



Master of Shadows: The Secret Diplomatic Career of the Painter Peter Paul Rubens

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The true story of how seventeenth-century Europe's most famous painter doubled as a secret agent and negotiated a peace between superpowers. Peter Paul Rubens is best remembered as the Old Master with the penchant for fleshy, pink nudes whose popularity was eclipsed by that of Rembrandt van Rijn. In his time, however, Rubens had no equal; his contemporaries revered him as the greatest painter of his era, if not in all history. His undeniable artistic genius, bolstered by a modest disposition and a reputation as a man of tact and discretion, made him a favorite among monarchs and political leaders across Europe, and gave him perfect cover for the clandestine activities that shaped the landscape of seventeenth-century politics. In *Master of Shadows*, Mark Lamster tells the story of Rubens' life and brilliantly re-creates the culture, religious conflicts, and political intrigues of his time. Commissions to paint military and political leaders drew Rubens from his Antwerp home to London, Madrid, Paris, and Rome. The Spanish crown, recognizing the value of his easy access to figures of power, enlisted him into diplomatic service. His uncommon intelligence, preternatural charm, and ability to navigate through ever-shifting political winds allowed him to negotiate a long-sought peace treaty between England and Spain even as Europe's shrewdest statesmen plotted against him. *Master of Shadows* weaves a gripping drama of cloak-and-dagger diplomacy with an insightful, authoritative exploration of Rubens' art and the private passions that influenced it.

Master of Shadows: The Secret Diplomatic Career of the Painter Peter Paul Rubens Details

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From Reader Review Master of Shadows: The Secret Diplomatic Career of the Painter Peter Paul Rubens for online ebook

Gregor says

Interesting but didn't quite hit the right blend of historical and fiction for me.

I enjoy historical fiction as it is a chance to learn while being entertained. However, I found this book to have too much of the feel of a pure historical text, while still having enough fiction that I was often not entirely sure whether the bit I was reading was established fact or literary extrapolation.

That said, I still learnt a lot about both Rubens and the history of the time. It was a little dry at times though mostly entertaining.

Carl says

If you know of Peter Paul Rubens the artist, you only know half the story. He also served as a diplomat and spy in the European circles of power. And, no, this is not fiction. He was instrumental in brokering a peace agreement between France and England over the Low Countries. The research is thorough and a little too detailed at times. If you love diplomacy (I mean really love diplomacy), international intrigue, and the lives of royalty, this book will take you behind the scenes, revealing an artist who not only would paint for kings and queens but also would be honored, knighted, and requested by the very forces that shaped Europe in the seventeenth century.

Steven Kaminski says

Really fascinating book. Rubens was unique to me (as far as I have read) as he is the only painter I know of who was also a professional diplomat representing not just one nation but multiple nation states. In the baroque era where he was painting he was right at the center of where all royalty wanted to be...in HIS paintings. The fact that he used the art world to build relationships and connections with royalty and important figures all throughout Europe made this book even more interesting. Also on top of that he produced a prolific amount of art. From sketches to painting to busts to public celebrations Rubens really was everywhere. The fact he was so charismatic just makes his appeal even more astounding. He was traveling often as an artist while being a diplomat undercover. All the while chasing peace from a small club of royals who kept wanting to hire him...

Melinda says

Very interesting, with a lot of characters and history.

Tom says

I forgot to write a review when I first finished the book, so I'm going off of my memory. As a historian at heart, I absolutely loved the book. It delves deeply into the uncertain situation of Antwerp and the Low Countries during Rubens' life and shows how he was just as much a diplomat as a painter. I can imagine others complaining that the writing style is dry, but I found it engaging enough.

GonReader says

Muy didactica y amena biografia del gran Pedro Pablo Rubens para adentrarse luego en su vida y visitar Amberes

Bill says

This book is very well written and researched. It is not about art. It is about diplomacy which the title tells us. The Problem I discovered is I really do not care about the dealings of major and minor aristocrats from 400 years ago. Perhaps if you are Dutch or Flemish or if you have a love of this period this book would be of interest, otherwise skip it.

Rk Wild says

Rubens was a diplomat and spy?! Well, yeah, the best artists of his time were among the few who had the ears of nobility. So it's no surprise that a few of them took advantage of their station. Rubens apparently did so with little trepidation and a fair amount of sensitivity as engagingly suggested in this book which, by the by, provides a decent enough overview of Rubens-as-artist as well, adequately supported with color plates. Pretty much a "must read" for anyone intending to visit any one of the bazillion cathedrals in Flanders, most of which contain masterworks from Rubens or one of his contemporaries.

GonReader says

Muy buena biografia del gran pintor y diplomatico Pedro Pablo Rubens

Emmanuel Gustin says

An entertaining history of Ruben's career as a diplomat, intertwined with the story of his life and his career as a painter. The author does a decent job of explaining the extremely complex international politics of the period, which are a necessary backdrop to the diplomatic efforts. But to me, he does not succeed very well in getting us a better understanding of the man Rubens, despite occasional quotes from his letters. Perhaps because diplomatic missives are not, after all, the best medium in which to express one's thoughts.

Ann Sloan says

I read this for the Fort Worth Kimball Museum's book club. I knew next to nothing about 17th century history – just a little about the Stuarts, Cromwell, and the Great Fire – but not European doings. Now I know way more than I ever wanted. Some of it little came in handy when I was teaching early American literature this summer. One never knows what random information one may pick up that might come in handy at the most unexpected times.

The audience for this book would, I think, be readers who want to know more about political history and art history. It is not for the casual reader; it is not light reading. Also, I have the paperback edition with few illustrations – all in black and white. I don't know whether the hardback would have more painting, and in color. I was lucky enough to have Rembrandt's Eyes by Simon Schama, which is chock full of Ruben's paintings mentioned in Master of Shadows.

I was also relatively unfamiliar with Rubens. I knew the name, of course, but his paintings are not as ubiquitous as are those of Monet, Rembrandt, Botticelli, or Munch. Chances are, you, like myself, are much better acquainted with the adjective than the work of the painter. Few people can cite a Rubens painting by name, but "Rubenesque" has become a synonym for any amply proportioned female. Rubens has fallen out of style and is now thought of as an Old World master of a painting style—symbolic representation, heavy on Greek and biblical references—that we now think of as musty and antiquated. High Baroque, the style in which he painted, is nowadays synonymous with pointless complexity. After all, how many modern museum-strollers have the time to invest in all of the reference books needed to make sense of his allegories? But despite the one-dimensionality associated with the painter's name, here's a book that puts Rubens in a whole other frame.

Peter Paul Rubens got more done in one day than most of us get done in a lifetime. Rubens wasn't content with merely being, conceivably, the world's greatest painter during his lifetime. Instead, he filled his resume with an impressive array of occupations. Like superspy, for one—in addition to treaty negotiator, statesman, wealthy landowner, antiquities dealer, and factory head.

Rubens the politico-spy is just one of his many pursuits that surface in Master of Shadows, but it's perhaps the least likely, given what was regarded as an artist's lack of prospects when it came to upward mobility in the 16th and 17th centuries. Painters had a relative low status in society and were viewed as manual laborers because they worked with their hands. They could, possibly, earn a fortune. Rubens certainly did, with many royal and ecclesiastical commissions, which he met, with the assistance of helpers and students executing large portions of the paintings that bore his name. Painters were rarely drafted into diplomatic service, despite what Mark Lamster cites as the most natural cover: they had the ear of kings, queens, dukes, and assorted courtiers.

Rubens was eventually put on military salary by the Spanish crown (which had dominion over his native Antwerp). He was handsome, affable, quick-witted, and a natural salesman and he knew when to keep his mouth shut. Lamster calls him "the perfect spy." There's no doubt that Rubens's undertakings were useful to Europe's volatile politics. Intrigue was everywhere, with one clandestine deal being canceled out by another, and a third in place as a fall-back.

Rubens worked primarily as an operative for the Spanish crown, which was engaged in a prolonged war with

the emerging Dutch republic, a conflict that engulfed all of Europe's powers and involved the countries' colonies. Rubens believed he could resolve this perpetual war, and he devoted several years of his life to this effort, risking all that he had achieved. He would arrange for a peace between Spain and England, with the expectation that England would then force its Dutch ally to compromise with Spain. It was a shrewd bit of strategic thinking, but it would not work unless Rubens could convince England and Spain, traditional enemies, to come to terms. Ultimately, Rubens did not succeed, although he was knighted by both Philip IV, King of Spain, and Charles I, King of England. One can see the sources of conflict in Europe that extend even to the 21st century. Lamster does a valuable job of sorting out the tangled politics of the Low Countries during what was a violent, complex, and energetic era. I was never entirely clear exactly what was going on, but I suspect the participants weren't either.

Rubens was able to balance affairs of state with his personal business interests. He was not an agitator, at least externally; repeatedly browbeaten by various members of the nobility, the painter/spy worked ceaselessly to please, winning the favor of kings (such as Spain's Philip IV) who had previously held his lack of a birthright against him.

Rubens approached negotiations as he might have approached a painting. That is, as a problem to be solved, requiring just the right balance of materials and techniques—shadow, color, and symbolism on the painting side of the equation; pointed reasons, financial assurances, and talk of shared interests at court.

We see Rubens's political concerns feeding into his art, yielding it greater narrative scope. His early work evolved into a style where the relationship between metaphor and meaning became more direct. He had to make sure that his patrons understood precisely what his art was conveying. Satisfying human vanity went a long way in Rubens's political career, and visualizing a king as a metaphorical god of justice and happiness, beloved of his flock, made for a favorable frame of mind when a favor was needed.

Mark Lamster's affection for his subject is so complete and his research is so thorough that "Master of Shadows: The Secret Diplomatic Career of the Painter Peter Paul Rubens" manages to be generally engaging, instructive and thought-provoking. My occasional impatience arose, undoubtedly, from my overall lack of interest and experience with 17th century European history.

Lamster demonstrates the relationship between Rubens' diplomatic assignments and his important artistic commissions. The author also reveals Rubens to be an attractive and likable man who clearly interested and charmed those around him.

Lamster provides a portrait of a major painter at a time when artists were still fully integrated into the intellectual, social and political affairs of their time. For Rubens, the artist was very much a man of affairs -- well-educated, -traveled and -schooled in the social graces. Flemish painters, like their Italian counterparts, were members of respectable, even prestigious guilds. It's not hard to see how a man as self-possessed and as socially gifted as Rubens could find a role in high-level diplomacy.

Jordan says

Do you like underrated artists? Do you like 17-century Dutch history? If you answered yes to one or both of those questions, then you'll love this book! This is definitely a niche kind of topic, but I really find Dutch history fascinating. Less focused on Rubens as a painter, and more focused on his unique diplomatic career as he tried to foster peace between Spain and the Netherlands.

Patrick says

Of course the book gives you much information that helps you appreciate his art, but it also gives you a bird's eye view of a truly interesting part of Europe's history. Loved it. The pages with Chronology and the real life historical `cast of characters` at the end help keep you on track. Highly recommended. Enjoyed the book immensely and now can't wait to re-visit Reubens' paintings around the world.

MikeFromQueens says

Light read - quite a lot of detail, and much of it was part of the story/drama of Rubens, but too much of a side-track at times. I liked learning about Flanders and the Spanish control of the area. Also, I enjoyed the insight into the lives of the people of the times. The Rubens art work was an integral part of the diplomacy story and helped me better appreciate the artist as a talented painter, negotiator, and business man.

Alberto says

Maravilloso. Me ha durado una semana de viajes en el metro.
