

# The Career of a Copier

Kathryn McNeilly



*St. Teresa of Avila Pleading for Souls in Purgatory*, Abraham Van Diepenbeeck, 1600/1699, image, Flanders

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Topics in Baroque

Kelly Helmstutler-Didio

### The Career of a Copier

Abraham Van Diepenbeeck is an under-recognized Flemish painter from the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> One distinguishing characteristic about him is the fact that, throughout his entire career, he is a close follower and talented student of the famous artist Peter Paul Rubens.<sup>2</sup> Diepenbeeck begins his career as a glass painter; he takes after his father to get his start in the art world.<sup>3</sup> When Rubens discovers Diepenbeeck's talent, Diepenbeeck is not only able to work in Rubens' studio but is later employed by Rubens for some of his endeavors.<sup>4</sup> Something interesting that historians have discovered is that Diepenbeeck is encouraged by Rubens to copy many works from France, both for Diepenbeeck's own learning and for Rubens' benefit.<sup>5</sup> Diepenbeeck is sent throughout Italy and France to copy works which are studied and used for further creation of art.<sup>6</sup> There are about 160 known copies of European work done by Diepenbeeck.<sup>7</sup> However, his surviving paintings are few considering the short length of his career.<sup>8</sup>

This paper will mainly focus on the similarities and differences between a painting of Saint Teresa of Avila Pleading for Souls in Purgatory by Abraham Van Diepenbeeck and the original by Peter

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<sup>1</sup> Matthias Depoorter, *Baroque in the Southern Netherlands* (Vlaamse Kunstcollectie, 2011), 1

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Wood, *Padre Resta's Flemish Drawings. Van Diepenbeeck, Van Thulden, Rubens, and the School of Fontainbleu*. Master Drawings, Vol. 28 No. 1 (Master Drawings Association, 1990), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Matthias Depoorter, *Baroque in the Southern Netherlands* (Vlaamse Kunstcollectie, 2011), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Wood, *Padre Resta's Flemish Drawings. Van Diepenbeeck, Van Thulden, Rubens, and the School of Fontainbleu*. Master Drawings, Vol 28 No. 1 (Master Drawings Association, 1990), 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

Paul Rubens. It seems to be a copy, or is at least inspired by Rubens' painting. There are many similarities in the paintings, but it seems that, at this point in his career, Diepenbeeck is capable of moving away from copying slightly and adds his own artistic license to the piece.<sup>9</sup> Diepenbeeck, though a skilled copier of works, uses this to further his career by putting his own style into his pieces.<sup>10</sup> I also want to analyze briefly the ways in which each artist adheres to and counters the typical ideals of vision paintings in the seventeenth century.

There is another pupil of Rubens that Rubens also later employs to do copies. Diepenbeeck has been found to copy some of this man's art. Theodor van Thulden works alongside Diepenbeeck to copy Primaticcio's work in France.<sup>11</sup> There are a series of copied chalk drawings from France by Diepenbeeck alone including Our Lady of Mount Carmel: The Madonna and Child Surrounded by Angels and Ecce Homo.<sup>12</sup> Both of these men take a number of separate borrowings from different paintings and other works and assemble them into new compositions.<sup>13</sup> This provides a link between Rubens and his pupils and illuminates his relationship with Van Diepenbeeck who later becomes an expert in making drawn copies of Franco-Italian sources.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes these are used by other printmakers and painters, but this occasionally causes legal trouble for Diepenbeeck.<sup>15</sup>

The subject matter and composition of the painting by Diepenbeeck are very similar to that of Rubens' painting. Both are oil paintings on canvas of Saint Teresa of Avila pleading for souls that are in purgatory. Saint Teresa is depicted kneeling in front of what historians believe to have identified as the

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<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Wood, *Padre Resta's Flemish Drawings. Van Diepenbeeck, Van Thulden, Rubens, and the School of Fontainebleau*. Master Drawings, Vol. 28 No. 1 (Master Drawings Association, 1990), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 3.

resurrected Christ.<sup>16</sup> Diepenbeeck's painting includes a man who art historians believe could be perceived as God and each painting includes angels to represent the heavenly realm. These similarities indicate that this is a very similar snapshot in time, if not the exact same moment depicted in both paintings.

It is interesting to note the differences between these two paintings because they each have characteristics of different centuries though they are similar pieces. These paintings are both typical of vision paintings as they show saints with companions kneeling before priests beholding, in a vision, the effects of intercession.<sup>17</sup> One or more divine figures appear and talk to or sometimes touch the nuns which is evident in both Diepenbeeck and Rubens' paintings.<sup>18</sup> The narrative is usually depicted on two levels with the setting held on earth and the heavenly realm in a vision above.<sup>19</sup> Both paintings do this but Diepenbeeck employs this technique by showing Saint Teresa kneeling in the background of the painting with the vision above her in the foreground; very typical of a fifteenth century vision painting. The fact that Rubens does not utilize this method is more typical of the seventeenth century as painting became less instructive and involved less religious subjects. This means that Rubens created a piece that could probably be enjoyed by most but would only be understood as this particular vision by viewers who were well-educated on the subject of Saint Teresa. Rubens includes angels to remind the viewer that this is a divine moment but combines heaven with earth, and possibly also hell rather than floating the heavenly realm above and placing Teresa on earth below. Diepenbeeck also includes a symbol of the Holy Ghost in the dove that floats above the heads of Saint Teresa, God and the resurrected Christ as

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<sup>16</sup> Jeremy Wood, *Padre Resta's Flemish Drawings. Van Diepenbeeck, Van Thulden, Rubens, and the School of Fontainbleu*. Master Drawings, Vol. 28 No. 1 (Master Drawings Association, 1990), 10

<sup>17</sup> Rosalva Loretto Lopez, *The Devil, Women, and the Body in Seventeenth-Century Puebla Convents* (The Academy of Franciscan History, 2002), 189.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 184.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 187.

many paintings of the divine do. Diepenbeeck's utilization of the presence of the Holy Ghost, the parallel image of Saint Teresa in the background and the disclusion of hell suggest fifteenth century standards are employed in his painting. Rubens painting is more modern and less instructive than this. It does not spell out the narrative as much. Through analysis of this painting we see in these techniques that Diepenbeeck's vision painting is more typical of the fifteenth century while Rubens follows the seventeenth century standards more closely.

An unconventional way that Rubens does include two realms in his painting is through the depictions of the suffering souls in the foreground. This vision is commonly depicted in art and Rubens' interpretation relates to knowledge that Teresa herself feared hell.<sup>20</sup> Rubens' painting is sure to show the suffering souls before the fiery chasm of hell and could almost cause the viewer to wonder, is this why Saint Teresa does it; because of her fear of hell? A source that historians have now, Teresa's own writings, confess to her readers that this is the exact reason for her continued nun-hood. She writes "I should have gone to hell, and though, even then, I could not incline my will to being a nun, I saw this was the best and safest state and so little by little I determined to force myself to embrace it."<sup>21</sup> This inclusion of hell in Rubens' painting shows that Rubens was probably well-informed in much of the subject matter that he painted.

Diepenbeeck does not choose to incorporate this notion of the suffering souls or Hell in his painting. His painting focuses mainly on the aspect of heaven and highlights purity. The subjects are dressed similarly though slightly more covered in Diepenbeeck's and he portrays Teresa clutching a rosary. He focuses on the religious aspects of the moment, using many more religious symbols in

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<sup>20</sup> Margareta Salinger, *Representations of Saint Teresa*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), 104.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 102.

number, while Rubens does so less. This shows that though Diepenbeeck is a skilled copier, he uses Rubens' painting more for inspiration and includes his own thoughts in his work.

It is difficult to speak much about each man's painting style as a poor reconstruction is done on Diepenbeeck's version;<sup>22</sup> by looking at the two as they are today some differences are evident. Rubens chose a much lighter, brighter color palate as opposed to the dark, almost muddy looking oil paint of Diepenbeeck. Rubens considers light and creates a happier looking scene where Diepenbeeck adheres more to dark blue-gray tones and a very uniform dreariness, not typical of peoples' image of heaven. Rubens also has a quite crisper painting style where the current state of Diepenbeeck's painting seems to run together. Rubens also pulled off a more lifelike painting than Diepenbeeck did. There is some seeming realism present in Rubens' painting.<sup>23</sup> Though the scene did not actually happen on earth, the figures and landscape are relatively lifelike and it looks like something that could be occurring, should angels and pleading souls exist on earth.<sup>24</sup> Diepenbeeck's painting has some strange proportions and odd representations of figures. The clouds hold small angels with poorly painted facial features and are not the typical angel at all. The arm of the resurrected Christ held out to Teresa looks as if the fingertips would brush his knee should he drop his hand; it is much too long. This painting is not done with the same skill and precision as Rubens'.

It is evident in the analysis of these two paintings that Diepenbeeck drew inspiration from his teacher Peter Paul Rubens and produced a relatively similar work. It is also clear though that Diepenbeeck was fully capable of producing his own piece and interested in turning a copy into a different piece of artwork.<sup>25</sup> This is something that Rubens encourages students of his to do; take

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<sup>22</sup> Notes from the Fleming Museum

<sup>23</sup> Eddy de Jongh, *Realism and Seeming Realism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch-Painting* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 28.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>25</sup> Jeremy Wood, *Padre Resta's Flemish Drawings. Van Diepenbeeck, Van Thulden, Rubens, and the School of Fontainebleu*. Master Drawings, Vol. 28 No. 1 (Master Drawings Association, 1990), 10.

inspiration from a work or multiple works, bring it back and turn it into something new.<sup>26</sup> It is a fascinating way to learn.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 3.

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