Dearest Sister,
You who sits on your throne at the River Scheldt,
Queen of Art, we have all gathered here!
Take our kisses, our crowns and our palms;
May our praise resonate across the globe:
We are proud on thou, Mother of Rubens!

This is the song of the so-called 'Belgian and Dutch Sister cities' in Julius de Geyter's poem 'Flanders Glory of Art'. Once again the translation is mine. Put on to music by Peter Benoit, the tekst survives as the so-called *Rubens Cantata*, more precisely an *oratorio*. It was performed for the first time in 1877, when Rubens' threehunderth birtday was celebrated. Henceforth, the cantata has became a staple of solemn public festivities in Antwerp.

On July 20 1946 for instance an impressive choir, amongst them several hundreds of schoolkids, accompanied by the Opera orchestra, sung the piece in an open air concert at the Antwerp *Grote Markt*, the City Square. This was precisely the way Benoit had intended his cantata: the crowd of performers symbolised the bond between a people and its culture. That concert was intended to mark the inauguration of the Rubens House as a museum, the next day. Although I have not found a recording of that particular concert, I think it is worthwile to make you listen to a fragment of another, more recent performance of that piece. **(nu stukje laten horen)**

This shift from a collective, the Antwerp school of painters, to the individual genius of a painter, Rubens, can be well traced in the work of the art historian and anti-clerical key figure of the Flemish movement, Max Rooses **(zie plaatje)**. In 1879, he published his *History of the Antwerp school of painters* (*Geschiedenis der Antwerpsche schilderschool*). The book was subsidized by the city administration.

About the same time, and once again on request of the city administration, Rooses started to systematically collect engravings from and after Rubens's works. Simultaneously, he started as well to work on a catalogue raisoné of Rubens' paintings and he translated and published, at first together with the Brussels' librarian an edition and translation into French of Rubens' correspondence. The first volume of the catalogue was published in 1886, followed the next year by the first part of the correspondence. Once finished, both projects turned to have become impressive series. The five volumes of *L'oeuvre de P.P. Rubens* werd already completed in 1892, whereas the sixth and last part of the *Codex diplomaticus Rubenianus* was printed in 1909.

At first and once again very recently, as we shall see, all attention was concentrated on Rubens' place of birth. Only in 1903, Max Rooses acknowledged, although somewhat reluctantly, that his hero had seen the daylight in the Westfalian town of Siegen: 'His place of birth has little importance, what does count is that Rubens is of good Antwerp stock, of Antwerp blood. Through his art, he belongs to the Antwerp school. In Antwerp, he has learnt, lived and worked … Only one city on the globe, can call itself the city of Rubens and that city is Antwerp … Into the light of this undisputed truth all statements to the contrary are lies or minor details.' (end quote and once again my translation). However, a century later onward this 'truth' has been discussed once again and controversy has been sparked. In 2011, in their lemma for the *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek*, published by the Royal Flemish Academy for Sciences, Rutger Tijs and Hans Rombaut have argued that the painter, all evidence considered, nevertheless might have been born in Antwerp. Though, most specialist beg to disagree and in any case Tijs and Rombaut interpret their sources very selectively.

Anyhow, already in 1876, and more or less by accident, the city administration of Antwerp had acquired the house, the printing presses and the furniture of the Plantin and Moretus families **(plaatje)**. Due to the efforts of mayor Leopold de Wael this mansion was restored and converted into a museum. Its first curator was Max Rooses. Immediately, the Plantin Moretus Museum became hugely popular with the

wider public. Visitors could imagine how it felt to be a sixteenth century famous printer, or they act to design fonts on at his request. The example was set.

Did one to truly understand Rubens' genius not have spend some time in his private collection of Antiquities, just as the artist had done at the time? Did one not have to imagine how the prince of painters and the painter of princes had received foreign dignitaries in his *palazzo* ontving to subsequently admire half finished canvasses in his studio? In short, did the House of Rubens not have to be a public good or more precisely an Antwerp public property?– In any case, Max Rooses and Leopold de Wael were convinced by these arguments. In 1880, for the first time the city administration tried to buy the house. This bid remained unsuccessful. But the debate lingered on and all successive administrations returned to the question.

Whereas in Amsterdam, in 1908, the Rembrandt Foundation, thanks to a large subsidy of the city authorities had succeeded to buy the Rembrandthuis, the Antwerp administration failed once again. In response to that failure, it decided to persue a different strategy. Because the city could not buy the real thing, the Rubens house, it ordered the fabrication of a copy. This replica, made from plaster and cardboard, was the official Antwerp contribution to the Brussels World Fair of 1910. There it met with huge success. This reconstruction was the work of city architect Henri Blomme. Later onward, critics have reproached Blomme to have built a neo-baroque pastice. This is a curious recrimination, as if he could have designed something else. At the time, his project was applauded. Many visitors, really meant that they had entered Rubens' living room and that they had admired there his tapestries. Luxioursly bound albums, with reproductions of Blomme's drawings, engravings and photographs enhanced this illusion. Also Rooses' brochure *Het huis van Rubens* (The House of Rubens), in fact a translation of a text he had published originally twenty five years earlier onward, was widely distributed. This publicity stunt seemed to work. A committee of which Rooses and Blomme amongst others were members, negotiated with the owners of the Rubens House a transfer to the city. In Spring 1914, both parties were close to an agreement. However, the outbreak of the Great War, thwarted the

negotiations. After the end of war, in 1919, they were reopened, however meanwhile the asking price turned out to be to high for the depleted city finances.

In 1927, the occasion presented itself once again. This time, the city remembered Rubens' threehundred and fiftieth birthday. In contrast to previous festivities, this time, the authorities decided to honour rather the artist Rubens instead of celebrating a Belgian, Flemish or Antwerp hero. This was not a time for elaborate processions, but one for exhibitions, catalogues and reproductions of Rubens' works of art. Paradoxically, precicely for this reason, even more then previously, the Antwerp cultural establishment experienced the absence of the Rubens House in the public patrimony as a want. Ary Delen, for the Flemish amongst you the best friend of the author Alphons de Ridder, alias Willem Elsschot, and at that time the assitent-curator of the Plantin Moretus Museum, expressed 'the deepest wish' of this group at the opening of an exhibition on Rubens' graphic works. They were 'expecting a Christ, who who would expel the merchants out of that temple (= that is to say the Rubens House) and who would restore the cult, the whorshipping of our God, Peter Paul Rubens, the prince amidst the painters and the painter of princes.' His, thus Rubens' house should be restored into 'a sacred place, one that art lovers out of the whole world could visit on their pious pilgrimages.'

For sure, this last argument struck a chord with the Antwerp city councillors. In 1931, they obtained the right to expropriate the Rubens House. Immediately, the City Council Meteen voted a motion to decide on the future functions of the mansion: it had to become a museum and a cabinet of drawings and prints. Most of the councillors opted for a restoration into the original state of the building. According to them Blomme's reconstruction out 1910 could serve as model for a new and this time lasting recreation of Rubens' House.

The marxist Flemish nationalist, this was a rather unusual combination, Ary Delen, whom we have just encountered, had a different opinion. He argued, that in contrast to the Plantin Moretus Museum, in the Rubens House virtually nothing still bore the traces of the old master. Forcefully, he condemned the existing plans for the

restauration. By creating the illusion that future visitors could follow into Rubens' footsteps, its planners would display 'an act of unworthy decoy'.

Delen by contrast, admired what had happened in the Amsterdams Rembrandt House. When Rembrandt had bought his house in the Breestraat in 1638, he had modelled it after the Rubens House: it had to become an impressive mansion, where he lived, trained his apprentices in a large studio and where could put his collection of antiquities on display. After all, just as Rubens was, Rembrandt aimed to pose not as a mere artisan, but a *pictor doctus*, a learned painter. In transforming his new property Rembrandt overspent and eighteen years later, he was declared bankrupt.

As I have mentioned earlier onward, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Rembrandt Foundation had acquired this house. Between 1907 en 1911 it was restored under the direction of architect Karel de Bazel **(zie plaatje)**. De Bazel was a modernist. Later onward for instance, he would design the headquarters of the Dutch Trading Company (Nederlandsche Handelsmaatschappij), an monumental office block that nowadays houses the Amsterdam City Archives **(zie plaatje)**. At the Rembrandt House, De Bazel remodelled the front side into its supposedly orginal, seventeenth century state, but in the interior he consciously avoided each reference to seventeenth century decorations. He covered the walls with simple oak wood panels, instead of conspicuous gold leather **(zie 2 plaatjes)**. In the original guide for visitors these choices were explained: 'It turned out to be impossible to restore the interior into the orignal state. In fact, how should we imagine that original state, now that the building has received a completly different function? … Meanwhile, we know a great deal about Rembrandt's life style and we can guess how the house must have been decorated on the basis of the extensive inventory that has been drawn in 1656, when Rembrandt went bankrupt, and supported by the most accurate archeological research. However, these remain mere indications and we lack the detailed knowledge. As far as Rembrandt's beautiful furniture is concerned, not a single piece of it has survived. In fact, it remains unclear which pieces precisely he had amassed. **When we would have reduced the house to its supposedly original state, we would have obtained nothing else but a masquerade of our own**

imagination: a quasi historic document, that would turn out to be a fraud. And so it would have become impossible to retrieve here Rembrandt's own spirit.' – These are telling words.

Indeed, meanwhile in Amsterdam a Rembrandt cult similar to the one of Rubens in Antwerp had developed. In 1906, in a grandiose manner the city had celebrated the painter's threehunderd birthday. Just as earlier onward had happened in Antwerp, the local cultural elite identified with Rembrandt. H.P.G. Quack, one of the directors of the Dutch National Bank articulated this sentiment in a speech: 'Rembrandt created his marvellous works of art out of the depth of the artist's soul. Rembrandt and Amsterdam belong to each other. Holland's greatest treasure was hidden in Holland's hart.' The city of Amsterdam faithfully responded to this plea. As I have told already, it lavishly subsidized the acquisition of the Rembrandt house and it paid for its restoration. At the outset, the new museum concentrated on collecting Rembrandt's engravings.

No wonder that Ary Delen, who was a graphic artist by training, and who in the 1920s worked as the junior-curator of the Plantin Moretus Museum, took inspiration from the Amsterdam model. However, not surprisingly, he lost this battle. On August first 1937, the city of Antwerp finally took possession of the Rubens House. Immeditately, the mayor and his aldermen decreed that 'the house and the studio will be restored into their original state.' Obviously, this pithy statement left room for interpretation. In Spring 1938 a Commission that would supervise the works was created. Mayor Camille Huysmans presided it personally and although also the critical Ary Delen took a seat, its most influential member became Emiel van Averbeke, the offictial town architect. Van Averbeke had started out as an ecclectic art nouveau architect, but in the 1920s and '30 he combined modernist designs such as for instance those for the *Torengebouw*, locally beter known as the 'Peasants Tower', Antwerp's and in fact Belgium's first genuine skyscraper and the monumental entrance buildings to the pedestrian tunnel underneath the Scheldt river, with restoration projects, such as the one for the tower of Our-Ladies-Cathedral, or as a matter of fact the restoration of the Rubens House.

Initially, the city administrators hoped that the restoration project would be completed in 1940, just in time for the planned festivities that should mark the three hundred anniversary of Rubens' death. However, soon this turned out to be an illusion. Even after the facade of the building had been cleaned and the interior had been stripped, the artist did not revive. Suddenly, it became clear that Delen had been right. Notwithstanding the intensive local Rubens' cult and thorough research on his works of art and his biography, virtually nothing was known about his about, or more precisely of how it had looked like.

Therefore, nearly immeditalty architect Emiel Van Averbeke opted for a 'hard' restauration, in fact a reconstruction of the Rubens House. His plans met fierce resistance in the accompanying comittee **(zie plaatje Harrewijngravure)**. The architect defended himself in two ways. Often, he defied the commitee with accomplished facts. Simultanously, he tried to win over his critics. In 1941 Frederik Clijmans, the director of the city branch for tourism, published the brochure *Rondom den wederopbouw van het Rubenshuis* (*About the reconstruction of the Rubens House*). In this booklet, Van Averbeke got the opportunity to explain his practices at length. Here and there he recourse to dubious arguments. For instance, Van Averbeke admitted that originally frescoes had decorated the southern and western facades of the courtyard. However he opted for *bas-reliefs*. toe dat de zuid –en westgevels van de binnenplaats oorspronkelijk waren beschilderd met fresco's. Maar hij koos voor half verheven beeldhouwwerk. Indeed, 'in 1640, when Rubens died, the mansion had not yet been completed' **(zie plaatje)**. In other words, if Rubens would have lived longer, he would certainly have chosen Van Averbeke's ultimate solution.

Obviously, building materials were scarce during the war. However, the Nazi occupiers, who considered Rubens as a German artist, did not frustrate Van Aberbeke's activities. On the contrary, the number of workers at construction site constantly increased. In 1937, they had started with ten men, but by the summer of 1944 about fifty people were employed on this project **(zie plaatje)**. At the liberation, in September 1944, structural work had been nearly completed.

Upon his return from London, mayor Huysmans and his adminitration continued to favor this presige project. Whereas during the winter months of 1944-‘45 nearly 900 flying V-bombs destroyed one out of every ten houses in the city and public life came to a virtual standstill, the restauration team at the Rubens house continued its work. The ‘bombfree’ shelters they had digged during the occupation, now were turned into good use.

However, as the works were nearly completed, an old question resurfaced: what to show at the Rubens House? – In fact, for the moment it still remained a museum without a collection. In the end, Ary Delen, who meanwhile had become the senior curator of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, reluctantly granted a few paintings on a long term loan. Moreover, on January second 1945, the Plantin Moretus Museum had been hit by a devastating V-1-bomb. Until that Museum reopend in 1954, its collection was partly put on display at the Rubens House.

From its opening in July 1946, the Rubens House became the most popular Antwerp Museum. The illusion as if the *palazzo* looked the same as in those years that the old master had lived and worked there, proofed to be irrestistable. Probably, for many this still is the main motive to visit the museum. Propelled by the waves of mass tourism, the number of visitors has increased from 50.000 to 60.000 in the 1950s to more than 200.000 in recent years.

That is comparable to number of visitors that the Rembrandt House in Amsterdam attracts. Meanwhile, those visitors can not only discover how a seventeenth century patrician mansion might have looked like and with which kind of artefacts a learned painter surronded himself. Thanks to the many sketches, studies and paintings of Rubens and his pupils that the museum has acquired in recent years, they can discover has well how Rubens managed his ‘company’.

Clearly this practice has incited copy-cat behaviour. Whereas, in the 1930s, Ary Delen still had hoped to convince the Antwerp city administrators to follow the example of

the Amsterdam Rembrandt House, in Amsterdam in the second half of the 1990s the curators have removed De Bazel's oak panels and they did so with explicit reference to the Antwerp example. Obviously, this drastic measure provoked a fierce public discussion that ended in the courts. Local associations were convinced that the curators violated restoration ethics. They were convinced that the Museum, including its famous interior decoration by De Bazel, as it was listed as a national monument could not be radically transformed. Judges sentenced thay they were wrong. The famous oak panels were removed and stored in an industrial area outside the city. Finally they ended up in the depot of Rijksmuseum Twente, in Enschede. Although it is unclear what will happen to them, they might be used to decorate three villa's of Twente textile barons, that were built by De Bazel around 1910.

Meanwhile, already for two decades now, the Rembrandt House looks once again as on that eve in 1656, when an Amsterdam notary clark drew up its inventory. **(zie plaatje)**.

Apparently, memories of the past, and certainly those on a glorious, proper pas survive best in a fitting would-be historic environment. In contrast to what Delen and De Bazel thought, honesty isn't the best policy, neither on the banks of the Scheldt or on those of the Amstel. Apparently, the practice of history and certainly showing history, requires some form of cheating.

This assessment may disappoint us, but it shouldn' be like that, as long as curators confront their benign visitors with that illusion. Both in Amsterdam and in Antwerp, they have succeeded in that mission: in Amsterdam the spectacular extension by Moshe Zwarts and Rein Jansma forces the Rembrandt lovers into a tele-time-machine **(zie plaatje)**, just as the more modest pavillon of Stéphane Beel does in Antwerp **(zie plaatje)**. Although, in fact the current Antwerp city administrators seem to consider Beel's pavillon even too modest and therefore they aim to replace it by what they call 'a Rubens experience'. Once again what happens in Amsterdam inspires them. So for the moment the enchantment still does the trick in both places. Let's hope it will continue to do so in the future.

Thank you very much for your attention

Hans Cools, Philadelphia 2019, November 22.