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Rubens's Peasant Dance in the Prado.¹

Today I want to talk about one of Rubens's most enchanting paintings, his *Dance of Mythological Figures and Villagers* in the Prado.² It is one of his most loveable and most important late works, and though it has been much admired, it has not received anything like the attention, let alone the commentary it deserves. To anyone who knows Rubens's work, it is clear that the picture must have been painted in the last decade of his life, when, after his long courtly and diplomatic labors, he retired to the countryside with his young bride, Hélène Fourment. There, although he kept his studio in Antwerp very busy with an incessant flow of commissions, both religious and mythological, he concentrated on two main themes: his family, and the life of the Flemish countryside. He painted the landscape he grew to love deeply, and he painted the peasants who lived in it with a mixture of candor, affection, and respect for both their labors and their pleasures. The painting fits perfectly with what we know about Rubens in the 1630s, but *when* it was painted within that decade is another question.

There are many indicators of a date well into the 1630s: the beautiful glow in the evening sky, suffusing the blue sky and wispy clouds, the softness of the dense foliage, the delicate treatment of the farmhouse with its enticing terrace on the right. Consider also the magnificent coloristic treatment of this picture: the ravishing *changeant* on the lilac dress of the young woman just catching up on the dance in the center rear of the

¹ Originally given as a lecture sponsored by the Fundación Amigos Museo del Prado at the Museo del Prado on February 2, 2004 and published as "La '*Danza de aldeanos*' de Rubens en el Prado," in *Historias Mortales: La vida cotidiana en el arte*, Madrid: Fundación Amigos del Museo del Prado; Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg/Círculo de Lectores, 2004, 128-142.

² Madrid, Prado, No. 1691. Panel, 73 x 106. Díaz Padrón, *Catálogo*, no. 1691, pp. 283-284.

painting, the contrast between the golden dress and the deep black blouse of the two women in the center of the painting, the deep ultramarine blue of the skirt of the one in the foreground, the brilliant red of the girl in the foreground on the right picking up the color of the breeches of the man on the left. Finally, note the incomparably Rubensian contrast of the deep and light blue, streaked with yellow, of the girl on the extreme left, and so on. All this, along with the delicate handling of the foliage and the orange glow in the night sky, as well as the handling of contours and vegetation, are altogether characteristic, it seems to me, of Rubens's work in the second half of the 30s, and not, as has sometimes been supposed, from around 1630-1632. Later on, I shall give other reasons for dating this painting later rather than earlier, but in the meantime, I'd like to comment a little further on what is actually going on in the picture.

For a long time, I admired this painting for its Arcadian mood, for the dance in the evening glow of the countryside. It seems such an idyllic scene; and who could fail to admire not only Rubens's skill with colors and brushwork, but also the almost magical way in which he has captured the complex yet compact rhythm of this circular dance, with six couples rushing to keep up with each other, passing under the bridge of arms formed by the two couples in the center, reminding us all of our childhood dances with similar patterns, bending down to enter and to exit, leaning forward to kiss, twisting to embrace ones partner, looking backwards over ones shoulder, and then finally rushing forward to complete this ever more enthusiastic loop. It is actually quite a complex composition that is difficult to sort out unless one takes the time to do so. One doesn't immediately notice the dog who yelps with equal enthusiasm in the lower left, as if to encourage the dancers, or the rustic flutist in the trees. This painting is, indeed, idyllic,

but only when one begins to look at it very attentively does one begin to notice that this is no simple scene; it is an idyll with a twist.

Some of the maidens, especially those in the background do, indeed, look quite tender, and so too, perhaps, does the man glancing back on the right of the painting. But in fact, the more one looks at this painting, the more its rough sensuality becomes clear. There's desire in this painting, one begins to realize—notice the lusty and jealous gazes of the two women in the foreground, for example, or the satyr-like expressions of several of the male figures, especially on the left, as well as the wonderful kiss of the couple in the center right. But then one becomes aware of something that seems to me essential about this painting, and which has not often been commented upon, except in the typically eagle-eyed cases of Julius Held and Leo Steinberg: every single person in this picture, whether male or female, is not looking at his or her partner, but at the *next* person's partner, sometimes with a very angry or jealous glance from the person who is, as it were, being betrayed in the course of the dance.

If we start right at the back, for example, the woman in lavender, who has just broken away from her partner, rushes forward to catch up with another man, who looks eagerly on to the next woman in light pink, who is about to pass under the bridge. Her partner looks ahead to the woman dressed in dark blue in the left foreground, while she looks on with petulant jealousy at her partner, the satyr-like figure with the wreath, who is about to kiss the woman in the center foreground. But *her* partner, in turn, bends back to give the most passionate kiss of the dance to the woman who, in an equally complex contrapposto, returns the embrace, pulling away from the intense gaze of a youthful Bacchus-like figure, who has himself cold shouldered *his* partner. She, of course, looks

longingly toward the man with whom this round began; the brim of his red hat flips backward as he chases desperately to close the loop with the girl in lavender who runs away from him.³ There is desire, jealousy, and chagrin aplenty in this painting, but it all seems to be a part of life, and no one could claim that Rubens seems to disapprove of it—on the contrary, as we shall see. It all seems to fit with the general gaiety and fertile lushness of the scene. “There can be no question,” as Julius Held commented, “that Rubens enjoyed mixing up and keeping apart the couples, not unlike the fun Puck—and Shakespeare—had with some young lovers in *A Midsummer-Night’s Dream*.”⁴

This painting was one of very many which were left unsold at the time of Rubens’s death in 1640—whether this was because he wished simply to keep them for himself, as we know was the case with at least a few more paintings at issue in this essay, we cannot be sure. In the inventory of his estate, it is recorded as “Une danse des paysans Italiens,” and it was sold directly from the estate to Philip IV of Spain for the sum of 800 guilders. He also left a copy specifically to his wife, Hélène. There is nothing, really, in this picture to justify the notion that these peasants are Italian (though the architecture of the farm building is, indeed, vaguely Italian, and the Arcadian tone of the scene as a whole may simply have led the notary to describe it as “Italian”).⁵ But the clothing of these so-called peasants, especially of the women, is rather too rich and sumptuous for ordinary peasants, and Díaz Padrón, in his catalogue of the Flemish paintings in the Prado, had a point when he noted that: “La indumentaria de las figuras es desconcertante; su naturaleza abre una interrogante en cuanto a su propio significado. Los símbolos de

³ Cf. the very full and beautiful description in Julius Held, *Rubens: Selected Drawings; with an Introduction and a Critical Catalogue*, 2. ed. Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1986, p. 135.

⁴ Held, *Selected Drawings*, p. 135.

⁵ Jeffrey Muller, *Rubens: The Artist as Collector*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 115 (Catalogue 1, No. 103).

Baco son evidentes en uno de los danzantes de primer piano (that is, the figure in the foreground on the right; let me also comment on the satyr-like figure of the libidinous peasant, who also has a wreath in his hair, in the foreground on the left) y no menos singular la presencia de un fauno que tañe la flauta en la copa del árbol.” But Díaz Padrón certainly goes too far when he suggests not just that “La composición encierra un sentido esotérico difícil de explicar. De ser otro su contenido, la tabla—hasta ahora pintura de género—correspondería a la producción mitológica de Rubens.”⁶ This cannot be right, for we know exactly what kind of painting this is. Indeed, the tradition into which it is to be placed could not be clearer, and it is this tradition to which I now wish to turn, before examining the relationship of what I will henceforward call the *Country Dance*, not only with other works by Rubens, but also with works by Titian. Finally, I will discuss the enormous personal significance that the painting had for Rubens himself.

Let us begin with the precedents for the *Country Dance*. Everyone knows of Rubens’s relationship with Italy and with Italian artists, but it has only been in the last few decades that scholars have begun to consider how much he owed to his Flemish past. In the case of this painting, he surely had not one but several of the compositions of this subject by the greatest of all his Flemish predecessors, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, in mind. In the first place, when thinking of the subject of a peasant dance, he probably remembered that most marvelous and least-seen of Bruegel’s great paintings in mind, the Darmstadt *Magpie on the Gallows*, where the peasants seem to be dancing in fierce defiance of the gallows that tower over them. But perhaps more relevant to the Prado painting was the larger *Peasant Dance* now in Vienna, whose very vigorous dance in the background—to say nothing of the kissing couple on the left—Rubens surely recalled

⁶ Díaz Padrón, p. 283.

when he came to paint his more Arcadian version of the same subject. But perhaps the closest of all of Bruegel's paintings to that of Rubens is the *Wedding Dance* in Detroit, where it is not only the groups of dancers in the foreground and the middleground, with similar *contrapposti*, twisting of bodies, glances over the shoulder, and looking in the other direction, that point forward to Rubens's picture of roughly seventy years later. One also observes the abundant lustiness of the scene; note the kissing couple in the background, and the very evident excitability of the peasants, which Rubens, of course, was too discreet to depict quite so literally, but surely intended in his more elegant representation of this subject.

Rubens must also have had to hand two or three of Bruegel's well-known engravings of peasant feasts and peasant dances, such as the *Wedding Dance*, which is so closely—but not exactly—related to the painting in Detroit, as well as the *Kermis at Hoboken* and the *St George's Day Fair*, where the inscriptions so significantly insist on the right of the peasants to hold their feasts, despite the lascivious and drunken behavior in which they are known to engage.

These are all works to which we will return shortly; in the meantime, I want to point to some equally important precedents for Rubens's painting—precedents which have been even more neglected in the study of his works. I refer to the series of prints by the great German printmakers of the 1520s, 30s and 40s: the Beham brothers. These are the prints that show peasants dancing (and sometimes the middle and upper classes, too). It has long been known that amongst Rubens's earliest works, drawn while he was still a youth in Antwerp—thus long before he made his famous trip to Italy—were his copies after German artists such as Hans Holbein the Younger and the Swiss artist Tobias

Stimmer, to mention just a couple of names. But no one, as far as I know, has suggested that he must also have been referring to the work of the Beham brothers for both the painting in the Prado and the evidently related painting in the Louvre: the famous *La Kermesse* or *Noces de Village*. The indebtedness of this work to Bruegel's compositions goes without saying, but it is clear that in both of these pictures, Rubens was referring not just to Bruegel, but also, even further back, to the rather large number of prints of peasants—and nobles, and perhaps a whole class of bourgeoisie in between—shown dancing at feasts, festivals, and other occasions that were done chiefly by the brothers Barthel and Sebald Beham.

For example, let us consider the two final prints from the series of *Peasant Dancers*, which, in their combination of dance and drunkenness or dance and bagpiping, come closest to *La Kermesse* and to its Bruegelian antecedents. But in fact, a number of other prints in this series come closer still to the painting in the Prado, such as the scenes of May and June, and July and August, with their over-the-shoulder dance positions, and many of their participants clearly looking in other directions besides their partners. Indeed, there are at least five or six other prints by the Beham brothers showing the dancers in greater or lesser states of excitement, and with a greater or lesser degree of vulgarity. It seems that Rubens must have studied these prints at some length and been impressed by their apparently realistic treatments of just the kind of scene he chose to depict towards the end of his life. There are a number of possible examples, but perhaps the closest in format (if not exactly in intention) is the so-called *Nose Dance at Gimpelsbrunn*, accompanied by lines from Hans Sachs on how easy it is for fights to break out when the peasants chase each other about in the course of the dance. As we

shall see, however, Rubens is by no means as critical as Hans Sachs and the Beham brothers seem to be about the behavior of the peasants in his paintings.

But this view of a Rubens engaged with peasant and countryside life is by no means the normal one—and rightly so. Though neither peasants nor the countryside were ever very far from Antwerp in those days, Rubens was brought up in a prosperous and aristocratic environment, and when he went to Italy, at the age of 23, he immersed himself both in the life of modern Italian art and in that of antiquity. His life and letters are full of love and knowledge of the classics and classical antiquity, and all his work is imbued with it. We know, too, of his deep involvement with the rebuilding and redecoration of churches in Antwerp after the disastrous iconoclastic outbreaks of the second half of the sixteenth century, and of his work for the grandest patrons of Europe, from Marie de Médicis in France to Charles I of England—and, of course, for Philip III and IV of Spain. In the late 1620s, following the tragic death of his first wife, Isabella Brant, he committed himself to a life of hectic diplomatic activity, almost always devoted to the fulfilment of his dream: the reunification of the Northern and Southern Netherlands. And, so, he went to Madrid in 1628 in order to negotiate a peace between England and Spain that would, he hoped, result in a peace between their respective allies in the areas we now call Belgium and Holland; between the Protestant North and the Catholic South. It was in Madrid that Philip IV gave him a great series of commissions, culminating in the cycle for the Torre de la Parada, and here it was that Rubens had the seminal re-encounter of his life—that is, his re-encounter with the works of Titian in the Escorial. From then on, all of Rubens's works, just like the *Country Dance*, would betray the influence of the colors, the broad and undulating contours, the magnificently complex

brushwork, and often the Arcadian and elegiac tone of the Venetian master's greatest works.

When he was in Rome a quarter of a century earlier, Rubens had devoted himself, amongst the modern masters, to copying the works of the great master of drawing, *disegno*: Michelangelo. Now, he would devote himself to the works of the supreme colorist amongst painters: Titian. He copied Titian's works with an accuracy and a beauty that has never been equaled, and he sometimes transformed them with an elegiac inventiveness that moves us at least as much as the originals. Chief amongst these copy-transformations are the two works which he seems, in fact, to have copied from copies (although he probably saw the originals in Mantua precisely twenty-five years before): the famous *Bacchanal of the Andrians* and the *The Worship of Venus*, originally painted for Alfonso d'Este's legendary *Camerino d'Alabastro* in Ferrara in 1518-19. It is hard to think of anyone improving upon these two great masterpieces of mythological painting, and yet Rubens's paintings are, if anything, even tenderer and more sensual, at least in color and handling, while the various small changes he made are totally significant—and reflect directly, I believe, on the Prado painting at issue here. Both paintings, I should add, were bought by Philip IV for the highest prices of any paintings in his estate, namely 1800 florins each (as opposed to the 800 florins that, the reader will recall, he paid for the *Peasant Dance*).⁷

⁷ Given that Rubens cannot have seen the originals of these two compositions by Titian in Madrid in 1628, some scholars have argued that Rubens's copies were not only made from copies, but also that they were made rather late in the decade, around 1638. This seems unlikely to me, but even if they were made late in the 1630s, the indebtedness of pictures like the Louvre *Kermis*, the Vienna *Feast of Venus Verticordia* as well as the Prado *Peasant Dance* (even if it is quite late in the decade, too) make it clear that Rubens was very familiar with the composition—and handling!—of these early Ferrarese *poesie* by Titian.

The *Andrians*, of course, is straightforwardly relevant, not just because of the high sensuality of the scene, and the figure of the nude in the foreground, which Rubens would immediately adopt in a number of other paintings of his, but also, of course, because of the formal relevance of the central group of dancers to his pastoral composition of a few years later. Even though here the main pair gaze lovingly into each other's eyes, rather than looking away from each other, it is the figure of the belaurelled youth on the left of the nymph which surely points to the formal significance of this group as a whole for Rubens's *Country Dance*. For the way in which he, too, casts a desirous glance at the nymph is almost exactly the same, although in reverse, as the similarly wreathed figure at the right hand side of Rubens's painting, who also turns his head towards the central embracing couple. The second trio now seems unimaginable without the earlier one. The figures are simply embracing rather more extravagantly than they are in the Titian and the copy—just as we would expect from Rubens.

The subject of the Titian, of course, comes from the ancient writer Philostratus, whose verbal descriptions of ancient paintings were much admired by the painters of the Renaissance and, above all, by the learned Rubens himself. Indeed, on the garden front of his town house in Antwerp, he painted a series of scenes recreating Philostratus's ancient descriptions. In the case of the subject of the *Bacchanal of the Andrians*, Philostratus describes the island of the Andrians, where the river consists of wine rather than water and thyrsi grow on its banks instead of reeds. The island's inhabitants, according to the Philostratean description, are always in a state of inebriation and ecstasy, and they like to entertain their wives and children with songs in praise of the vine.⁸ So

⁸ Philostratus, I, 25. For a discussion of how Titian diverges from the Philostratean description, and the reasons for his doing so, see Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic*,

much is suggested by the song sheet lying on the ground in the center foreground, with the words “he who drinks and does not drink again, does not know what drinking is.” In the case of the so-called *Worship of Venus*, one sees “cupids gathering apples—the tokens of love and therefore of Venus herself—in an apple orchard, chasing a hare, shooting arrows at each other and generally fervently engaging in amorous monkey-business,”⁹ all in the presence of a statue of Venus to whom a silver mirror is being offered—just as described by Philostratus.¹⁰

But in the case of his copy, now in Stockholm, of *this* painting, Rubens made a tiny but wholly significant change. If we look closely at the scene in the foreground where one putto prepares to shoot an arrow at another, we find that Rubens has transformed the male putto on the left into a female one, just as he does in the case of several more of the putti in this painting. Rarely did Rubens pass up a chance to emphasize in pictorial terms the importance of love between the sexes, a matter which seemed to grow ever more urgent to him after his marriage, at the age of 53, to the sixteen-year-old Hélène Fourment upon his return to Antwerp in 1630 after the long and exhausting years of his diplomatic journeys abroad.

The story is well known. In 1626, just after the successful completion of the stupendous high altar of Antwerp Cathedral, Rubens’s beloved first wife, Isabella Brant, died. He was broken-hearted, and in a moving letter to his best friend Peiresc, he wrote of how he was going to travel and work on his political projects in order to take his mind

New York: New York University Press, 1969, pp. 100-102. Philostratus makes a great deal of the sense of sound which the visual description of the songs generated, and this may have been in the back of Rubens’s mind when he placed his obscure flutist in the tree behind the dancers in the *Country Dance*.

⁹ See Philipp Fehl’s very apt description in “Rubens’s ‘Feast of Venus Verticordia,’” *The Burlington Magazine* 114, no. 828 (March 1972), p. 161.

¹⁰ Philostratus, *Imagines*, I, 6.

both off his sorrows and the needs of the body. Four years later, he returned, and took the young H el ene as his wife. As he would later write to Peiresc, he no longer had any inclination to the “abstinence of celibacy,”¹¹ and decided to marry a young woman from the bourgeoisie, the daughter of a prosperous art dealer, for the simple reason that she would not blush to see him in his working clothes, with brush in hand, as an aristocratic spouse might have. The difference between the two wives, as evidenced by his two portraits of their faces, could not be more striking: the kind but slightly severe and pinched Isabella on the one hand, and the ample and sensual H el ene on the other, whom Rubens would love and desire with a greater passion.

But at the beginning their love may have developed more slowly. This is probably a sentimental way of reading the famous and mysterious painting of the *Garden of Love*, also in the Prado—a work that has never really been properly explained. But although H el ene has been identified with a number of faces in this painting—perhaps she is to be identified with all of the sitters—could it be that couple entering this pastoral love scene is intended to represent none other than the two newly-weds? Certainly, the face of the man turned towards us looks like Rubens’s, while H el ene often wore black dresses of the kind this young woman is shown in here. But notice what is happening to her; she is being pushed onto the scene by a cupid with an eager and slightly lustful expression on her face. She seems to need some encouragement to enter this very sensual scene, and the cupid is offering just that. Though she appears to be reluctant, the rest of the figures painting are less so—note the two other loving couples, one already engaged in wistful conversation, the other entering much more confidently on the left. In the center a group of four richly dressed women all, as I’ve said, bear a certain resemblance to H el ene,

¹¹ Rubens, Letter of December 18, 1634.

clearly ever-present in Rubens's pictorial imagination from the beginning of their marriage on.

Most erotic of all, of course, is the statue of Venus on a dolphin on the upper right, ejecting water from her breasts, which then cascades suggestively to the ground. Above in the sky are more cupids, brandishing bows or shooting arrows directly at the women below. The whole scene, then, is a kind of painted encouragement to love, and it seems particularly appropriate at this stage of Rubens's life.

Cupids flying around in the sky as a stimulus to love appear in another work by Rubens that was inspired by Titian's *Worship of Venus*, and which, despite its wholly classical and mythological theme, is of the utmost relevance, not just to Rubens's marriage, but also to his relationship with the countryside and its native denizens. This is the painting once called the *Feast of Venus* in Vienna, but which now bears the rather more apt title of the *Feast of Venus Verticordia*, or *Venus, Changer of Hearts*, as Philipp Fehl has correctly shown. It is a most complicated painting, not often discussed, but which turns out to play a crucial role in the development of the themes and the motifs at hand.

There can be no question that this work derives ultimately from Titian's *Worship of Venus* in the Prado, or from Rubens's copy of it; but there are extremely important differences and expansions among them. Rubens has taken the theme of the scampering and playfully fighting Erotes or putti, and, as it were, ordered them in into two dance formations that anticipate the main motif of the dancing peasants. But there are many more differences in the painting such as the four women rushing in from the side, the naked and clothed women surrounding the statue of Venus, and the very lascivious dance

of nymphs, peasants, and satyrs on the left (note how men and satyrs participate in this dance, as if to emphasize the essential libidinous nature of the couplings); notice how the central contrapposto embrace closely resembles the kissing couple at the center of Rubens's *Country Dance*. In fact, as Philipp Fehl has shown, while the original idea for this painting is clearly based on the Philostratan description in *Imagines* I.60 of an abundance of putti disporting themselves around a statue of Venus, Rubens has combined it with a subject that perhaps had still greater resonance for him at the time it was painted, sometime in the early to mid 1630s. For in Book IV of Ovid's *Fasti*, the poet describes how the statue of Venus must be washed by three groups of women: by the brides of Rome, by the mothers, and by the courtesans.¹² But then Ovid goes on to say that in ancient times, Rome had fallen from a state of chastity, and that is why a temple to Venus had to be built—which was added by Rubens in the upper left in a later stage of the painting—so that their all women could come and devote themselves chastely to her. This is why she was called *Venus Verticordia*, or “Venus changer of hearts.”

Fehl points out that the women rushing in on the left carrying an offering of dolls must be the prospective brides who actually worshiped at the temple of Venus in the countryside outside Rome, while the naked figures actually washing the statue of Venus and holding up a mirror to her are the courtesans referred to by Ovid. Ovid also refers to the married women who have to burn incense to the god of Fortuna Virilis—that is, good luck with men—represented here by the woman making an offering at the archeologically precise tripod in the foreground. The putti above, who recall the putti shooting arrows in the *Garden of Love*, carry not only the apples sacred to Venus (and so important in

¹² “The goddess, he says, must be washed from top to toe [...] you too, he exhorts the women, she bids bathe under the green myrtle [...] propitiate her with supplications.” Ovid, *Fasti*, IV 136-139.

Philostratus' description of the putti in *Imagines* 1.60), but also bunches of wheat and grapes. These, of course, refer to the much loved and much illustrated epigram from Terence's *Andria*, *Sine Cerere et Baccho friget Venus*. And the gods who provide the food and drink without which Love cannot flourish—literally grow warm—are, indeed, shown up in the temple which Rubens added in the upper left of the painting.

In his discussion of this painting, Fehl is absolutely right in noting that the pair of impending brides bringing dolls as an offering to Venus must surely allude to H el ene. Moreover, the way in which the matrons rushing in from the right offering incense are swallowed up by the dancing putti suggests that the theme of the picture must in fact be changed from that of Venus changer of hearts to one that encourages genuine sensuality. Fehl also justly reminds us of the phrase Rubens used in his famous letter to Peiresc, in which he explained why he had married the young H el ene: so that he could enjoy his pleasures licitly and gratefully—as he put it: “*fruimur licita voluptate cum gratiarum actione.*” The painting, as Fehl says, “celebrates the felicity of connubial bliss in which voluptuous sensuality is joined and enhanced by the propriety of marriage.” But, as I shall show, it is clear that this was not quite enough for Rubens, and it is significant too that for all his careful analysis of the painting Fehl notes neither the enthusiasm—indeed, the desperation—with which the matrons on the right, tellingly accompanied by a satyr, rush into the scene of love,¹³ nor the wild scene of sensual abandon on the lower left of the picture, where three couples are engaged in twisting, sensual, and nude embraces. While two of the male figures are fully human, the figure carrying off the woman on the right has the goat-feet of a satyr, and the woman who resists slightly by pushing at his

¹³ And once more, these figures are, of course, adapted from the similar figure on the right of Titian's *Worship of Venus*.

forelocks is surely none other than Hélène herself. This is a critical group, both thematically and formally. It is a critical statement, perhaps, about the limits of licit love, to use Rubens's own phrase, and the antithesis of the representation of the married couple that enters the Garden of Love on the left. Surely this group in the *Venus Verticordia* is Rubens's own painted plea to his young wife to let herself go, a clear exhortation to a wilder and more abandoned sensuality than he must have found in her at the outset of the marriage celebrated by this painting; a work in which matrons, mothers, and nude courtesans—to say nothing of that group on the left, omitted by Fehl—all come together in honor of the goddess of love.

This, surely, is the direction in which Rubens intended that gentle push on the left of the Garden of Love to go. But first let me return to Rubens's domestic situation at the time all these works were painted. As we have seen, he married Hélène in December of 1630, and just over four years later he bought the lovely country estate of Het Steen, outside Brussels, where he retired with his young bride. Though he kept up his studio in Antwerp, they lived at Steen, bringing up the three children they had together.

In Antwerp, the studio continued to produce the large religious and mythological works he continued to receive commissions for, but for the last decade of his life, it is abundantly clear that his chief loves were his wife, his family, and the countryside in which he lived. He painted more landscapes than ever before, and all his works, whether landscape or personal—even the small mythological works, often set in landscapes—carried the imprint of the style of Titian, whom he had so admired at the Escorial in 1628-29. As these paintings show, he often painted his wife and children taking walks in their country estate, or in their garden. But it is clear that two aspects of life mattered deeply to

him as his life drew to its close. First was the relationship with his wife, and in particular its sensual aspect—evident in the portrait now at the Alte Pinakothek, where she is shown rather shyly if magnificently in her wedding dress, and in the famous painting known as *Het Pelsken*, the only painting he left specifically to H el ene in his inventory. That the life of the senses, and its connotations of fertility, continued to be important to him is clear from the very last letter he wrote to his favorite student, Lucas Faydherbe, in 1640. “I have heard with great pleasure,” he wrote on the occasion of Faydherbe’s marriage, “that on May Day you planted the may in your beloved’s garden; I hope that it will flourish and bring forth fruit in due season. My wife and I, with both my sons, sincerely wish you and your beloved every happiness”

Over and over again Rubens’s pictures at this time are filled with ever more abundant representations of female sensuality. It is hard to believe that pictures such as these, or the many *Judgments of Paris*, which he painted at the same time and in which Beauty is chosen over Wisdom and Seniority (or pleasure, as one scholar has suggested, over the active and the contemplative), were not inspired by his love—or perhaps one should say his desire—for H el ene. But equally important to him was the life of the countryside. In picture after picture he painted not only the landscape and vegetation he grew to know so well, but also the peasants who worked its land. As Svetlana Alpers has justly emphasized, they had an important role to play—as Rubens and others seem to have believed as well—in the revival of an economy that was declining as a result of the international tensions that had so reduced the urban economy of Antwerp.

And so the two themes came together: love and nature. And so it is that some landscapes, like the *Garden of Love*, show elegant figures who exactly resemble the

couple formed by Rubens and H el ene, while others emphasize the relationship between landscape and the senses more directly. And for Rubens, the peasants who worked the land were the embodiment of that relationship. What H el ene was encouraged to learn, as it were, from those who had more direct contact with the soil, with country life, was the kind of untrammled sensuality Rubens represented over and over again in his late pictures. This is no sentimental reading of the late landscapes; it is an explanation for painting after painting made during this last decade, and it is made plain by the thread that runs directly from the mythological paintings of this period to the *Country Dance* in the Prado. It is no surprise that the central figure in the painting of *Nymphs and Satyrs in a Landscape*, also in the Prado, should likewise bear a resemblance to H el ene. Less speculatively, one could also observe that the couple formed by this figure and the satyr embracing her are similar to the central embracing pair in the *Country Dance*, but also—and above all—to the peasant couple embracing in the center of the great painting known as *La Kermesse* in the Louvre. The significant difference, of course, is that in *Nymphs and Satyrs in a Landscape*, she is still desperately pulling away from the attentions of the satyr in the center.

There are two critical observations to be made at this point. It is this group, as we have already seen, that features as the central element in all the works I have been discussing today, and it is critical. Motifs such as this were transported from myth to the life of the countryside. Myth became intimate and local, however much that local might be imbued, sometimes, with the spirit of Virgil's *Georgics*. But in the meantime, I think we can also make a psychological reflection: if Rubens, as he approached the twilight of his life, identified himself ever more, for whatever psychological reasons, with the satyr

carrying off a beautiful young woman, he also seems to have identified with the life of the countryside, not only because of its natural beauty, but also precisely because of the natural life of the peasants who inhabit it.

The *Kermis* in the Louvre is a robust painting by any standard. People drink, dance, grab each other and vomit. As in the works of his Flemish contemporaries David Teniers and (above all) Adriaen Brouwer, Rubens did not shrink from showing the rawer sides of peasant life. But did these peasants provide Rubens with a model of sensuality which were absent from the politer aspects of his own private and public life? This may seem like too sentimental a suggestion for these paintings (in particular for the *Kermis* and the *Peasant Dance*), but it is altogether clear, both from the paintings and from the drawings for them, which we will consider shortly, that Rubens's attitude was vastly different from the attitudes exemplified by the prints by the Beham brothers and the inscriptions often attached to these prints by the famous *Meistersinger*, Hans Sachs.

For Hans Sachs at least—and probably for the Behams themselves—peasant dances were seen as worthy of disapproval. Their participants behaved disgustingly, particularly on feast days. They were used as opportunities for carousing and lechery. In a description that seems to apply to the *La Kermesse*, Hans Sachs writes that “the wine was knocked back so hastily/that many of them fell under the bench. / They raised a great clamor of farting and spitting/shouting screaming singing and crying.” The peasants are given ridiculous names, and when they dance they behave completely inappropriately; Gretchen, almost like the peasants in Rubens's Prado painting, dances with whomever she pleases,” while “the donkey miller from Ptenstain/ who was the greatest drinker at the

table,/Sprang about with Elsie the farmer's wife/ and squeezed her so closely that she choked." And so on and so forth, they continue their lecherous brawling. For the fact is that in Nuremberg in the 1530s and 1540s, the lusty and rude dancing of the peasants was negatively contrasted with the decorous dances of the middle and upper classes. *They*, instead, moved with decorum, grace, and slowness, partaking in none of the lusty speed of the peasants. In fact, a number of statutes were promulgated in Nuremberg from 1521 onwards. These statutes set out to control the types of dancing that took place on social occasions, and a clear distinction was drawn, as Keith Moxey puts it, "between the way the aristocracy danced and the way the peasants danced, in which control and restraint are played off against uninhibited sensual enjoyment."¹⁴

Not so, as we have seen, for Rubens. It is clear that, for him, the slow decorum of aristocratic love had much to learn from the uninhibited sensuality of countryside life, exemplified both by *La Kermesse* and the *Country Dance*. Indeed, in this he may well have been influenced by Bruegel, whose attitude towards peasant life has been the subject of much discussion. On the one hand, Bruegel has been viewed as one of them, or as someone very sympathetic to them; this much we might gather from any number of his paintings. On the other hand, the brute lustiness of the paintings sometimes seems a little coarse, and we can't be sure of his position, whether favorable or unfavorable to the peasants. But I suspect that Bruegel's position was more like Rubens's—although probably without the personal motives. While the inscription (probably not composed by Bruegel) on the print of the *Kermis at Hoboken* says that "The peasants rejoice at such festivals to dance, jump and drink themselves drunk as beasts" and, rather disparagingly,

¹⁴ Keith Moxey, *Peasants, Warriors, and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 51.

continues with “They must observe these feasts even if they fast or die of the cold” (meaning that they will carouse at any cost), the pennant hanging over the dancers on the right of the *St George’s Day Feast* declares: “Let the peasants hold their feasts,” as if responding to all those who criticize the peasants and their coarse behavior.

While we cannot be sure where Bruegel stood on this subject, with Rubens there is surely no doubt. Alpers made a convincing case for Rubens’s esteem for the peasants in the context of his own keen sense of a declining Antwerp economy, and his sense of the importance of agriculture in reviving it. Tired of the city, like so many of his upper-class peers, he bought his house in the countryside, where there was still hope in the local rather than the globalized politics of his time. His marriage to H  l  ne and his move to the countryside seems to have enhanced his view of its inhabitants, not only because of their closeness to the nature he came to love ever more, but also because of their exemplification of the open sensuality which he deemed essential to his married life and which he had once found represented only in the domain of the mythological.

Before I conclude, I’d like to turn to the four drawings, each drawn on both sides of the paper, which tie all the compositions I have considered thus far together, both formally and, even more importantly, thematically. They form the bases for the most critical of the compositions I have discussed, and although some of them, in their typically Rubensian abundance of invention, are occasionally difficult to read. Taken together, they perfectly exemplify the transformation of which I have been speaking: the transformation from classical myth to the local and the personal.

Sometime around 1628-29, Rubens did this very beautiful drawing of two nude female figures clasping each other in an apparently intimate embrace—although the

women are actually looking away from each other. It was intended as the preparatory study for a salt cellar which was soon carved in ivory by the virtuoso German sculptor, Georg Petel, and which survives today in the National Museum in Stockholm. Although the subject was intended as a *Venus Anadyomene between Two Nymphs*, the group immediately puts one in mind of the many pairs of figures we have been looking at today—figures in contrapposto are both attached to each other yet look in the opposite direction—including the figures on the right of the *Country Dance* in the Prado. These are admittedly rather more detached from each other, but the connection between this composition and the painting is proven by the fact that the verso of the design for the salt cellar shows nothing less than the compositional sketch—or, at least, half the compositional sketch—for the painting itself. As Julius Held suggested, the drawing must have been cut down at some point from a larger rectangular composition showing the right half of the painting as well. Indeed, since the salt cellar had to be seen in the round, we may imagine that the recto of the drawing—the *Venus Anadyomene*—originally showed another, possibly more intimate view of the salt cellar, as suggested by a photograph showing two views of it. All this confirms the importance of this group for Rubens's evolution of figures who dance entwined with each other in sensual abandon, regardless of whether their gazes are distracted or interlocked. Indeed, I believe that this critical drawing must stand at the beginning of the evolution of a series of studies of just such figures, who grow ever more intensely intimate.

It was, indeed, at just about the time he married H el ene Fourment (possibly just before but most likely just after) that he produced a series of drawings of nude females lying in splendid and seductive abandon. Perhaps the most sensual of all of these is the

drawing that was once in the Princes Gate collection in London, and which served as the preparatory drawing for the painting *Angelica and the Hermit*, an appropriate subject, given its visual evocation of desire between an aging man and a younger female. It also evokes the famous sleeping female nude of Titian's *Bacchanal of the Andrians*. But now, if we turn this drawing over, we find on *its* verso a drawing of a most intimate embrace between an old male centaur and a young female one. Of this drawing, Held rightly noted that "the problem of rendering the embrace of hybrid creatures whose emotions were very human while the sex-act was purely animal may have been of interest to Rubens." Indeed. Was this not the kind of love which Rubens envisioned for himself and his new wife, and which he so repeatedly put into paint in these years? Not the gentle push, surely, of the *Garden of Love*, but rather the passionate embrace of the entwined figures, where the female figure twists back to embrace her older lover in some of the most sensual poses in the history of art, once tightly, in the center, and once with rather greater abandon, in the upper left. In one of the many moving passages Julius Held wrote of Rubens's drawings and oil sketches, he went on to say this:

It is perhaps not accidental, however, that in the picture of the embracing centaurs as well as in the panel of the *Sleeping Angelica*, Rubens was concerned with themes of sexual attraction in which the male partner is considerably older than the female. One is a picture of sinful lust, with a demon helping to incite the old hermit. The other shows an embrace on the borderline of human and animal, in which the younger partner yields to an almost angrily pleading older one. We may touch here on a theme of conflict which may have occupied Rubens' emotions in these years.¹⁵

Rubens must have used the central motif of this drawing quite precisely in the critical group on the lower left of the *Venus Verticordia*, where he clearly set passionate love against the more decorous desires of marriage. But what is critical here is the way in

¹⁵ Held, *Selected Drawings*, p. 142.

which this motif was transmuted not only into the loves of an imaginary mythological scene, but also into the lives of the country folk amongst whom Rubens settled and whom, unlike the Behams and, possibly, unlike Bruegel, he seems genuinely to have admired—even if it was only for the ways in which their pleasures were unrestrained. For the embracing groups in this drawing are transformed over and over again in a sheet that served as the basis for none other than that rawest of Rubens's pictures of peasant life: *La Kermesse*. This is another two-sided sheet, also in the British Museum. On the recto are the preparatory thoughts for the long table at which the peasants carouse in the left half of the painting. But this side of the sheet also includes a group that surely makes the connection with the Prado *Country Dance* even clearer, for here, in the center foreground, is a small group of dancers, which does not, in fact, occur in *La Kermesse* at all, but which surely points to the very similar figures who move with similar intensity in the Prado painting. One has only to consider the similarity between the two figures in the left foreground of the groups in each case for this connection to crystalize.

But let us return to the verso of this astonishing sheet. For here Rubens has drawn—with an insistence and a rhythm of line that is surely almost without parallel in the history of art—figures of couples not looking away from each other, but locked in passionate and happy embraces, over and over again. Never has the brilliance, vigor, and brio of Rubens's line, even now as he was growing old, been more apparent. It is as if he cannot stop; as if he has to record every move of the dancers as they lean forward and back and twist this way and that to embrace each other. Some of these figures are used in the final painting, and, of course, in the *Venus Verticordia*, but some are not. It is as if he

could not stop recording, or investigating every possible permutation of the way in which couples might embrace each other, not in some mythical moment, but in real life.

In both the chronological and the psychological sequence I have just suggested, the *Country Dance* might seem to come just slightly before *La Kermesse*. It seems not unreasonable to suggest that after the loose dance of the Prado painting, where everyone is looking over their shoulder, resolution should come in the form of the close embraces of the drawings for the salt cellar, the centaurs, and, above all, the Louvre painting. But I prefer to see the Prado painting as suffused with an elegiac tone and a happiness in abandon that befits an even older Rubens, even after he painted the *Garden of Love* (which is *certainly* earlier) and *La Kermesse*. If I am right, then the painting would, indeed, be late, and the psychology here would be that he learned to smile at the notion of still freer and more generous affections—perhaps those affections which he saw best in the life of the countryside, of the life which he also celebrated in the great landscapes of his last decade. But I leave it to the reader to decide which of these interpretations is preferable. The evidence is before your eyes, in this great museum; one has only to return to the paintings.

