

# Rubens & Brueghel

## *A Working Friendship*

### THE WORKING FRIENDSHIP OF RUBENS AND BRUEGHEL

\* Excerpts from "The Working Friendship of Rubens and Brueghel," from the exhibition catalogue *Rubens & Brueghel: A Working Friendship*, co-authored by Anne T. Woollett, associate curator of paintings, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and Ariane van Suchtelen, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis.

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Rubens and Brueghel's professional and personal lives were closely intertwined, revealing the extent of their remarkable friendship. At the time of Brueghel and Rubens's earliest collaboration in the late 1590s, Jan Brueghel was the older and more established of the pair, and a seasoned collaborator. Shortly after Rubens decided to remain in Antwerp, Brueghel introduced him into the elite confraternity of Romanists, of which he had been a member for the preceding ten years. One of the most often cited examples of their friendship, however, was Rubens' role as amanuensis for his friend - he acted as Brueghel's secretary to his patron Cardinal Borromeo and his agent Bianchi. Starting in October 1610, over two dozen letters in Italian from Rubens' hand are known, continuing up to Brueghel's death in 1625. Although Rubens and Brueghel together painted at least one garland for Borromeo, Rubens facilitated his friend's exchanges with his Milan patrons regardless of the content. His briefer, more elegant style is evident when compared with the lively but irregular grammar of those written by Brueghel himself.

The intimacy and warmth of their personal relationship was conveyed in Rubens' splendid portrait of Jan Brueghel and his family (not in the exhibition), painted at about the time they resumed their painterly collaborations in 1610-12.

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The affectionate interactions between Jan, his second wife, Catharina van Mariënberghe, and their children Elisabeth and Pieter are emphasized by the tight format of the Netherlandish portrait tradition. The strong lighting, simple background and sculptural quality of the figures lend the group a polished immediacy that mitigates the simplicity of this older portrait type, and underscores the familiarity of the painter with his subjects. Jan Brueghel's angled posture conveys the relaxed naturalism that seems to have been a revised objective of the painting. Rubens' first wife, Isabella Brant, was present at the baptism of the Brueghel's children, and Rubens himself was godfather to Brueghel's older children Jan and Paschasia. At Brueghel's death, he served as one of the executors of his friend's will and guardian of his children. As a mark of esteem for Brueghel and his family, Rubens painted *The Delivery of the Keys to St. Peter* to decorate the tomb of Jan's father, the celebrated Pieter Bruegel the Elder, in Notre Dame de la Chapelle, Brussels.

Despite their disparate styles, Brueghel and Rubens exercised an artistic relationship that was based on mutually held principles. From their earliest known collaboration, *The Battle of the Amazons*, conceptually innovative and technically challenging projects were the norm. Unlike their work with other colleagues, in which the painting styles were similar, Rubens and Brueghel's joint works are distinguished by the evident separateness of their hands in a composition. While only one collaboration bears the names of both artists, and a handful of others Brueghel's name, their established specialties and styles of painting serve as the visual equivalent of a signature. Most unusually for Rubens, in certain works, notably *The Battle of the Amazons* and *The Return from War: Mars Disarmed by Venus*, there exists a visual equality between his work and that of Brueghel. His willingness to allow certain features of Brueghel's approach, such a high view-point or tilted foreground, as well as the strong and even lighting Jan preferred, to be employed suggests that he perceived these as more truly collaborative ventures than his works with other artists such as Snyders, which were carried out under his direction. In instances where the composition is dominated by Brueghel's contribution, such as in the allegories of the

senses and the garlands, it is the type of painting that determined which of the two partners took the primary role. There are also instances of friendly reciprocity; in *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man* Rubens shared the role of animal painter and may even have contributed grapes to the foreground still life in *The Return from War*. The artists certainly had access to each other's studios, and Brueghel's repeated borrowing of animal motifs from Rubens in the years around 1612–13 attests to the close association they enjoyed and which they acknowledge in paint.

The Premiere Presentation ***Rubens and Brueghel: A Working Friendship*** is on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center from July 5–September 24, 2006.