

Honors Thesis Proposal  
for  
Subjects of the Gaze:  
Rubens and his Female Portraits

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## Topic Summary:

Portraiture is often perceived as a study of the sitter. Each element, each stylistic choice in the work is made to reveal the character of the subject. While portraits reveal to the viewer information about the sitter and their culture, they also reveal information about the painter. In the history of European female portraiture specifically, the female is never independent. She is always accompanied by the male gaze, that of her patron and of the artist. During his lengthy and prestigious career Rubens executed many different portraits<sup>1</sup>. Portraiture was by no means the focus of his career. However, in the beginning of his career, portraiture was a means with which to support himself. For Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), portraiture was “a task he would almost have liked to, but could not always, avoid in his frequent intercourse with personages of rank and quality.”<sup>2</sup> Although neither his passion nor his focus, Rubens had a major impact on the development of portraiture of the time. His work the *Portrait of Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria* was pivotal in creating an influential formula for portrait painting that Rubens and artists after him continued to use. This formula included a column and red drapery to highlight the figure as well as a balcony overlooking a landscape in the background. This formula was continually, but not in a homogeneously repetitive fashion. Of course such differences in each portrait are due in part to obvious things such as choice of background, the circumstances of the commission and the sitter itself.

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<sup>1</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London, (British Broadcasting Company: 1972), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Gustav Glück, "Rubens as Portrait Painter," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 76 (1940): 173-83. Accessed March 28, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/868019>

Another key difference is the inherent gaze of the sitter. The sitters themselves change the gaze of the artist and by extent the viewer as well. Rubens does several other portraits of women who follow the same set up, however, none seem formulaic. Perhaps the female portrait completed by Rubens that breaks this mold the most is the massive cycle of paintings of Marie de' Medici. This ambitious cycle is unique in its sheer size and in the collaboration between powerful female patron and male artist. The portraits are vastly different from any of Rubens other female portraits in complexity. Millen and Wolf describe it as "too vast and multiform in its sources and allusions, too humanly biographical, too fully bound up with what the Queen wished to convey. . . [than] could be realized out of the mind of the artist himself."<sup>3</sup> Despite using the same theme of organization in the portraits, there is a distinct difference in how wealthy patrons such as the Marchesa, Anne of Austria, and Marie de' Medici are depicted and how his wives, Isabella Brandt and Helene Fourment, are represented. The Marchesa is deemed the "lovely but icy mechanical doll" while the wives are the embodiment of "natural warmth and the bubbling security of loving and being loved."<sup>4</sup> These differences are, in part, due to the different way Rubens views these women. The public commissions are of women emotionally inaccessible to the painter, while the private portraits of his wives evoke the intimacy he shared with them. It is incorrect to view any of these paintings of snapshots of the women as they were. Women in this time were always defined and observed by men.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald Millen and Robert Erich Wolf, *Heroic Deeds and Mystic Figures: A New Reading of Rubens' Life of Maria de' Medici*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Feghelmk, Dagmar, and Markus Kersting, *Rubens and his Women*, (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2005), 53.

<sup>5</sup> Simons, Patricia. "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture." *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (1992): 44.

### Research Question:

In the hierarchy of painting in art history the portrait falls far below the pinnacle of history painting. Rubens himself never thought of his portraits as pivotal to his career and yet his contribution to the genre is significant and deserves exploration. The focus of my research is specifically his female portraits. Because portraits are supposed to depict the physiology of an actual person it is easy to look for elements of pure identity of the sitter within such a work. However, such a practice is irresponsible especially for female portraits by male artists. My research will support the idea that Rubens painted women in a sexualized manner based on what Foucault coins the male gaze. The male gaze proposes that females in paintings are placed for the viewing pleasure of the male. In each of these works we see not simply a portrait of a woman, but a portrait of how a man viewed a woman. History, largely, has left us with the definition of women mostly in terms of the men in her life: her marriage, her family, and in this case the artist that painted her. The paintings evaluated in this project will include portraits of Rubens' wives, Isabella Brandt and Helene Fourment, and portraits of wealthy patrons such as Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria, Anne of Austria, and Marie de' Medici. The last of these stands out in this study because of Marie de' Medici's "special case . . . [as] a woman who was both the patron and the portrayed, the viewer as well as the viewed."<sup>6</sup>

### Literature Review:

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<sup>6</sup>Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 101.

There are ample sources about the allegorical and history paintings done by Rubens but fewer about his portraits. However, there is a good deal of biographical information about the artists which aides in contextualizing the gaze through psychoanalysis of the artist. As the most prominent subjects of Ruben's female portraits, there is more written about Marie de' Medici than the other female sitters that are the subject of this paper. Through research and analysis, it is possible to place the female sitters in a solid historical context.

#### Goals and Methodology:

I aim to combine psychoanalysis, contextual analysis, and contemporary feminist theory on the gaze and viewing to provide insight into the way the viewer perceives female portraits executed by a male artist. Similar to Patricia Simons in her article "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture" my goal is to analyze the 17<sup>th</sup> century portraits of women done by Rubens through a "dialogue rather than a confrontation between historical and psychoanalytic interpretations."<sup>7</sup> Rather than viewing these portraits as simply pure, true to life representations of these women, I hope to explore the complex interaction between how the gaze of the subject, the gaze of the artist, and the gaze of the intended viewer complicates the image. The point is not to just further restrict these women singularly into objects of the male gaze but explore the how they negotiated and interacted within the patriarchal system of the time.

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<sup>7</sup> Simons, Patricia. "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture." *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (1992): 41.

## Thesis Sections and Content:

My thesis will adhere to the following organization:

- Chapter 1: Biography of Rubens and an analysis of the breadth of his artistic career.
- Chapter 2: Explanation of the development of the theory of gaze starting with Jacques Lacan and ending with contemporary feminist theory
- Chapter 3: Formal and Psychoanalytic exploration of the private portraits of Ruben's wives, Isabella Brandt and Helene Fourment.
- Chapter 4: Formal and Psychoanalytic exploration of Rubens' portraits of wealthy, upper class women.
- Chapter 5: Discussion of the Marie de' Medici cycle and its unique display of female power as opposed to other female portraits done by Rubens.
- Chapter 6: Conclusion summarizing the differences between the works and the impact of the gaze in their interpretation

My first chapter will focus on the life, career, and works of Peter Paul Rubens. I will start his childhood and family in Siegen and Antwerp. A critical part of this section will be Rubens' identity as a Northern European artist and the long tradition in the north of women having more rights than in the south. In this section I will address the importance of Peter Paul Rubens' exceptional education facilitated by his father, Jan Rubens, and how it influenced his artistic career. Another important aspect of his childhood is his relationship with his mother and her

influence as head of the household both when her husband, Jan Rubens, was imprisoned and after he died. From there I will investigate Peter Paul Rubens artistic training. This includes his trip to Italy which lead both to the beginning of his diplomatic career and the addition of an important Italian influence in his art. His role as a diplomat in Italy, Spain and Flanders opened the door for him to do many of the aristocratic female portraits discussed later in the paper. The last part of this section will address the later part of his career and his final return to Flanders. It will discuss both of his marriages, first to Isabella Brandt and then to Helene Fourment. The development and discussion of Ruben's biography sets the stage for the psychoanalysis of Rubens and the artist's gaze and describes the historical context in which it is situated.

The second chapter presents the development of scholarship and theory addressing the gaze. The term gaze was first made popular by Jacques Lacan in his work "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a.*" in which he discusses awareness of gaze and the loss of autonomy when one realizes one is an object that is gazed upon.<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault then uses the term gaze in the context of power relations and self-regulation in "Discipline and Punish."<sup>9</sup> In 1989, feminist film critic Laura Mulvey first coins the term "male gaze" in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."<sup>10</sup> From there male gaze is specifically analyzed in an art historical context in John Berger's "Ways of Seeing"<sup>11</sup> and Patricia Simons "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in

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<sup>8</sup>Jacques Lacan, "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a.*" from *Reading Images*, ed. Julia Thomas, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 138-148.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, "Discipline and Punish" from *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 549-565.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and other Pleasures*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989)

<sup>11</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London, (British Broadcasting Company: 1972), 47.

Renaissance Portraiture”<sup>12</sup> both which show how historically the objectification of the female body by the male gaze is present in visual art.

Chapter 3 addresses the portraits done by Rubens of his two wives, Isabella Brandt and Helene Fourment. This section will begin with a formal analysis of both portraits. It will then progress to an analysis how the male gaze of Rubens as an artist effects the choices made in the compositions. It is under this sexualizing gaze that the female figures, his wives, become objects. It is appropriate to analyze these portraits within a discussion of the sexualizing male gaze because both of these women were in fact sexually available to the artist. Lastly I will discuss the private context for which these intimate portraits were intended. Not only does Rubens play the role of artist but also of sole viewer. In this way his gaze plays a dual role in objectifying the sitter.

The fourth chapter provides a contrast to the topic of chapter three by discussing portraits of wealthy, aristocratic women done by Rubens. The two aristocratic portraits examined will be that of Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria and Anne of Austria. First, I will formally analyze both portraits. From there I will discuss the role women play in the aristocracy of the time as wives, mothers, and representatives of a dynasty. In this way these women have the power of wealth but are still made objects as wives in need of dowry in the patriarchal system that existed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. From here the discussion opens to how the gaze of the wealthy, aristocratic subjects of these portraits changes the gaze of the artist, Rubens. The difference in social status means the women are not sexually available to Rubens which decreases the sexualizing male gaze of the

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<sup>12</sup> Patricia Simons, “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture,” *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (1992): 41.



artist. Rather these women are objectified by the gaze of the intended audience because of their semi-public viewership of other members of aristocracy.

Chapter five will discuss the portrait cycle of Marie de' Medici executed by Peter Paul Rubens. This cycle is unique in its laudatory depiction of a confident, empowered woman in twenty-four large scale paintings. I will discuss Marie de' Medici's biography and her struggle for control with her son for the throne of France and how it influenced the design of this cycle. Marie de' Medici's negotiation of the presentation of power as a woman is uniquely portrayed in this semi-public work of propaganda housed in the Luxembourg Palace in Paris. I will also discuss the complicated use of female nudity and typically "male" imagery to communicate power and authority. These symbols in combination with the gaze of the intended audience of French (mostly male) courtiers have led to questions on how successfully the work portrays Marie de' Medici in a position of power rather than a sexualized object.

Finally, Chapter 6 will contain my conclusion. I will use this section to discussion of the impact Rubens had on portrait painting and the differences between the works presented above. These differences will first be looked at in terms of the private and public intention of display. Lastly, I will analyze the shared impact of the gaze of artist, subject, and viewer on the interpretation of the portraits.

Proposed Timeline and Expected Outcomes:

This thesis will be completed by the end of the 2017 Spring Semester. My proposal will be finished by October 27, 2016. My second draft of the preliminary study I started last Spring will be completed by November 17<sup>th</sup>. I will be using *Mendeley* to organize my sources and citations. I have already collected several sources for this project but hope to collect and analyze more in my reading semester especially primary sources. I plan to set aside six hours a week dedicated to this project to further my research and writing.

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