

Evan Balkan

The Rubens Vase

As we continue to try and adjust to life during a pandemic, the inability to travel and be exposed to new worlds and experiences has hit many especially hard. Even in more normal times, museum visits have always been a way to engage in quick and accessible travel through time, geography, and culture. Fortunately, though with restrictions in many places, many museums have reopened their doors, allowing for a resumption of this particular kind of “travel.” There can be few greater gifts in a time of lockdown.

Baltimore is home to many world class museums. One of them is the Walters Art Museum, with a collection of more than 36,000 objects spanning more than seven centuries. One can easily spend days there and while every corner offers something extraordinary, some pieces stand out above the rest. One such object is the arresting Rubens Vase.

According to the Walters’s records, the Rubens Vase was “Carved in high relief from a single piece of agate . . . most likely created in an imperial workshop for a Byzantine emperor,” sometime around 400 A.D. Agate is a type of translucent quartz that for centuries has been regarded as a prized semiprecious stone. Agate carvings were especially popular with Roman emperors; ultimately, many of their classical collectibles were taken to Constantinople by Constantine the Great. As for the Rubens Vase, it eventually wound up in France, “probably carried off as treasure after the sack of Constantinople in 1204” and eventually wound up in the possession of the Duke of Anjou in 1360. Subsequently, a series of notable collectors came to own the vase, including King Charles V of France, until ransacking Huguenots stole it from the Royal Collections in 1590. But it’s the vase’s most famous possessor who gives the vessel its name: the great Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), widely considered the seminal

figure in the Flemish Baroque artistic tradition. Rubens purchased the vase at an Antwerp flea market in 1619.

Rubens was understandably enamored of his vase, having long been a collector and admirer of gems and ornate pieces. He was moved to make several sketches of it, one of which now sits in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. Rubens came to call the vase “my jewel” and it’s clear from his correspondence that he was thrilled with his purchase. But within a decade, Rubens had parted with his jewel and the Rubens Vase would subsequently undergo an extraordinary journey. There is a fair amount of mystery and conjecture attached, but its unpacking reveals a story more astonishing than one could ever imagine while taking in its majesty in its prominent spot in the Walters’ Early Byzantine Art section. But first, more on the vase’s history and attributes.

The Walters identifies the Rubens Vase as belonging to the Late Antique era, which denotes the period between the 3rd and 7th or 8th centuries, bridging classical antiquity with the Middle Ages. This transitional period constitutes an interesting era in the ancient art world, when Roman pagan influences still existed, but a new medieval Byzantine art was forming. The gem carving of the Roman period was still practiced, in other words, even as new influences would soon take over. The appearance on the vase of the leering satyr Pan, the half-man/half-goat pagan symbol for the wild forces of nature, clearly harks to the precedent period. Marvin Chauncey Ross in his exhaustive 1947 article, “The Rubens Vase: Its History and Date,” published in the *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, wrote that “. . . the revival of an old art, just as a new one was forming, endowed such an object with a young energy and aesthetic, haunted by an ancient authority and tradition.” Ross further claimed that because of its “beauty and rarity [the vase] ranks among the most important gem carvings of the world.”

True enough; the vase is stunning. On each side are handles carved in the shape of Pan's detailed horns. Pan leers in a way that can be seen as either benignly mischievous or something more malevolent—owing to the satyr's slightly open mouth, revealing only the upper row of teeth, as well as to the prominence of the upper and lower eyelids, visible but retracted enough to reveal expressive eyes that carry a certain heaviness. Whatever interpretation one makes of this look, what cannot be denied is the extraordinary detail in the carving, not just in Pan's visage but in the rest of the designs that decorate the vase as well.

Curving around the vessel are tendrils of acanthus leaves, vines, and grape bunches executed in a cross-hatch design. The leaves and vines are not presented symmetrically, either in relation to each other on either side of the vase or within each explosion of vegetation on its own side. Instead, the tendrils run as they do in nature, hugging the body of the vase as clinging vines while also exploding off the surface as would occur naturally in robust plants. This asymmetrical display of depth emphasizes the wonderful interplay of light and shadow, highlighting the vase's alternating milky hues and honeyed translucency. Few spaces are left flat or untouched and those that are expose the lush contrasting depth of the natural elements. At its least ornate points, the vase seems to glow from within while the protruding designs produce shadow and depth.

Due to its age and delicate nature, the vase is, of course, not without marks of wear. A prominent crack runs downward from the gold rim, bisecting the leaves and then joining a smaller hairline crack, running horizontally amidst the raised flowers, tendrilous vines, and leaf stems, with multiple small cracks snaking amongst and then hidden within the floral designs. Far from detracting from the vase's beauty, these cracks serve as reminders of the fragility of the piece, calling to attention the extraordinary detail in the designs that grace the vase from top to

bottom. Additionally, these cracks make the story of the vase's very survival even more remarkable.

Marvin Chauncey Ross's history provides the following for the vase's provenance: "Foire Saint Germain Sale, Paris, 1619; Peter Paul Rubens, Antwerp, 1619, by purchase; Daniel Fourment, Antwerp, ca. 1626-1628, by purchase; Emperor Jahangir of India [date of acquisition unknown], by consignment; Dutch East India Company, prior to 1635, by confiscation . . ." As can be seen, despite his love for the piece, Rubens was moved to give it up within a decade after purchasing it. Rubens was in desperate need of money by 1626 and we know from Ross's history and from Rubens's correspondence that he sold his "jewel" and that it was subsequently "sent to the East Indies on a boat that was captained by the Dutch." In looking at the provenance list above, this would have taken place after Daniel Fourment—an Antwerp silk merchant and friend of Rubens—purchased the vase from Rubens sometime between 1626-28 and 1635, when the vase came into possession, "by confiscation," of the Dutch East India Company.

What follows in Ross's provenance list after the above is a roll call of sixteen more exchanges of possession, either by sale or inheritance, culminating thusly: "Walters Art Museum, 1941, by purchase." What's intriguing is that this otherwise exhaustive list of possession contains a major gap between 1635 and 1818. Again, from the Walters's records, comes this note: "The subsequent fate of the vase before the 19th century is obscure." Only a French gold-standard stamp around the lip used during the years 1809-1819 then picks up the trail. Despite its having gone missing—or maybe because of it—the vase's stature had only grown. A friend and correspondent of the Englishman William Beckford, who purchased the vase in 1818, wrote that it was "one of the greatest curiosities in existence." A tantalizing

historical account, led by the “by confiscation” notation above, may provide some part of the answer to its earlier disappearance.

On October 27, 1628 the Dutch trading vessel the *Batavia* left Holland bound for Indonesia, then a Dutch trading colony. In early June, the vessel impaled itself on an obscure reef of the Houtman Abrolhos, a series of coral islands about forty miles off the western coast of present day Australia. While the captain rowed to Indonesia to get help, a Haarlem apothecary named Jeronimus Cornelisz formed a gang that took over the island, plundered the *Batavia*'s bounty, and instituted a murderous and dictatorial regime. By the time the captain returned three months later with a rescue ship, 120 people had been killed. “If there ever has been a Godless man . . . it was [Cornelisz],” wrote a clergyman whose wife and six of his children were murdered. The official East India Company report on the sinking noted that despite the high fatalities, much of the treasure had been spared: “Thanks be to the almighty for this,” the report stated, “We would not have expected it to come out so well.” The upbeat tone notwithstanding, the *Batavia* incident remains to this day Australia's largest concentrated mass murder.

Henrietta Drake-Brockman was an Australian journalist and novelist who had a lifelong fascination with the *Batavia* and set out to discover precisely where it had foundered. Her pluck and energy were extraordinary and she eventually succeeded in discovering the site. Using contemporaneous sources, including the translated journal of Captain Francisco Pelsaert, she claimed in her 1963 book *Voyage to Disaster* that among the identifiable treasures the *Batavia* held was the Rubens Vase. It is known that Pelsaert had been carrying items intended for trade with the powerful Grand Moghul of India, Jahangir, with whom he was personally acquainted. Daniel Fourment, the most recent owner of the vase, knew Pelsaert as well and certainly could have given the captain the vase for trade or sale.

Subsequent authors, including Drake-Brockman's friend the Australian author and adventurer Hugh Edwards, took up the claim. Edwards wrote of the vase in his 1966 book, *Islands of Angry Ghosts*, "On it were carved two faces of the goat-legged, lecherous woodland god Pan. The expression on Pan's face was strikingly similar to that of Jeronimus Cornelisz . . ." At the end of the book, referring to the vase, Edwards strikes an amazed tone: "The shining glories fashioned by craftsmen in the time of the Roman Emperors still exist, reminders of the days when they were pinched and rubbed by the coarse fingers of the mutineers on Batavia's Graveyard, held up to the lamplight in a castaway's tent on a desert island to glint for greedy eyes awestruck at the fortune." Since that time, it has become accepted lore that the Rubens Vase was aboard the *Batavia*.

It should be noted, however, that not every investigator of the *Batavia* disaster agrees. Most notably, Mike Dash in his 2002 study, *Batavia's Graveyard: The True Story of the Mad Heretic Who Led History's Bloodiest Mutiny*, wrote: "[I]n my view it is not possible to state with any certainty that the Rubens Vase was ever in the Abrolhos," though he cannot discount it. Certainly the timeline and all other relevant facts do match up. Even Marvin Chauncey Ross, writing his study decades before Drake-Brockman and Edwards made their claims, includes this intriguing nugget, calling the Rubens Vase a "marvel of craftsmen, treasure of princes, delight of artists and antiquarians, *booty of pirates and despoilers* [emphasis added]." That last referent is a curious one as nowhere else in Ross's history does he make any mention of "pirates" or "despoilers." He does acknowledge the Dutch trading ship, but that was hardly a nest of pirates.

It has become accepted among most investigators of the *Batavia* that the Rubens Vase was indeed on the ship. But because the *Batavia*'s cargo list was destroyed and because Pelsaert's journal makes no specific reference to it (it's important to remember that at the time it

would not have been known as the “Rubens Vase”) it is, of course, impossible to say for sure, as Dash points out. But it cannot be ruled out; indeed, the evidence for it is certainly there.

As for Rubens himself, he assumed that his jewel had been lost forever. “It perished at the hands of the plunderers” he wrote. Of course, that wasn’t so. Rubens’s reference here could have reflected his belief that it was stolen by a company official before it ever made its way onto the *Batavia*, or that it did indeed make the journey and was “confiscated” by company officials in the rescue thereafter. We cannot know.

But even without its inclusion in the story of the *Batavia*, that this fragile vase has survived for 1,700 years is itself remarkable. Whatever the full, true story of its journeys, the fact that the vase today reposes at the Walters, for anyone to see, is a gift for us all. A trip to see it does indeed take in hundreds of years and thousands of miles and is replete with people—famous and infamous—that provide a multitude of stories and ideas to take us away, at least for a time, from the difficult circumstances of this present moment. If nothing else, gazing upon this extraordinary work of art, and being aware of the stories attached to it, delivers us the long view, certainly a gift in these dark days.

Note: If a trip to Baltimore and the Walters Art Museum is not feasible, the piece can be viewed online here: <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/10284/the-rubens-vase/>

Bibliography:

--- “The Batavia Journal of Francois Pelsaert” (ARA Document 1630:1098 QQ II, fol. 232-316) *Report of the Department of Maritime Archaeology Western Australian Maritime Museum* No. 136. Marit Van Huystee, trans., ed., 1994 http://museum.wa.gov.au/maritime-archaeology-db/sites/default/files/no._136_pelsaertjournal.pdf

--- Drake-Brockman, Henrietta. *Voyage to Disaster: the Life of Francisco Pelsaert covering his Indian report to the Dutch East India Company and the wreck of the ship Batavia in 1629 off the coast of Western Australia together with the full text of his journals concerning the Rescue Voyages, the mutiny on the Abrolhos Islands and the subsequent trials of the Mutineers*. London: Angus & Robertson Publishers, 1963

--- Edwards, Hugh. *Islands of Angry Ghosts*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966

--- Ross, Marvin Chauncey. "The Rubens Vase: Its History and Date." *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, vol. 6, 1943, pp. 8–39.

--- "The Rubens Vase" *Walters Art Museum*. <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/10284/the-rubens-vase/>