

Rubens' *Consequences of War*, or perhaps more accurately titled, "*Horrors of War*" is a vivid scene which casts narrative to the devastation of the 30 Years War. This painting contains extensive symbolism drawn from both pagan and Christian contexts, which feels particularly fitting in the depiction of a war whose origins were both religious and political (*Britannica*, 2016). This gruesome war touched almost every region of Europe, yet was primarily fought on German soil, resulting in an estimated 20-30% decrease to the country's population (C.,P. 2016). Human life however, was not the only casualty. Literature, artistic culture and architecture are other sacrifices laid on the alter of war; an inescapable reality which Ruben passionately illustrates.

### 30 Years War: The Scourge of Europe

Beginning in the early 17th century, the 30 Years War was initiated when Ferdinand II chose to impose strict Roman Catholicism on his domains. Under his rule, Protestant nobles were incensed by this decree and retaliated in a 5 year struggle which Ferdinand ultimately won ("Thirty Years War" 2016). Having succeeded in overthrowing the Protestant uprising within his lands, Ferdinand set his sights on forcefully converting German Protestants, as well. Great European powers such as France, Spain, Sweden and Austria came to the aid of Germany in what would become a 12 year struggle ('Thirty Years' War', 2009). Their motives for entry, however,

were not entirely selfless. Sweden's entry was fueled by a desire to control the Baltic and France had set its sights on acquisition of Alsace and Lorraine (C.,P. 2016). These layers of ulterior motives only served to further fuel the fires of war. Ultimately these territorial and religious factors created the perfect storm for one of the most bloody battles in European history. Peter Wilson (2010) offers sobering insight into this tragedy when he states:

"Though they are now largely silent, the voices from the seventeenth century still speak to us from the innumerable texts and images we are fortunate to possess. They offer a warning of the dangers of entrusting power to those who feel summoned by God to war, or feel that their sense of justice and order is the only one valid." (Wilson, 2010).

As Wilson insightfully states, preserved texts and images serve as a voice which transcend generations to narrate history. It is through the work of Rubens that modern audiences can truly understand the experience of the 30 Years War. His use of symbolism as a historic narrative serves to underscore subtle themes and attitudes which were prevalent in his time. The employment of these images help the modern viewer understand the 17th century dependence upon mythology and other types of symbolism. They also speak to the insightful nature of Rubens who understood that there were many factors at play in the development of this widespread war.

#### **Ruben: A Man with Many Hats**

German-born Peter Paul Rubens lived through the height of this war (Scribner, 2017). His parents fled Belgium due to religious persecution which may have account for his passionate views of personal freedoms and political peace. It is also this background which informs the vast religious symbolism included in his paintings. His parents, however, allowed him to take part in

other types of early education which provided the foundation for his characteristic employment of pagan symbolism, as well.

Although he was residing in Belgium, he remained heavily involved through the creation of art containing political commentary and close ties with royalty (Scribner, 2017). Being classically educated, he was able to maintain scholarly conversation and became favored among the elite. He was also renowned for his incredible art and often commissioned for portraits, as well as other household decorations. In fact, he oversaw the design of tapestries lining the royal entryway in Antwerp. Although he was based in this Belgium city, he frequently traveled as an artist which allowed him to establish far-reaching connections and witness the profound effects of war. This was compounded by his close ties with royalty who welcomed his presence as an artist, ambassador and diplomat. Through his personal travels and exposure to the perspective of the elite, Rubens became intimately aware of the humanitarian need throughout Europe (Scribner, 2017).

As his reputation among royalty became more pronounced, Rubens was increasingly commissioned on diplomatic missions across the continent. He moved frequently between various European courts, gathering information and facilitating negotiations (Scribner, 2017). By 1629 his reputation and status as a knight had become so renowned that he was presented with an honorary Masters degree from the prestigious Cambridge University. This further bolstered his status among royalty and reinforced his position as a peace negotiator and diplomat during the 30 Years War. He was particularly active in negotiations between England and Spain who were major world powers at that time (Scribner, 2017). This emphasizes his pivotal role in history, not only as an impressive artist but additionally for his ability to relay difficult messages between

warring countries. The skill with which he maneuvered this nuanced role speak to Rubens' creative genius in more ways than one.

Although Rubens was instrumental in negotiating peace, he offered his personal commentary in the form of art. *Consequences of War* is one of his most famous works for it's visually appealing style and extensive use of symbolic meaning. Employing both Christian and pagan imagery (Scribner, 2017), the artist makes clear his distaste for war and it's far-reaching devastation. In this oil painting, Rubens depicts a helpless mother clutching her child. Some theorize that this woman represents the bewildered state of Europe, gripping her innocent children in the throes of war (*Britannica*, 2016). Also present are other casualties of war such as the book, lute and compass. These symbolize literature, music and architecture which often become casualties of war, along with women and children.

#### **Ruben and Euripides: Artists with a Unique Focus on War**

This characteristic focus on innocent women and children, however, is not unique to Rubens. Euripides illustrates a similar message through his historic play, *The Trojan Women*. Although it was written significantly earlier, Euripides shares Ruben's focus on the unwilling impacts of war. Living through the context of the Peloponnesian War, Euripides writes intimately of the god's influence into the lives of women and children. This is closely paralleled by Ruben's depiction of the the Roman goddess of love, Venus, begging Mars to end the awful scene that has unfolded. There are additional supernatural elements such as the role of Cupid and the Furies which further add to the chaos of the scene. Ruben paints this powerfully mythological clash of Elekto on the other side of Mars, compelling him towards destruction while Venus silently pleads with him for peace.

This is similar to the unwilling powerlessness that the women of Troy experience throughout Euripides' iconic scene of Astyanax being sentenced to death. Andromache and Hecuba lament the loss of their son and grandson, however they are absolutely powerless over his fate, and their own. Interestingly, Rubens and Euripides depiction of war with an emphasis on women and children were uncharacteristic for their time. War has traditionally centered around men and their involvement in the front lines. This is evident through Homer's Epic Poem, the *Illiad*, in which women are mainly referenced on the periphery of the stronger male characters. However, both Rubens and Euripides showcase strong, female characters in the forefront of the action. Venus, like Hecuba rise up within these stories to fight for the mothers and children who are being victimized. The assertions of these two artists to portray strong female figures speaks to an early awareness of female strength in adversity. Particularly, the primal fight of the mother to protect her child fearlessly and at all costs.

Although these works of art depict strong women who persevere, Geoff Mortimer (2002) gives voice to the individuals who rose up during this calamitous era, namely, Anna Wolf. Mortimer sheds light onto Anna's personal experience of the 30 Years War and survival when he narrates:

Anna Wolff's account, written in the 1660s, describes the siege and capture of her town, Schwabach, near Nuremberg, by Imperialist troops in 1632. Wolff, a young miller-woman at the time, avoided possible rape by hiding for five days in a dovecote, and later she hid the mayor and his wife from the occupying forces for several weeks. (Mortimer, 2002)

It is stories like Anna's which illuminate the incredible resilience of women through hardship. She not only saved herself through innovative thinking but she went on to save the mayor and his wife. Women of this nature are often at the center of incredibly compelling stories throughout history, however, it has taken courageous men such as Rubens to illustrate these heroic acts.

### **Conclusion**

Rubens early life and family history of religious persecution may have paved the way for his entrance into the 30 Years War as a passionate activist. This is demonstrated in his depiction of compelling war scenes, such as *The Consequences of War*. Rubens recognized the power of art as political, social and historical commentary and became extremely influential in the movement to end the 30 Years war. His refined political insight and artistic skill launched him into the ranks of European elite during an incredibly delicate time in history. This allowed him to fuse his love for art and politics into a diplomatic position. His notoriety gave him even more opportunity to create timeless works and artistic narrative which would transcend generations.

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