

## *Rubens and the bird of paradise. Painting natural knowledge in the early seventeenth century*

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The dirty feet of a porter, the glowing face of the boy blowing on an incense burner: standing in front of Peter Paul Rubens's *Adoration of the Magi* (Fig. 1) at the Prado Museum one cannot help but focus on the small details that make up such an imposing composition.<sup>1</sup> This article is concerned with one such detail: the splendid aigrette on the Black Magus' turban. The beautiful plumage, the thin body of the bird, even its head and beak are clearly visible; only the legs are missing. This is not an ordinary plume: it is a bird of paradise.<sup>2</sup> Why did Rubens choose this wonder from the East Indies, this *perpetuum mobile* of the natural world, as the main adornment in the Black Magus' headdress? What does this choice of motif tell us about such a central figure in the composition, or about the *Adoration* theme on the whole? What does it reveal about Rubens's interests in natural history and the representation of natural elements in paintings?

In recent years the study of the connections between natural history and visual culture in early modern Europe has enjoyed an exuberant development. The *visual turn* experienced by the history of science, together with the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *The Adoration of the Magi*. 1609; 1628–29. Oil on canvas. 349 x 488 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado. On this painting see Rubens. *The Adoration of the Magi* (London: Paul Holberton, 2004), esp. Joost Vander Auwera, 'Rubens's *Adoration of the Magi* in light of its original Antwerp destination', 27–53 and Alejandro Vergara, 'The *Adoration of the Magi*. A case study in Rubens's creativity', 55–123.

<sup>2</sup> To my knowledge, this is the first time that the bird of paradise in Rubens's Prado *Adoration* is discussed in the literature. Elizabeth McGrath has made references to depictions of birds of paradise on turbans in later paintings by Frans Francken II, Karel van Mander III and Jan Boeckhorst; see 'Sibyls, Sheba and Jan Boeckhorst's "*Parts of the World*", in Arnout Balis, Paul Huvenne, Jeanine Lambrecht and Christine Van Mulders (eds.), *Florisant. Bijdragen tot de kunstgeschiedenis der Nederlanden (15–17 Eeuw)* (Brussels: VUB Press, 2005), 369, note 24, and cat. 26 in Vincent Boele, Esther Schreuder and Elmer Kolfin (eds.), *Black is Beautiful. Rubens to Dumas* (Amsterdam: Nieuwe Kerk, 2008), 200. See also Joaneath Spicer, 'Heliodorus's *An Ethiopian Story* in Seventeenth-Century European Art', in David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates (eds.), *The Image of the Black in Western Art. From the 'Age of Discovery' to the Age of Abolition*, Vol. 3, Part 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 328 and 389, note 81, who refers to Jean Michel Massing, 'Paradisaea Apoda: The Symbolism of the Bird of Paradise in the Sixteenth Century', in Jay A. Levenson (ed.), *Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16th & 17th Centuries, 3: Essays* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 28–37, 258–61, the most thorough account of the early modern visual representation of the bird of paradise.

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Fig. 1 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1609, 1628–29, oil on canvas, 349 × 488 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

contributions from other disciplines such as the history of art or the history of collecting, has led to many projects aimed at bringing to surface the multiple interactions between image-makers, image-collectors and the producers and consumers of natural knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this article is to explore these interconnections by focusing on the representation of the bird of paradise in the Prado *Adoration*. With this choice of visual material – an oil painting of large dimensions, produced by a high-profile artist and with a predominantly religious theme – this article also argues that there is much to be gained from an open and unprejudiced approach to early modern pictorial sources, no matter how detached they may seem (to us) from the practices commonly associated with natural history. In other words, a study of the intersections between early modern visual culture and contemporary knowledge-making practices should be prepared to examine any product of this interaction, notwithstanding its author, content or format. Ultimately, the aim is to highlight the multi-layered nature of early modern visual culture and evaluate its relevance with regard to the history of natural knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> See Sachiko Kusakawa, 'The Role of Images in the Development of Renaissance Natural History', *Archives of Natural History* 38 (2011), 189–213.

## THE TWO VERSIONS OF RUBENS'S PRADO ADORATION

Commissioned to mark the occasion of the signing of the Twelve Years' Truce between Spain and the United Provinces of the Northern Netherlands, the *Adoration of the Magi* was painted between 1609 and 1610, shortly after Rubens's return from Italy.<sup>4</sup> The work was displayed at the town hall of Antwerp, where the truce had been signed on 9 April 1609. A few years later the painting was presented as a gift from the city to Rodrigo Calderón, an Antwerp-born Spanish noble, who took it with him to Madrid. Two years after Calderón's downfall in 1621, the *Adoration* entered the royal collection at the Alcázar palace. It was there that Rubens was reunited with it, during his second visit to Spain, between 1628 and 1629.<sup>5</sup>

As it is well known, Rubens repainted the *Adoration* during this second visit. The painting was significantly expanded and many elements were added to its original composition. This is Rubens's painting at its present state in the Prado Museum. Regarding its first version, we have an approximate idea of how the work might have looked owing to a preliminary sketch, now in the Groninger Museum, and a workshop copy made around the end of 1612 or the beginning of 1613, before the *Adoration* was moved to Madrid.<sup>6</sup> Judging from the workshop copy, we observe that in the first version Rubens included the motif of the bird of paradise as part of the Black Magus' headwear. The beak, the head and the black, yellow and white feathers are clearly visible. The motif is absent, though, in the preliminary sketch of the painting. There is no aigrette either in the study that seems to have served as model for the head of the Black Magus.<sup>7</sup> In fact, no other known portrait or study by Rubens from this period features a bird of paradise, although he portrayed African or Oriental men on several occasions.<sup>8</sup>

Moving on to the second version of the *Adoration*, a quick comparison with the workshop copy shows that one of the elements that Rubens cared to repaint was the bird of paradise. Indeed, the bird seems larger, and its beak, head and plumage are depicted in more detail. As a consequence, the panache and the turban have gained more prominence. What could have motivated this new, definitely more striking depiction? As such a noticeable element in the enlarged composition, what does it account for?

<sup>4</sup> Vander Auwera, 'Rubens's *Adoration*', 31–35.

<sup>5</sup> On Rubens's activities in Spain see Alejandro Vergara, *Rubens and his Spanish patrons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> On the sketch see Julius S. Held, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens: A Critical Catalogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), Vol. 1, 450–53; and Vergara, 'Adoration of the Magi', 57–62. On the workshop copy see Christopher Norris, 'Rubens' *Adoration of the Kings of 1609*', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 14 (1963), 129–36; and Vergara, 'Adoration of the Magi', 65–7.

<sup>7</sup> *Study of a Black African Man with a Turban*. 1609. London, private collection. On this sketch see Joost Vander Auwera's entry on Boele, Schreuder and Kolfin, *Black is Beautiful*, 185. I follow Elizabeth McGrath's opinion that the sketch was made in Italy.

<sup>8</sup> See Elizabeth McGrath, 'Rubens and his Black Kings', *Rubens Bulletin. Koninklijk Museum Voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen* 2 (2008), 87–101 and Jean Michel Massing, 'The Black Magus in the Netherlands from Memling to Rubens', in Boele, Schreuder and Kolfin, *Black is Beautiful*, 32–49.

## TURBANS AND PANACHES: THE ORNAMENTAL USE OF THE BIRD OF PARADISE

Most of the earliest accounts of the bird of paradise refer to the ornamental use of the plumes, even the whole bird, in headwear. Nicolò de' Conti, a fifteenth-century Venetian traveller and merchant – generally regarded as the first European to mention the bird of paradise – alludes to this practice when he writes about a 'special bird' ('*avis praecipua*') from Java, 'without feet' ('*sine pedibus*'), whose skin and tail are greatly esteemed as head ornaments ('*pellis et cauda habentur preciosiores: quibus pro ornamento capitibus utuntur*').<sup>9</sup> Other accounts provided by Portuguese merchants describing New Guinea and the 'Moluccas' islands – the natural habitat of the birds – refer to them in similar terms. Writing in the 1520s, the apothecary Tomé Pires notes: 'Those which are prized more than any others come from the islands called Aru, birds which they bring over dead, called birds of paradise ("*passaros de Deus*")', and they say they come from heaven, and that they do not know how they are bred; and the Turks and Persians use them for making panaches – they are very suitable for this purpose.'<sup>10</sup> Similarly, António Galvão – governor of the Moluccas from 1536 to 1540 – refers to the birds as '*passaros myrrados, que sam mui estimados pera penachos*'.<sup>11</sup>

The arrival in 1522 of the first specimens in Europe – brought by members of the Magellan expedition which had just completed the first circumnavigation of the world – helped to spread the news about this rarity from the East Indies and its associated cultural practices. Witness accounts such as the one by the Italian explorer Antonio Pigafetta – a survivor of the Magellan expedition – or second-hand testimonies like those gathered by Maximilianus Transylvanus, secretary of Charles V, helped to establish the link between the features of the bird and its fanciful, heavenly nature. 'They told us that these birds came from the terrestrial paradise, and they call them *bolon diuata*, that is, "birds of God",' Pigafetta remarks in his travel diary.<sup>12</sup> On a similar vein, Transylvanus writes how the inhabitants of these islands 'call the bird Mamuco Diata, and they hold it in such reverence and religious esteem, that they

<sup>9</sup> Nicolò de' Conti, *India Recognita* (Milan: Ulderico Scinzenzeler, 1492), Avii-r.

<sup>10</sup> 'Os mais prezados Das Ilhas que se chamam daru vem os pasaros que trazê mortos que se chamã pasaros de d's E dizem que vem do cêo E que lhe nõ achã nascimento E destes os turqos E parses fazem penachos sam pa o tall vso conuenjemtês.' Tomé Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires. An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to Japan, written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515*, ed. Armando Cortesão (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944), Vol. 2, 442; English translation: Vol. 1, 209. The text circulated in manuscript, but was never printed.

<sup>11</sup> António Galvão, *Tratado. Que compôs o nobre e notauel capitão Antonio Galvão, dos diuersos e desuayrados caminhos, por onde nos tempos passados a pimenta e especearia veyo da Índia às nossas partes* (Lisboa: Ioam da Barreira, 1563), 35v.

<sup>12</sup> 'Costoro ne dicero questi uccelli venire dal paradiso terrestre e le chiamano *bolon diuata*, cioè "uccelli de Dio"'. Antonio Pigaferra, *Relazione del primo viaggio attorno al mondo*, ed. Andrea Canova (Padova: Antenore, 1999), 301.

believe that by it their kings are safe in war'.<sup>13</sup> Later accounts by naturalists continued to make reference to the symbolic and ornamental use of the '*manucodiata*', as it came to be known.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many of the texts containing these descriptions enjoyed a wide circulation. Conti's oral account was transcribed by Giovanni Poggio Bracciolini in the 1440s, and in 1492 was published in Latin under the title *India Recognita*, followed by translations into Portuguese (1502), Spanish (1503), Italian (1550) and English (1579, 1625). The Italian edition in particular, published by Giovanni Battista Ramusio in the first volume of his popular compilation of travel literature, *Navigazioni et Viaggi*, contributed to its dissemination.<sup>14</sup> A summarized version of Pires's *Suma*, rich in descriptions of Asian trade, was also included in the *Navigazioni et Viaggi* – although the information related to the Moluccas was omitted.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Pigafetta's account enjoyed a widespread circulation and was extensively read. Originally written in Italian, it was published in an abridged French version in 1525. The first Italian edition, published in 1536, was prepared by Ramusio, who later included it in his compilation.<sup>16</sup> Finally, first published in 1523 in Cologne and Rome, Transylvanus' account was also widely read, specially through Ramusio's 1536 edition of Pigafetta's text and the first volume of *Navigazioni et Viaggi*.<sup>17</sup>

In the light of this textual circulation, it is important to note that all through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the only birds of paradise that reached Europe were dead specimens. Moreover, as part of a process of preservation completed right after capture, the birds would lose part of their bodies – most importantly their feet – before being sold to local and foreign merchants. This absence of feet became a key element in the European conception of the bird of paradise as a natural wonder, giving support to the idea the *manucodiata* truly was a heavenly creature that spent its life in permanent flight. The claim was controversial, for it challenged Aristotle's long-accepted account of birds as legged animals.<sup>18</sup> The weight of evidence, however, both in terms of specimens and testimonies, seemed persuasive enough and during the whole of the sixteenth century the footless nature of the bird of paradise was considered and, to a large extent, accepted by

<sup>13</sup> 'Auiculam uero Mamuco Diata appellarunt. Quam adeo sancte religioseque habent, ut se ea reges tutos in bello existiment'. Maximilianus Transylvanus, *De Moluccis Insulis* (Coloniae: Eucharius Cervicornus, 1523), B.Vr. For the English translation see Edward J. Stanley, *The First Voyage around the World by Magellan* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1874), 205–06.

<sup>14</sup> See Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Primo Volume delle Navigazioni et Viaggi* (Venezia: Heredi di Lucantonio Giunti, 1550), 364v–371v.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 349r–64r.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 379v–397v.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 374r–379v.

<sup>18</sup> 'Some birds have feet which are not much use, and this accounts for their being called *apodes* (footless),' Aristotle had asserted. However, his view was that 'no animal is merely able to fly (winged), as the fish is merely able to swim.' Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, I, 487b, ed. and trans. by A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 13.



naturalists, from Conrad Gesner to Ulisse Aldrovandi.<sup>19</sup> By the time Carolus Clusius published his rebuttal to the absence of feet, in 1605,<sup>20</sup> the bird of paradise had become part of the European emblematic lore, both as a symbol of virtuous diligence and *contemptus mundi*, on the one hand, and rarity and exoticism, on the other. With or without feet, it would remain as one of the most sought-after items among collectors of curiosities.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE *MANUCODIATA* AND THE FIGURE OF THE 'ORIENTAL'

As the previous accounts suggest, by the time Rubens painted the first version of the *Adoration* the ornamental use of the bird of paradise not only was a well-documented practice but the basis of a long-established commercial activity.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the use of the bird as an aigrette carried a particular association with the figure of the 'Oriental', an imprecise and yet versatile category, comprising such varied social identities as the 'Turks', the 'Janissaries', the 'Persians' or the 'Arabs'.<sup>23</sup> A well-known example of this association is the story of the helmet designed by the Venetian Caorlini goldsmiths for the Ottoman Sultan Süleyman I: a lavishly decorated head ornament which, in addition to pearls and precious stones, featured an aigrette made up of 'the plumage of an animal which stays and lives in the air, has very soft feathers of various colours and comes from India; it is called chameleon and is worth a fortune' – the Venetian Marino Sanudo reported in 1532.<sup>24</sup> In his study of the extant images of this helmet, Otto Kurz was the first to identify the aigrette as a bird of paradise by pointing out the connection between the *manucodiata* and the chameleon.<sup>25</sup>

This association between the *manucodiata*, the tradition of ornamental headwear and the figure of the 'Oriental' would account for the symbolic

<sup>19</sup> Conrad Gesner, *Historiae animalium liber III* (Tiguri: Christoph. Froschouerum, 1555), 611–14; Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae* (Bononiae: Franciscum de Franciscis, 1599), 806–16.

<sup>20</sup> Carolus Clusius, *Exoticorum libri decem* (Lugduni: Officina Plantiniana, 1605), 359–63.

<sup>21</sup> Wilma George, 'Alive or Dead: Zoological Collections in the Seventeenth Century', in Oliver R. Impey and Arthur MacGregor (eds.), *The Origins of Museums. The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 247.

<sup>22</sup> See Pamela Swadling, *Plumes from Paradise*. (Coorparoo: Papua-New Guinea National Museum, 1996), Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>23</sup> Massing, 'Paradisaea Apoda', 30 and 259, note 17.

<sup>24</sup> On this helmet see Otto Kurz, 'A Gold Helmet Made in Venice for Sultan Sulayman the Magnificent', *Gazette Des Beaux-Arts* 74 (1969), 249–258, quotation: 249–50; Gülrü Necipoglu, 'Süleyman the Magnificent and the representation of power in the context of Ottoman-Hapsburg-Papal Rivalry', *Art Bulletin* 81 (1989), 401–27.

<sup>25</sup> Kurz, 'Gold Helmet', 250 and 257, notes 5–7. As Kurz points out, at the turn of the sixteenth century the chameleon was widely believed to be a bird, which fed on nothing but air. On this last feature the textual references are many: from Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* (Book VIII, LI) to Leonardo da Vinci's *Studies on the life and habits of animals*, where – as Kurz quotes – he wrote that the chameleon 'lives on air' ('*vive d'aria*') and 'flies above the clouds' ('*vola sopra le nuvole*'). Further references include the catalogue of the Museo Calceolari in Verona, where the *manucodiata* is classified as a 'chamaleon aereus'. See Jean Paul Richter (ed.), *The Literary Works of Leonardo Da Vinci* (London: Low, 1883), Vol. 2, 322; Cerutus Benedictus, *Musaeum Franc. Calceolari Iun. Veronensis* (Verona: Angelum Tamum, 1622), 668–73; Massing 2007, 260, note 39. Kurz also alludes to the mythical *huma*, the 'bird of paradise' traditionally associated with royalty in the Islamic world, which might be the basis of early modern links between the *manucodiata* and panache making.



Fig. 2 Rubens, *The Adoration of the Magi*, detail of Fig. 1, showing the aigrette on the Black Magus' turban

potential of Rubens's motif in the *Adoration*. Both the bird and the Magi belonged to an extraneous imagery which for Rubens and his contemporaries was charged with a strong sense of novelty. Thus the juxtaposition of the outlandish bird of paradise and the most exotic of the Three Wise Men: the Black Magus. As Elizabeth McGrath and Jean Michel Massing have pointed out, this character plays a central role in Rubens's treatment of the *Adoration* theme in so much as it personifies the seductiveness of Eastern luxury.<sup>26</sup>

In the specific example that concerns us here, what makes Rubens's depiction so intriguing is the explicitness with which he portrays the *manucodiata* as part of the Magus' attire. Plumes, body, head, beak: it is almost a complete bird (Fig. 2). From an iconographic perspective the depiction of feathered turbans in *Adoration* paintings could hardly be regarded as a novelty; many

<sup>26</sup> McGrath, 'Rubens and his Black Kings' and Massing, 'Black Magus in the Netherlands'. On the tradition of the Black Magus see Paul H. D. Kaplan, *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1985). On the cult of the Magi see Richard C. Trexler, *The Journey of the Magi. Meanings in the History of a Christian Story* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

examples from the Mannerist tradition attest to it. This is different. It seems as if such a vivid portrayal was a way of highlighting the bird itself. Indeed, both the depiction of the motif and its position in the composition suggest that this was not intended as a conventional representation of a fanciful panache. Rather, it was designed so the aigrette would be unambiguously identified as a bird of paradise. Why?

#### THE BIRD OF PARADISE IN EARLY SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTING

As Arnout Balis has demonstrated, Rubens was no stranger to the challenges posed by the depiction of natural objects in painting – from the portrayal of common fauna to the representation of exotic creatures.<sup>27</sup> The motif of the bird of paradise would have been a relatively familiar one by the time he started working on the *Adoration*, given that his friend and collaborator Jan Brueghel the Elder was already the leading Flemish expert in this type of representation.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, either during his stay in Italy or upon his return to the Netherlands, Rubens would have become acquainted with Brueghel's landscape and allegorical compositions, many of which featured the wondrous *manucodiata*. As a matter of fact, Rubens and Brueghel collaborated on one such composition, *Paradise with the Fall of Man* (c. 1617), where a bird of paradise is depicted *with feet* next to Adam.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to its occurrence in this renewed trend of natural painting, by the 1610s the *manucodiata* had enjoyed several decades of presence as a *visual* motif. Some of the best-known representations were those included in the above-mentioned natural history treatises by Gesner, Aldrovandi and Clusius, which proved to be popular publications among patrons and collectors. Concurrently, starting with the publication of *Emblemata* (1564), by Johannes Sambucus, the bird of paradise entered the book of emblems repertoire, with examples ranging from relatively well-known treatises by Luca Contile and Juan de Borja, to best-sellers such as Joachim Camerarius' multi-volume work, *Symbolorum et emblematic . . . centuriae*.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, images of birds of paradise were published in travel compilations and books on wonders, such as

<sup>27</sup> See 'Rubens as an Animal Painter', in Arnout Balis, *Rubens' Hunting Scenes*, Vol. 2. Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard 18 (London: Harvey Miller, 1986), 70–87.

<sup>28</sup> On Brueghel's interests in natural knowledge see Arienne Faber Kolb, *Jan Brueghel the Elder. The Entry of the Animals into Noah's Ark* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005) and Marringje Rikken and Paul J. Smith, 'Jan Brueghel's *Allegory of Air* (1621) from a natural historical perspective', in Eric Jorink and Bart Ramakers (eds.), *Art and Science in the Early Modern Netherlands* (Zwolle: Wbooks, 2011), 86–115.

<sup>29</sup> Paul J. Smith, 'Sympathy in Eden. On "*Paradise with the Fall of Man*" by Rubens and Brueghel', in Christine Göttler and Wolfgang Neuber (eds.), *Spirits unseen. The Representation of Subtle Bodies in Early Modern European Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 211–44; Anne T. Woollett and Ariane Van Suchtelen (eds.), *Rubens & Brueghel: A Working Friendship* (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2006), esp. 64–71.

<sup>30</sup> Johannes Sambucus, *Emblemata* (Antuerpiae: Christopherus Plantinus, 1564), 132; Luca Contile, *Ragionamento di Luca Contile sopra la proprietà delle imprese* (Pavia, Girolamo Bartoli, 1574), 77v–78r; Juan de Borja, *Empresas morales* (Prague: Jorge Nigrin, 1581), 49v–50r; Joachim Camerarius, *Symbolorum & emblematum ex volatilibus et insectis desumptorum centuria tertia collecta* (Noribergae: Paulus Kaufmann, 1596), 43r–43v.



those by Pierre Belon, Pierre Boaistuau or Ambroise Paré, as well as in the form of printed pamphlets and coloured drawings in picture albums.<sup>31</sup>

The circulation of these representations, together with the editorial success of Ramusio's *Navigazioni et Viaggi* and other textual accounts, helped to establish the motif as part of the European symbolic culture. By the 1600s, therefore, the bird was not an obscure or unfamiliar subject, and yet Rubens's *Adoration* comes through as one of the earliest high-profile works in which a bird of paradise is depicted as an *aigrette* in a painting. In order to appreciate this claim fully we need to consider the completion dates of each version of the *Adoration* as well as those occasions in between when Rubens revisited the motif. Additionally, we should take into account other variants produced by contemporary artists, for Rubens was not the only one depicting birds of paradise as panaches in the early decades of the seventeenth century.

As already discussed, it is likely that Rubens's first version of the Prado *Adoration* was completed before the end of 1609. To my knowledge, there are at least two paintings prior to this date that feature a bird of paradise in a similar fashion: Hendrick van Balen's *Adoration of the Magi*, from 1598, and Pieter Lastman's *Adoration of the Magi*, from 1608.<sup>32</sup> In both cases the bird is attached to the Black Magus' turban and is easily differentiable from other aigrettes depicted in the paintings. In addition to these works, a portrait of Charles I painted by Robert Peake around 1610 also features a bird of paradise, attached to a hat.<sup>33</sup>

Rubens returned to the motif less than a decade after his first version of the Prado painting, when he produced several hunting scenes featuring characters '*alla moresca e turcesca molto bizarra*', according to his own account.<sup>34</sup> The two compositions where the bird is included are *Tiger, Lion and Leopard Hunt*

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Belon, *Portraits d'oiseaux, animaux, serpens, herbes, arbres, hommes et femmes d'Arabie & Egypte* (Paris: Guillaume Cauellat, 1557), 23v; Pierre Boaistuau, *Histoires prodigieuses* (Paris: Vincent Certenas, 1560), 151r; Ambroise Paré, *Deux livres de chirurgie* (Paris: André Wechel, 1573), 574–6. On pamphlets and coloured drawings see Fritz Koreny, *Albrecht Dürer and the Animal Plant Studies of the Renaissance* (Boston: Little Brown, 1988) and Massing, '*Paradisaea Apoda*'.

<sup>32</sup> Hendrick van Balen, *Adoration of the Kings*. 1598. Brussels, Notre-Dame-de-la-Chapelle; Pieter Lastman, *The Adoration of the Magi*. 1608. Aachen, Suermondt Museum. On the first painting, see Bettina Werche, *Hendrick Van Balen (1575–1632)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), Vol. 1, 142; Vol. 2, 330. Lastman's *Adoration* is reproduced in Bindman and Gates, *The Image of the Black*, 289.

<sup>33</sup> See David Attenborough and Errol Fuller, *Drawn from Paradise. The Discovery, Art and Natural History of the Birds of Paradise* (London: Harper Collins, 2012), 51. Donald Lach refers to Thomas Platter's account of an audience with Queen Elizabeth I in 1599, in which she wore 'a gown of pure white satin, gold-embroidered, with a whole bird of Paradise for panache'; Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe, Volume II: A Century of Wonder. Book 1: The Visual Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 102–03. In connection with this last testimony, I wonder if the headdress worn by Elizabeth in the 'Rainbow portrait' (c. 1600) features a bird of paradise as an aigrette. Without a proper analysis this remains an open question, but the partially visible plume on the headdress bears a resemblance to a desiccated *manucodiata*.

<sup>34</sup> Balis, *Rubens' Hunting Scenes*, 123–53. The expression is used by Rubens in a letter to Sir Dudley Carleton, on May 12, 1618. See Max Rooses and Charles Ruelens (eds.), *Correspondance de Rubens et documents épistolaires concernant sa vie et ses oeuvres* (Anvers: Jos. Maes, 1887), Vol. 2, doc. CLXVIII, 149–50.

and *Lion and Leopard Hunt*, painted around 1616–17.<sup>35</sup> In both cases, the motif is associated with the same turbaned figure on the upper-left side of the composition. Again, the beak, head and plumage are easily discernible. Two other paintings from this period, attributed to Rubens's workshop, also include representations of complete birds, but the identification with the *manucodiata* seems less clear.<sup>36</sup>

By this time other artists were also using the motif of the *manucodiata* as an aigrette in their compositions. A beautiful example is Abraham Janssens's *Olympus*, where the bird is attached to the helmet of the goddess Minerva.<sup>37</sup> Like Rubens, Janssens had been commissioned to produce a painting on the occasion of the Twelve Years' Truce. It is then likely that he saw Rubens' use of the motif while both the *Adoration* and his own contribution were on display at the town hall of Antwerp. Another Flemish artist whose works feature the *manucodiata* is Frans Francken II. A well-known example is his *Allegory of the Abdication of Charles V* (c. 1630).<sup>38</sup> Willem van Haecht also included an aigrette that closely resembles a bird of paradise in his *Apelles Painting Campaspe* (c. 1630).<sup>39</sup>

Coming back to Rubens, two more works from the 1620s allow us to appreciate the potentials of his use of this motif. The first painting belongs to his Medici cycle: *The Exchange of Two Princesses from France and Spain upon the Bidassoa, November 9, 1615*, which features a bird of paradise in the helmet of the figure that personifies Spain.<sup>40</sup> The other great rendition from this period is his second version of the Prado *Adoration*, from 1628–29. As this brief survey reveals, Rubens may not have been the first artist to paint a bird of paradise as an ornament; and he was certainly not the last, for many authors would continue to represent whole *manucodiatas* as aigrettes – most notably Karel van Mander III.<sup>41</sup> But given the magnificent dimensions of the enlarged Prado *Adoration* (349 × 488 cm) and the relevance of its context of production and ownership, Rubens's depiction remains the most outstanding rendition among these earliest representations. In the final sections of this article I will elaborate on the reasons that could have motivated Rubens's enhanced repainting of this motif.

<sup>35</sup> Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts; Dresden, Gemäldegalerie. See Balis, *Rubens' Hunting Scenes*, 133–46 and 149–53.

<sup>36</sup> *Alboin and Rosamunde*. 1615. Viena, Kunsthistorisches Museum; *Adoration of the Magi*. c. 1619. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts.

<sup>37</sup> 1610–20. Munich, Alte Pinakothek.

<sup>38</sup> See Elizabeth McGrath, 'Humanism, Allegorical Invention and the Personification of the Continents', in A. Balis, C. Van de Velde and H. Vlieghe (eds.), *Concept, Design and Execution: The Creative Process in Flemish Painting (1550–1700)* (Antwerp: Brepols, 2000), 43–71.

<sup>39</sup> The Hague, Mauritshuis.

<sup>40</sup> 1622–25. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

<sup>41</sup> McGrath, 'Sibyls, Sheba' and Spicer, 'Heliodorus's *An Ethiopian Story*'. Another example can be found in the central panel of the *Allegory of Asia*, by Jan van Kessel I. 1664–66. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.

The alignment of Mary and the column, the ritualistic presentation of Jesus, the Magi themselves: Rubens's *Adoration* is dominated by references to Catholicism, with a clear emphasis on Counter-Reformist values.<sup>42</sup> However, in addition to its unmistakably religious argument, the painting is also a work about trade and the circulation of goods. Most authors have emphasized the 'commercial narrative', the 'iconography of commercial transport', that underlie the *Adoration* genre.<sup>43</sup> With its evocation of luxury and exoticism the image of the Magi proved an effective way to channel the ambitions and anxieties of a trade-dependent territory like the Netherlands. This helps to understand the circumstances surrounding Rubens's commission of 1609: it was hoped that the end of hostilities between Spain and the Dutch Republic would reactivate local economies, thus bringing prosperity to Antwerp. The *Adoration* theme chosen by Rubens mirrored these collective expectations, as did Abraham Janssens's composition, *Antwerp and the Scheldt*, in reference to the city's main gateway of wealth: its river.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, it is important to consider the socio-cultural significance of the *Adoration* theme in other European contexts. The case of Florence – which Rubens visited during his Italian sojourn (1600–08) – is a particularly illustrative example given the well-known association between the Medici family and the cult of the Magi throughout the Quattrocento, which resulted in a substantial amount of artistic works devoted to this subject: from the frescoes in Cosimo de' Medici's cell at the Convent of San Marco, painted by Benozzo Gozzoli, and the decoration of Cosimo's private chapel in the Palazzo Medici – the *Cappella dei Magi* – also by Gozzoli, to versions of the *Adoration of the Magi* by Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi or Sandro Botticelli.<sup>45</sup>

The portrayal of family members and acquaintances of the Medici in these works – the frescoes at the *Cappella dei Magi* and Botticelli's *Adoration* of around 1475 are well-known examples – demonstrates to what extent the Magi came to be adopted as a truly 'Medici icon'.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the patronage of the arts, the Medici's appropriation of the subject extended to

<sup>42</sup> On the reinvigorated religious iconography of the second version see Vergara, 'Adoration of the Magi', 117–21. On Counter-Reformist values in Rubens's work, see Thomas L. Glen, *Rubens and the Counter Reformation. Studies in his Religious Paintings between 1609 and 1620* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 135–42 and Barbara Haeger, 'Rubens' *Adoration of the Magi* and the program for the High Altar of St Michael's Abbey in Antwerp', *Simiolus* 25 (1997), 45–71.

<sup>43</sup> Dan Ewing, 'Magi and Merchants: the Force behind the Antwerp Mannerists' *Adoration* Pictures', *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum Voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen 2004/2005* (2006), 297, 282.

<sup>44</sup> See Frans Baudouin, *Pietro Paolo Rubens* (Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1977), 71–73.

<sup>45</sup> See Rab Hatfield, *Botticelli's Uffizi Adoration: A Study in Pictorial Content* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Cristina Acidini (ed.), *The Chapel of the Magi: Benozzo Gozzoli's Frescoes in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi Florence* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994); and Dale Kent, *Cosimo De' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Kent, *Cosimo De' Medici*, 315.

other aspects of Florentine life, such as the annual celebration of the Epiphany, organized by a confraternity devoted to the Magi, the *Compagnia de' Magi*.<sup>47</sup> An extremely popular event, this feast saw the most illustrious families of the city performing in a magnificent parade; a re-enactment of the display of lavishness and exoticism represented in the painted versions of the procession of the Magi.<sup>48</sup>

In this regard, the significance of the Florentine case for our understanding of the context in which Rubens's *Adoration* was conceived and appreciated is twofold. Firstly, the Medici's multifaceted adoption of the cult of the Magi not only reveals the artistic and devotional aspects of this subject but also – more radically than in the Netherlandish context – its social and political dimensions. Without denying its elements of piousness, the Medici's attachment to the theme – both in terms of patronage and their involvement in public events – stands out as a celebration of mercantilism and power at the service of a well-defined political agenda.<sup>49</sup> Secondly, the popularity of the cult in fifteenth-century Florence brings to light a reinvigorated fascination with the exotic East, just as the medieval worldview was giving way to a new conception of the world marked by the discovery of new territories, the expansion of trade, and the development of knowledge. Pictorially this is expressed by the detailed representation of foreign complexions and attires, including the depiction of unusual animals as part of the travelling company.<sup>50</sup> The Magi themselves would have been perceived not only as dignitaries coming from distant lands but also as learned sages, the embodiment of an ancient Oriental wisdom which philosophers in the Medicean circle such as Marsilio Ficino were trying to revive.<sup>51</sup>

A rare creature and a valuable commodity itself, the bird of paradise would seem like a fitting element in such a pictorial tradition. Furthermore, its significance as a motif would be magnified by the association with its place of origin: the Moluccas or 'Spice Islands'. To think of the *manucodiata* was to think of clove, nutmeg, mace, pepper; all the goods whose circulation was reshaping the world's economy.<sup>52</sup> An example of this connection concerns two of the gifts traditionally associated with the Magi: frankincense and myrrh.<sup>53</sup> The mortuary symbolism and the ceremonial use of these commodities echoed the methods of preservation that provided the *manucodiata* with its

<sup>47</sup> Rab Hatfield, 'The Compagnia de' Magi,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 33 (1970), 107–61.

<sup>48</sup> After the expulsion of the Medici in 1494 the *Compagnia* ceased to function and the procession was suppressed. *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>49</sup> Acidini, *Chapel of the Magi*, 363–70.

<sup>50</sup> Kent, *Cosimo De' Medici*, 312–15.

<sup>51</sup> Stephen M. Buhler, 'Marsilio Ficino's *De Stella Magorum* and Renaissance Views of the Magi', *Renaissance Quarterly* 43, No. 2 (1990), 348–31.

<sup>52</sup> See Pires, *Suma Oriental*, Vol. 2, 270. I wish to thank Simon Schaffer for his suggestive questions on this matter.

<sup>53</sup> Ewing, 'Magi and Merchants', 288–9.

unique features: a light body, splendid feathers, and no legs; '*passaros myrrados*', to repeat António Galvão's expression.<sup>54</sup>

Since their arrival at the Moluccas in 1512 and following the signing of the Treaty of Zaragoza (1529), the overseas spice trade between the East Indies and Europe had been largely controlled by the Portuguese. With the creation of the *English East India Company* (1600) and the *Dutch East India Company* (1602), this control – shared by Portugal and Spain, after the union of the two crowns in 1580 – came under serious threat. In this context, the signing of a truce to stop an already four-decade long confrontation would have seemed like a good measure to relieve the pressure exerted by this threat. Twenty years later, at the time of Rubens's reunion with his *Adoration*, the situation had worsened as far as the Spanish interests in the spice trade were concerned. The European market was mostly in Dutch hands, and the prospects of regaining control were slight, given Spain's critical position in the political scenario.

These circumstances are of great importance to understand the context in which the second Prado *Adoration* was painted. Rubens's involvement in a series of diplomatic missions as a representative of the Spanish crown had brought him back to the country for the second time. As many scholars have pointed out, several aspects of this involvement came to be reflected in the second version of the *Adoration*, the most important being a self-portrait – just as Benozzo Gozzoli and Sandro Botticelli had done before him – which shows Rubens wearing a gold chain and sword, symbols of his noble status.<sup>55</sup> Scholars have also drawn a parallel between the portrayal of the Magi as peace emissaries in the original 1609 version and Rubens's own position as a peace delegate in the 1620s.<sup>56</sup> However, the extent to which the motif of the bird of paradise could be regarded as an allusion to the political and economic context at the time of Rubens's second visit to Spain has not previously been addressed.

Here I propose a twofold interpretation. Firstly, the *manucodiata* could be seen as a particularly appealing motif among the many that conformed to the sense of geographical diversity commonly associated with the *Adoration* genre – inasmuch as it was a celebration of Christ's recognition by gentiles coming from all over the world.<sup>57</sup> In a context like 1629 Madrid, this sense of geographical diversity would have echoed the still thriving imperial ambitions of the Spanish crown. In this regard, the repainted version of the *Adoration* – completed with the approval and the frequent supervision of King Philip IV himself<sup>58</sup> – would have worked as a pictorial claim for a similar type of ecumenical recognition: that of the power of Catholic Spain over its world-

<sup>54</sup> Kaplan, *Rise of the Black Magus*, 26–34 and Trexler, *Journey of the Magi*, 21, 41. A further connection with the star of Bethlehem is highly questionable, despite the resemblance between the *manucodiata* imagery and early modern depictions of shooting stars and comets.

<sup>55</sup> Vergara, '*Adoration of the Magi*', 121–2. On Gozzoli and Botticelli's self-portraits in their *Adoration* scenes see Acidini, *Chapel of the Magi*, 358, 360, and Hatfield, *Botticelli's Adoration*, 31–32.

<sup>56</sup> Baudouin, *Rubens*, 71.

<sup>57</sup> McGrath, 'Rubens and his Black Kings', 90–91.

<sup>58</sup> Vergara, *Rubens Spanish patrons*, 90–93.



stretching territories. Rubens had already established a connection between the bird of paradise and Spain in his earlier painting, *The Exchange of Two Princesses*, where the depiction of the motif on the helmet would have evoked the gifts of invincibility and protection traditionally attributed to the bird.<sup>59</sup> Secondly, in connection to the spice trade specifically, the bird of paradise could be seen as another element in the 'commercial narrative' underlying the painting: a symbol of the Iberian concerns regarding a territory and a market that were no longer under control. Imperial hopes and trade interests, in sum, would account for the inclusion of this motif in a work permeated by the desire for political stability and universal recognition. But what about Rubens himself? What does this motif reveal about his own interests as a painter?

#### PAINTING NATURAL KNOWLEDGE

As has already been hinted, the second version of the *Adoration* constitutes a fine example of self-fashioning: Rubens presented himself as a legitimate political agent, a *connoisseur* of the world affairs. In addition to this perception, the motif of the bird of paradise illustrates another expression of connoisseurship and self-characterization: the representation of natural knowledge. As Pamela Smith and Paula Findlen have argued, the fashion for naturalistic representation would have a tremendous impact on the social and intellectual status of early modern artists devoted to the natural world.<sup>60</sup> Natural knowledge and natural objects were certainly common currency in Rubens's circle, a group that included noble patrons, well-off collectors and intellectuals, as well as fellow artists and artisans.<sup>61</sup> Among the latter, Jan Brueghel the Elder and Frans Snyders are two well-known examples of painters whose interest in natural history turned their work into a sophisticated display of animal and botanical illustrations.

Another member of this circle, whose name enhances his relevance for our story, was the head of the Plantin press and Rubens's school friend, Balthasar Moretus. As Elizabeth McGrath and Dan Ewing have pointed out, the significant number of early modern Antwerp merchants named after the Magi is an indication of the popularity of the theme at the time.<sup>62</sup> Balthasar's father, Jan Moretus, even adopted the symbol of the Black Magus – the Moor – as the family emblem, a fact of which Rubens would certainly have been aware.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> These elements must have resonated with the painting's victorious overtones regarding the triumph of Catholicism over the Protestant Reformation. See Vergara, 'Adoration of the Magi', 117–21 and Haeger, 'Rubens' Adoration'.

<sup>60</sup> See Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan. Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen (eds.), *Merchants and Marvels. Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>61</sup> See Julius S. Held, *Rubens and his Circle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

<sup>62</sup> McGrath, 'Rubens and his Black Kings', 96 and Ewing, 'Magi and Merchants', 291.

<sup>63</sup> McGrath, 'Rubens and his Black Kings', 96.

Moretus is an important character for at least two reasons. Firstly, as the director of one of the most important publishing firms in Europe, his expertise in all matters of printed culture – from book distribution to contacts with authors and traders – would have been considerable. Secondly, it was through him that Rubens acquired many of the books for his personal library, including natural history treatises by authors such as Gesner and Aldrovandi.<sup>64</sup> In addition to their rich textual content – the subject of much discussion within Rubens's circle – these frequently illustrated works could serve as model books for the depiction of natural motifs. Aldrovandi's *Ornithologiae* is particularly noteworthy for it includes five woodcuts of the bird of paradise, the most comprehensive set of images published up to that date.

Judging from the workshop copy, the bird in the 1609 *Adoration* does not seem to have been based on any of these five images – or any other published at the time. As far as the second version is concerned, it is difficult to assess which source Rubens might have used. Most likely, he modelled his *manucodiata* after Brueghel's studies of the bird, which the latter reproduced in his paintings. In particular, Rubens's depiction bears a close resemblance to the feathers held by the central figure in at least two allegorical works by Brueghel produced around 1608–11.<sup>65</sup> Brueghel's depictions, in turn, resemble a set of watercolours of birds of paradise from the picture album collection of Rudolph II, whose court Brueghel visited in 1604.<sup>66</sup> This successive borrowing and repetition of studies and models was by no means exceptional in Rubens's time. On the contrary, scholars have emphasized what common practice it was to copy motifs from other artists, particularly when it was not possible to depict specimens 'from the life'.<sup>67</sup>

Either using models or painting '*ad vivum*', throughout his career Rubens never shied away from the challenge of representing natural elements. The Prado *Adoration* may not be the most illustrative example in this regard, but does offer suggestive evidence of the painter's skills. More significantly, though, the *Adoration* brings to light another aspect of the interaction between early modern painting and natural knowledge: the wide-ranging scope of natural history as a discipline, which at the time would cover issues beyond the

<sup>64</sup> On Rubens's library see Elizabeth McGrath, 'Rubens and his Books', in *Rubens. Subjects from History*. Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard 13, 1 (London: Harvey Miller, 1997), 55–67; Alfons K. L. Thijs, *Prosper Avents: De Bibliotheek Van Pieter Pauwel Rubens* (Antwerp: Vereniging der Antwerpse Bibliofielen, 2001); Kristin Belkin and Fiona Healy, *A House of Art. Rubens as Collector* (Antwerp: Rubenshuis & Rubenianum, 2004). I wish to thank Elizabeth McGrath and Peter Mason for these references.

<sup>65</sup> *Allegory of air*. c. 1608. Roma, Galleria Doria Pamphilj; *Allegory of air*. 1611. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts. I follow the dates and attributions provided by Rikken and Smith, 'Brueghel's *Allegory of Air*', 108, notes 21, 22, 35.

<sup>66</sup> Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Codex Miniatus 42, fol. 119r and, in particular, Codex Miniatus 130, fol. 14r, reproduced in Herbert Haupt *et al*, *Le bestiaire de Rodolphe II: Cod. min. 129 et 130 de la Bibliothèque nationale d'Autriche* (Paris: Citadelles, 1990), Fig. 103. I wish to thank Florike Egmond for having shared information and reproductions of these illustrations.

<sup>67</sup> Kolb, *Entry of the Animals*. See also Peter Parshall, 'Imago Contrafacta: Images and Facts in the Northern Renaissance', *Art History* 16 (1993), 554–79 and Claudia Swan, 'Ad vivum, naer het leven, from the life: defining a mode of representation', *Word and Image* 11, (1995), 353–372.

study of the fauna and flora of a certain place, to include the pursuit of knowledge about the culture of its inhabitants and the translation of this knowledge into the European lore.<sup>68</sup> This is the kind of natural history that permeates the Prado *Adoration*, which in Rubens's hands becomes an alternative means for self-fashioning. The motif of the bird of paradise constitutes the visual manifestation of a natural historical fact: the use of preserved *manucodiatas* as panaches both by Moluccan rulers and other ethnic groups, including those associated with the Black Magus.<sup>69</sup>

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS: RUBENS'S *ADORATION* AND THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE

Rubens's *Adoration of the Magi* may not seem like the usual case study for a historian of science and yet, as this article has demonstrated, the painting provides a firm basis for a discussion of the relationship between natural history and European visual culture in the first decades of the seventeenth century. The motif of the bird of paradise in particular has proved to be a resourceful means to explore the representation of natural knowledge in Rubens's *oeuvre* and the uses of this representation in the context of court culture – both Netherlandish and Spanish.

Imperial ambitions, global trade, interest in the exotic, the exhibition of knowledge: having unveiled the intersection of these themes in the Prado *Adoration* also demonstrates the advantages of incorporating different methodologies to the analysis of a single historical object – a painting by Rubens, in this case – thus reinforcing the claim for an interdisciplinary approach to the studies of art and science, and to history as a field of enquiry more generally.

Back at the Prado Museum, in front of the *Adoration*, the bird of paradise, Rubens's sophisticated *nature morte*, seems livelier than ever – the kind of detail in a painting, this *Paradisaea Rubensiana*, that once discovered one cannot help looking for in every other work. Ultimately this is the most positive outcome of the type of study that I have rehearsed in this paper: the ability to identify a pictorial motif and make sense of its meaning, on the one hand, and the encouragement to apply this skill to any work of art or visual expression, on the other. In other words: an exploration of new ways of looking into images, departing from the conviction that there is much in them to look at with regard to the visual representation of knowledge.

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<sup>68</sup> Gianna Pomata and Nancy G Siraisi (eds.), *Historia. Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> I owe this appreciation of the scope of early modern natural history to Peter Mason. Other allusions to this 'ethnographic' knowledge associated with natural history include Rubens's depiction of individuals from different ethnic groups, as in his *Adoration of the Magi*. 1626. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten. On this issue see McGrath, 'Rubens and his Black Kings' and Jean Michel Massing, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*: Vol. 3, Part 2. *From the 'Age of discovery' to the Age of Abolition. Europe and the World Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).