

Review

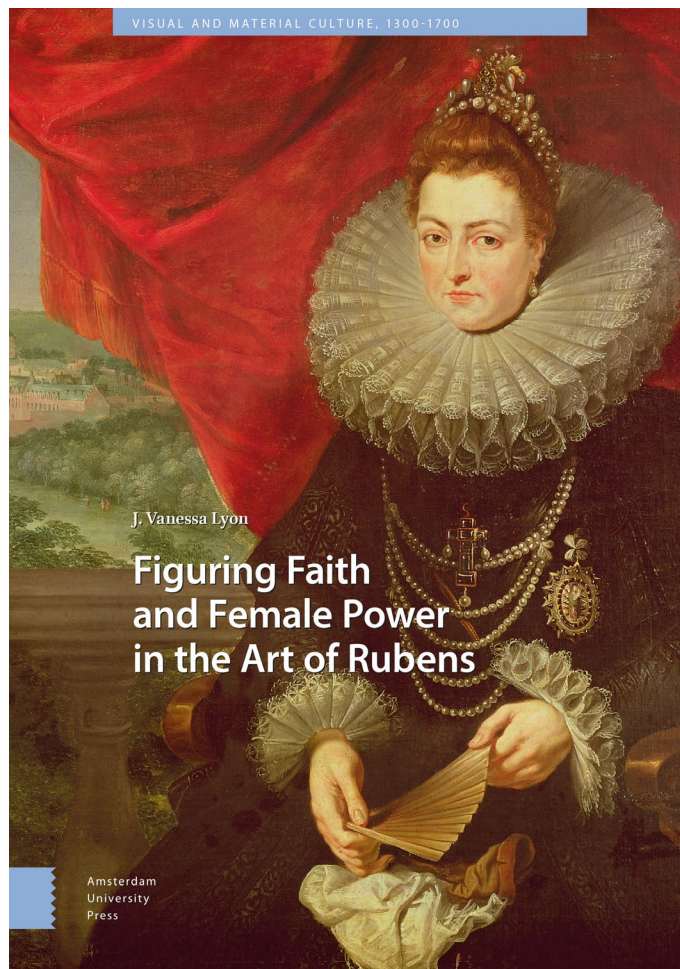
J. Vanessa Lyon:

Figuring faith and female power in the art of Rubens

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Reviewed by Marilyn Dunn



Feminist scholarship over the past four decades has enriched and deepened our understanding of the art of Peter Paul Rubens through its exploration of the role of gender in his *oeuvre*. J. Vanessa Lyon's *Figuring faith and female power in the art of Rubens* offers a new contribution to this body of gender-oriented studies on the artist by drawing upon and expanding earlier innovative and revelatory scholarship. Noting that Rubens's secular subjects have been the primary focus of these previous studies, Lyon seeks to illuminate how Rubens represents powerful women and female power in religious art and devotional subjects. She endeavors to engage feminist and gender studies with historical theology and Queer theory in her approach to analyzing Rubens's female imagery and patronage within the context of early modern court culture and Catholicism. A limited selection of paintings of gynocentric subjects, including religious as well as some mythological and allegorical themes, forms the focus of her analysis which is organized into five chapters preceded by a prologue and an introduction. The chapters are structured like independent essays related to the book's central themes; each chapter begins with an abstract and includes its own separate bibliography. Tracing Rubens's career chronologically, thematic chapters seek to demonstrate "that as his career advances, female figures increasingly bear the burden of meaning-making, assuming an ever-greater formal and compositional presence as well as more iconographically complex roles in his art" (25).

Following a prologue that provides a brief contextual background of the social, intellectual, religious, and artistic milieu in which Rubens worked, Lyon's introduction challenges the acceptance of conventional standards of beauty evident in "fat-phobic" critical assessments of Rubens's female figures as excessive or vulgar. She claims that Rubens's "strong and vigorous, well-nourished women" (24) suggest strength and invulnerability in the turbulent times in which Rubens lived and that his treatment of these female forms serves to express the central meaning of his compositions. Lyon argues that in his religious works women often function as *figurae* (typological forms of expression) to tangibly "embody Catholic ideas of the sacred or spiritual" (29) but also acknowledges his use of *figurae* in secular subjects. Lyon's claim that the evolution of Rubens's use of the female form as an expressive instrument of visual rhetoric relates to his changing relationships with the women in his life – wives, patrons, the Virgin Mary, and female saints – is examined in successive chapters.

In chapter 1 Lyon analyzes three paintings of dyadic pairs of male/female couples – *Hercules and Omphale* (c. 1606), *Samson and Delilah* (c. 1609), and his *Self-Portrait with Isabella Brant* (c. 1609) – to explore Rubens's strategies for depicting sex difference and negotiating how to represent female power. The mythological and biblical couples represent the dangerous Powers of Women theme popularized in 16th-century prints. Lyon posits these two paintings as

“iconographical and compositional keys” (37) to interpreting the *Self-Portrait*. She sees Rubens as trying to find a way to “simultaneously demonstrate and curtail” the power of such anti-heroines as Delilah and Omphale (55). In contrast to art historians who emphasize the aesthetic, robust male form as Rubens’s principal rhetorical instrument in the early 17th century, Lyon calls attention to his increasing interest in the expressive potential of the female body as well. She analyzes Rubens’s *Self-Portrait with Isabella Brant*, in relation to his earlier depiction of the inversion of perceived notions of gender hierarchy in *Hercules and Omphale*. In his marriage portrait, Rubens compositionally resets gender order, as Lyon demonstrates in an insightful compositional analysis of the positioning and poses of Rubens and his wife. In the portrait Rubens aims to construct his own self-identity as an exemplary married gentleman and aspiring court artist. Isabella’s higher social status helps advance his own, but the purported superior status of his male gender is manifested in his placement on the honorific left positioned above his lower-seated wife. Yet Lyon also suggests a more complex reading of the picture. She calls attention to the prominence of the couple’s hand-clasp gesture as an allusion to faithfulness and the sacrament of marriage, and she notes that Isabella’s expressive gaze and placement of her hand over her husband’s imbue her with a power of her own.

Chapter 2 examines how gender relates to painterly style and iconography in Rubens’s paintings of religious themes in the second decade of the 17th century. Building on a history of the critical reception of Rubens’s *Raising of the Cross* (c. 1611-13) and *Descent from the Cross* (c. 1614) based on traditional notions of masculine and feminine artistic style in the respective altarpieces, Lyon argues that female figures assume greater iconographic and compositional importance, beginning with the *Descent*. In this period, she sees Rubens combining stylistic binaries of Venetian *colorito* (‘colouring’) and central Italian *disegno* (‘fine art drawing’) in his *Assumption* from c. 1613, but Lyon asserts that Rubens had not yet resolved how to represent virtuous female power. The chapter concludes with a discussion of paintings featuring lactation imagery in which Rubens eschews depictions of the Madonna actively suckling the Christ Child. Lyon claims that Rubens instead chose to emphasize nursing as a Christian charitable activity, but curiously she does not include any examples that represent the charitable theme. She does, however, make the interesting suggestion that lactation images may be used by Rubens to express an analogy between the “creative power of nursing and the creative power of painting” (107). Lyon persuasively demonstrates this analogous connection in her analysis of a mythological scene of lactation, *Juno and Argos* (c. 1610-11).

Figuring female power is addressed in chapter 3 through a comparison of Rubens’s large-scale decorative cycles from the 1620s for Marie de’ Medici, queen

mother of France, and Archduchess Isabel Clara Eugenia, governor of the Spanish Netherlands, in which Lyon contrasts both historical contexts and conceptual strategies for creating the self-image of each female ruler. Her analysis concentrates on Rubens's representations of his female patrons rather than on the iconography and compositional details of the larger programs. Although acknowledging the contribution of feminist scholarship on the Marie de' Medici cycle, which has added nuanced evaluations of its program and imagery, Lyon judges the cycle as a brilliantly calculated but spectacular failure at political self-fashioning, and she sets it as a foil to Rubens's very differently conceived *Triumph of the Eucharist* tapestry series for the archduchess Isabel. Commissioned as an ex-voto in thanks for the Spanish victory over the Dutch at Breda, the tapestries celebrate a Catholic triumph in the form of the doctrine of the Eucharist. The series was intended as an expression of Isabel's devotion, of her affection for the community of Poor Clares at Descalzas Reales in Madrid, in whose church the tapestries were hung on certain liturgical occasions, and as a political statement in which a military victory achieved through Isabel's policies represented the triumph of Catholicism and Isabel as its defender. Lyon focuses her analysis on the *Defenders of the Eucharist*, the only image in the series in which the archduchess actually appears. Here Isabel is depicted in the guise of the Franciscan St. Clare of Assisi holding a monstrance with the Host in the center of the composition. In contrast to the multiple guises assumed by Marie de' Medici – biographical, mythological, allegorical – Isabel's identity is fused with St. Clare as a "*figura* made flesh"; "a post-Tridentine Catholic for whom the medieval St. Clare is the prototype" (170). At this point in Rubens's career, Lyon believes that he recognized the intellect and agency of certain powerful women with whom he was associated. Unfortunately, the color plates corresponding to this chapter are mis-ordered and mis-numbered, and the paintings' locations listed in the captions are incorrectly scrambled between the images.

Turning in the next chapter to a large-scale allegorical project, the Whitehall Palace Banqueting House in London that celebrates the male ruler King James I, Lyon focuses her analysis on a small oil sketch for the figures of Peace and Plenty that appear in the scene of the *Peaceful Reign of King James I* on the ceiling. Rejecting the proposal that these figures relate to Righteousness kissing Peace in Psalm 85, she offers a convincing argument relating the two affectionately embracing females to Psalm 122 which links Peace and Prosperity (Plenty) to good government. Rubens uses these female bodies to invoke Old Testament references to kingship as exemplified by Solomon, builder of the Holy Temple and a prototype of King James. Lyon asserts that the poses, expressions, and supple flesh of bare-breasted Peace and Plenty convey a desired mutuality. Like the other female figures in the ceiling's canvases, they play a principal role in actively

expressing the political allegorical meaning in human terms. Lyon considers the amorous female couple of Peace and Plenty through a queer gaze and relates them to an interest in female same-sex desire in contemporary literature and art associated with the English court. Suggesting that Peace and Plenty's embrace rhetorically prefigures the union of church and state desired by Rubens's patron King Charles I, she asserts that this image of female same-sex desire reflects the artist's use of loving female personifications to convey hopeful civic allegories and casts female affection in a politically and morally positive light.

The final chapter considers the feminization of Rubens in the 17th century through an examination of his critical reception structured by stylistic binaries of traditional gendered and regionalist classifications of painting that identified the artist as the consummate practitioner of Venetian colouring despite his accomplished skills in masculine-defined Tuscan design. Not only was Rubens a painter of women, but the Venetian coloristic, painterly, tactile style he embraced was gendered as feminine in the critical discourse on art. Lyon claims that Rubens's adoption of Venetian models was not simply a stylistic choice but an ideological one that was tied to his understanding of gender. She links his turn to a painterly *colorito* style from the middle of the second decade of the 17th century onward with a simultaneous increase in the number of female figures which were both visually delightful and iconographically significant. Lyon argues that Rubens recognized the powerful rhetorical capacity of the female body and reconceptualized the power of women in a positive way that privileged "femininity's unique capacity to figure artistic expression" (230).

This overarching argument of the book is appealing, but while Lyon's insightful analysis of figures like Peace and Plenty successfully demonstrates how these female bodies are bearers of rhetorical meaning, more of a discussion in chapter 3 of how the nymphs, bare-breasted, and fluidly gendered personifications in the Medici cycle, to which she alludes in chapter 5, function to efficaciously express iconographic meaning, would help to substantially reinforce this important argument. The case studies of individual chapters introduce many intriguing ideas and observations about the paintings she considers, though detailed, multifaceted discussions and rich contextual material sometimes bury her major points and their relation to the thread of her larger thesis. Lyon skillfully engages in some thoughtful visual analyses to explicate her points. However, a few descriptions do not match details visible in the paintings illustrated, as, for example, in her reference to a bare-breasted figure of Plenty in an anonymous copy (fig. 4.5) of Lucas de Heere's *An Allegory of Tudor Succession*, apparently not noting that the figure's breast, bare in the original painting, is fully covered in the copy illustrated. Nevertheless, Lyon's book represents a useful source for new perspectives on Rubens's relation to women and the representation of the female

form. Her concluding epilogue, advocating for new modes of inquiry that expand feminist methodology beyond the scope of her book, points to a growing awareness of critical race studies, intersectionality of gender and race, and Queer theory by early modern art historians that opens new and welcome approaches to the history of art.

About the reviewer

Marilyn Dunn is associate professor emerita of art history and former associate faculty member of the women and gender studies program at Loyola University Chicago (Illinois, U.S.). She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1985. A specialist in Renaissance and Baroque art, her research has focused on art patronage and on issues of women and gender and art. She has published extensively on religious communities in 17th-century Rome and the role of women and nuns as patrons of art and architecture. Among her recent publications is *Convent networks in Early Modern Italy* (Brepols, 2020, coedited with Sandra Weddle). Currently, she is coeditor with Andrea Pearson of Lund Humphries's *Illuminating women artists: Renaissance and Baroque* book series.