





Peter Paul Rubens. *Self-portrait with hat (detail)*, 1623–1625, oil on wood, Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY

1 Painter and Diplomat

Flemish artist Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) had a prolific career painting religious and mythological stories, church altarpieces, palace decorations, royal portraits, and intimate family scenes. Not only was he one of the most acclaimed painters of his time, but he was also a scholar, teacher, linguist (he knew seven languages), collector of antiquities, and diplomat.

Rubens traveled from his home in Antwerp to study in Italy from 1600 to 1609. There he was inspired by classical sculpture, the paintings of Raphael and Michelangelo, and Caravaggio's dramatic works that contrast light and shadow. Rubens returned to Antwerp, where his artistic talents were quickly recognized and his popularity grew. Rubens was appointed court painter to Archduke Albert and his wife, Isabella. He established a large workshop with apprentices and assistants to help him complete his numerous commissions.

Paralleling Rubens' unrivaled artistic career was his increased involvement in politics and diplomatic missions. While traveling for royal commissions, Rubens served as a cultural envoy and helped negotiate treaties. Among his many noble patrons was King Charles I of England, who knighted Rubens for his work as a peace mediator between Spain and England.

Daniel in the Lions' Den, once owned by Charles I, shows how Rubens masterfully combined realism and theatricality to produce a strong emotional impact.



2 Daniel's Dramatic Story

The story of the Hebrew prophet Daniel comes from the Old Testament. Daniel aroused the envy of the other royal ministers when he became the chief counselor to the Persian king Darius. These jealous men tricked the king into ordering Daniel's death. They passed a law that said people could pray only to the king and not to any god. When it was discovered that Daniel kept praying to God as he always had, he was condemned to spend the night in the den of ferocious, hungry lions. In the morning, King Darius rushed out to see what had happened. Miraculously, Daniel had survived the night unharmed!

Rubens shows the scene inside the lions' den. Surrounded by the dangerous beasts, Daniel prays and looks toward heaven with gratitude. Bones on the ground are a grim reminder of what could have happened. Daniel became a symbol of justice, and his story demonstrated the importance of faith.



above: Peter Paul Rubens, *Daniel in the Lions' Den*, c. 1614/1616, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

This painting is over 7 by 10 feet in size!

right: Peter Paul Rubens, *Lion*, c. 1612–1613, black chalk, heightened with white, yellow chalk in the background, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den. . . . At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice. . . . Daniel answered, "May the King live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me." Daniel 6:17–22

"Daniel among many lions, taken from life. Original, entirely by my hand." Peter Paul Rubens

3 Taken from Life

Snarling, pacing, sleeping, yawning, and staring: the ten lions in this painting look frightening and amazingly real. How did Rubens manage to paint these animals in such a lifelike way? He studied lions in the royal menagerie of Brussels and in the zoo of Ghent. He made detailed drawings of the animals' movements, expressions, and behaviors.

His use of light, color, space, and scale emphasizes the physical and emotional drama of the scene. By painting the lions nearly life-size, Rubens makes it feel as if we are in the den with Daniel. Morning light streams into the dark cave through an opening, illuminating Daniel's gestures, sculpted muscles, and anguished expression. His red and white robes stand out against the brown tones of the lions' den. Rubens even added blood red paint around the mouths of some lions for a terrifying effect!



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Myth in Motion

The Fall of Phaeton by Rubens is another example of the artist's exceptional ability for dramatic storytelling. The myth, recounted by the Roman poet Ovid, describes Phaeton's doomed journey across the sky.

The Tragedy of Phaeton

According to classical mythology, the Roman god Phoebus Apollo (called Helios by the Greeks) drove the chariot of the sun across the sky each day, thus giving the earth its hours and seasons. His son, Phaeton, was a mortal. When the boy was teased because he claimed his father was a god, Phaeton asked Phoebus Apollo to prove he was his parent. In response, Phoebus Apollo promised Phaeton anything he wanted. Phaeton impulsively demanded to drive his father's chariot for one day. Although Phoebus Apollo knew the boy couldn't control the horses, he felt he could not deny his son's request and handed over the reins.

The chariot ran wild, scorching everything in its path with the sun's heat. To prevent the earth's destruction, Jupiter, the king of the gods, intervened. He hurled a thunderbolt at the chariot and sent it in a fiery plunge to earth.

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Fall of Phaeton*, c. 1604/1605, probably reworked c. 1606/1608, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund



Rubens' Dramatic Style

Rubens created this painting while he was studying in Italy. An inventive artist, he chose to depict the story at the height of its action, when the thunderbolt streaks in from the right and Phaeton plummets to the earth. The artist included figures with butterfly wings to symbolize the hours and the seasons; they gesture in horror as the pattern of night and day is disrupted. He also conveys the chaos that occurred when Phaeton lost control of the chariot. Everything in his dynamic composition is in motion—figures twist and tumble, and horses rear. The strong contrast between light and dark further intensifies the drama.

Rubens often chose to show the climax, or most dramatic moment, of a story.

Choose a story that interests you and make a drawing showing the most climatic moment.

*With a splitting crack of thunder
he lifted a bolt,
Poised it by his ear,
Then drove the barbed flash point-blank
into Phaeton.
The explosion
Snuffed the ball of flame
As it blew the chariot to fragments. Phaeton
Went spinning out of his life.*

*The crazed horses scattered.
They tore free, with scraps of the yoke,
Trailing their broken reins.
The wreckage fell through space,
Shattered wheels gyrating apart,
Shards of the car, the stripped axle,
Bits of harness—all in slow motion
Sprinkled through emptiness.*

*Phaeton, hair ablaze,
A fiery speck, lengthening a vapour trail,
Plunged toward earth
Like a star
Falling and burning out on a clear night.*

—excerpt from Ted Hughes' *Tales from Ovid*