

# Saint Teresa of Avila as an Intercessor

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

Saint Teresa of Avila as an Intercessor

The painting *St. Teresa of Avila Pleading for Souls in Purgatory* was produced by Abraham Van Diepenbeeck in the seventeenth century. Van Diepenbeeck was a glass painter from Hertogenbosch and an accomplished painter of the Flemish School, predominantly active in Antwerp beginning in the 1620s.<sup>1</sup> After receiving a classical education, Van Diepenbeeck became one of Peter Paul Rubens's best pupils and assistants before 1640.<sup>2</sup> This particular painting depicts St. Teresa of Avila kneeling, perhaps in heaven, with her hand reaching out to Christ while another figure, a Pope or a Saint, stands next to them looking up to the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove. Additionally, there is a figure in the background that is dressed identically to St. Teresa and who is kneeling on a prayer bench. This composition suggests that St. Teresa is having a vision of herself with Christ while she remains firmly on Earth. Van Diepenbeeck, a student of Rubens, drew from Rubens' *Saint Teresa of Ávila Interceding for Souls in Purgatory* when creating his painting, both artists having the intention of using St. Teresa to inspire religious devotion and encourage people to strive to save souls from purgatory.

The relationship between Rubens and Van Diepenbeeck was interesting considering that Rubens had a significant influence on Van Diepenbeeck's work. As a student of Rubens, Van Diepenbeeck became an expert in producing drawn copies from Franco-Italian sources, copies that were utilized by other painters and printmakers. This tended to get Van Diepenbeeck into substantial legal issues.<sup>3</sup> He had the reputation of being a "grand maître d'inventions" because of his tendency to

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<sup>1</sup> Joost vander Auwera, *Rubens: A Genius at Work: the Works of Peter Paul Rubens in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium Reconsidered* (Lannoo Uitgeverij, 2007) 45.

<sup>2</sup> Van Cleef, Augustus, "Abraham van Diepenbeeck" (New York: Robert Appleton Company) 786.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Wood, "Padre Resta's Flemish Drawings. Van Diepenbeeck, Van Thulden, Rubens, and the School of Fontainebleau," *Master Drawings* (Master Drawings Association, 1990) 3.

copy the work of other artists such as Francesco Primaticcio, Nicolò dell'Abate, and Fontainebleau.<sup>4</sup> He was known to recycle ideas taken from Italian art,<sup>5</sup> and as Jeremy Wood writes, Van Diepenbeeck, “considered himself a ‘true master of invention’ and clearly considered that invention included the intelligent adaptation of other artists’ ideas” (Wood 22). In his own work, Van Diepenbeeck proved himself to have a very flexible style and he was effortlessly able to duplicate Rubens’ artistic technique.<sup>6</sup> Because of this skill, Van Diepenbeeck was employed by Rubens to copy works for his own pleasure, including those of Rubens’.<sup>7</sup> Rubens also occasionally hired Van Diepenbeeck as a co-designer for a couple of his prints, the first time being in 1627.<sup>8</sup> The influence that Rubens had on Van Diepenbeeck is strongly demonstrated when comparing Rubens’ *Saint Teresa of Ávila Interceding for Souls in Purgatory* to Van Diepenbeeck’s *St. Teresa of Avila Pleading for Souls in Purgatory*.

Before looking at the respective paintings by Rubens and Van Diepenbeeck, it may be helpful to focus on St. Teresa’s substantial influence in the art world. St. Teresa of Avila was the most impactful saint of the Counter-Reformation period, for her intense passion and energy drew a lot of attention in a period of fervent religious enthusiasm and mysticism.<sup>9</sup> Many seventeenth century artists, including Van Diepenbeeck and Rubens, used the subject matter of St. Teresa, including different events and visions in her life, in their artwork.<sup>10</sup> It was during this time period that a movement began with the intention of

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<sup>4</sup> Zirka Zaremba Filipczak, *Picturing Art in Antwerp* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1987). 225.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Wood, “Padre Resta’s Flemish Drawings. Van Diepenbeeck, Van Thulden, Rubens, and the School of Fontainebleau,” *Master Drawings* (Master Drawings Association, 1990) 22.

<sup>6</sup> Joost vander Auwera, *Rubens: A Genius at Work: the Works of Peter Paul Rubens in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium Reconsidered* (Lannoo Uitgeverij, 2007). 45.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Wood, “Padre Resta’s Flemish Drawings. Van Diepenbeeck, Van Thulden, Rubens, and the School of Fontainebleau,” *Master Drawings* (Master Drawings Association, 1990) 9.

<sup>8</sup> Joost vander Auwera, *Rubens: A Genius at Work: the Works of Peter Paul Rubens in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium Reconsidered* (Lannoo Uitgeverij, 2007). 45.

<sup>9</sup> Salinger Margaretta, “Representations of Saint Teresa,” (*The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1949) 97.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 97.

designating Teresa of Avila to be the co-patron saint of Spain, alongside Santiago.<sup>11</sup> This campaign changed the way in which the saint is depicted in both visual images and metaphors and much of the rhetoric about St. Teresa arises from the desire to legitimize Teresa as a patron saint.<sup>12</sup> Widely known for her visions, the mystical experiences of St. Teresa are often portrayed as the subject matter of artwork. St. Teresa wrote that during her visions, which she describes as a “complete transformation of the soul in God,” (Carole Slade 176) she would see those she loved in heaven like her parents, her favorite confessors, several Jesuits whom she admired, or Christ himself.<sup>13</sup> She usually also sees a dove over her head with “wings made of little shells which emitted a great brilliance.”<sup>14</sup> The dove is frequently present in the paintings of St. Teresa’s visions and makes reference to her mystical visions that happened on the vigil of Pentecost.<sup>15</sup> It is a symbol to religious novices that the holy spirit is always with them.<sup>16</sup> Beginning in the 6th century, the dove has been a continuous and universal representation of the Holy Ghost most commonly shown at the Nativity and the Annunciation.<sup>17</sup> It levitates above saints, including St. Teresa, and holy men to demonstrate heavenly inspiration.<sup>18</sup> The dove is also a universal symbol in art, symbolic of purity and innocence and is attributed to certain female saints, indicating purity and chastity.<sup>19</sup> St. Teresa and her experiences are portrayed in many different ways through art, something that is particularly seen in Rubens’ work.

As mentioned previously, Rubens was one of the many fifteenth century artists who found

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<sup>11</sup> Erin Kathleen Rowe, “The Spanish Minerva: Imagining Teresa of Avila as Patron Saint in Seventeenth-Century Spain” (Catholic University of America Press, 2006) 574.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 578.

<sup>13</sup> Bielecki, Tessa. *Teresa of Avila Mystical Writings* (New York: Crossroad, 1994). 167.

<sup>14</sup> Salinger Margaretta, “Representations of Saint Teresa,” (*The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1949) 100.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 101.

<sup>17</sup> Clement, Clara Erskine. *A Handbook of Christian Symbols and Stories of the Saints as Illustrated in Art* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1886). 12.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Clement, Clara Erskine. *A Handbook of Christian Symbols and Stories of the Saints as Illustrated in Art* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1886). 28.

subject matter in the life of St. Teresa. Rubens was a devout Catholic and an ambassador to the court of Philip IV, placing him in in close proximity to the mystic representation of St. Teresa in Spain.<sup>20</sup> Towards the end of his life in 1630, Rubens was commissioned a painting of Saint Teresa saving souls in purgatory for the church of the Discalced Carmelites in Antwerp.<sup>21</sup> Rubens' *Saint Teresa of Ávila Interceding for Souls in Purgatory* was widely copied,<sup>22</sup> and was perhaps the inspiration for Van Diepenbeeck to reproduce the painting in his own way. This altarpiece by Rubens was commissioned by the Portuguese noblewoman Doña Felipa Mendes Borges for the "privileged" altar of her burial chapel.<sup>23</sup> The piece established Teresa of Avila, who founded the reformed branch of Carmelites, as an "intercessor" for souls trapped in purgatory.<sup>24</sup> The purpose of this altar piece was to convey the church's official teaching that persistent masses at "indulged altars" and prayers to specific saints could successfully save suffering souls from purgatory and help them find salvation.<sup>25</sup> The painting demonstrated the effectiveness of directing prayers to St. Teresa who was recently canonized in 1622.<sup>26</sup> In turn, it promoted investments in church buildings for her religious order.<sup>27</sup> Rubens' altarpiece became the background for these indulgenced masses that that were performed daily for the soul of the patron, becoming a part of a sacred scene and sending a compelling message to spectators.<sup>28</sup> The sheer amount of masses that Felipa requested for a perpetual length of time reflects a concern that her piety alone would not be enough to bring her to heaven even though it was assured that one single mass would

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<sup>20</sup>Salinger Margaretta, "Representations of Saint Teresa," (*The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1949) 103.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>23</sup> Christine Göttler, "Securing Space in a Foreign Place: Peter Paul Rubens's "Saint Teresa" for the Portuguese Merchant-Bankers in Antwerp" (*The Walters Art Museum*, 1999). 133.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 133.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 135.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 135.

<sup>27</sup> Christine Göttler, "Securing Space in a Foreign Place: Peter Paul Rubens's "Saint Teresa" for the Portuguese Merchant-Bankers in Antwerp" (*The Walters Art Museum*, 1999). 136.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 138.

rescue a soul when using a privileged altar.<sup>29</sup> Rubens' painting visually put the effects of indulgences and of masses at a privileged altar into a physical view for anyone attending the mass. After the Council of trent, purgatory became a concept that one was not able to escape, spurring an increase in demand for saints that were able to intercede on behalf of the dead in the afterlife.<sup>30</sup> Carmelites sought to meet this demand with the promotion of St. Teresa as an intercessory saint, spreading the story that their saint had successfully convinced God to release King Philip II from purgatory in only eight days.<sup>31</sup> Rubens' painting successfully illustrated Teresa's intercession, inspiring donations and invocation<sup>32</sup>

After Rubens' painting was completed, a printmaker in Antwerp, Schelte á Bolswert, engraved the bottom of the piece in Latin that drew from St. Teresa's *Book of Foundations* and *The Second Book of Maccabees* in the Old Testament. The Inscription emphasizes the theme of doing good works and reinforces how St. Teresa has the ability to release souls from purgatory.<sup>33</sup> This new representation of Teresa as intercessor substituted her previous official image, which was based on the visionary experience of her transverberation, when her heart was pierced by the golden spear of the angel.<sup>34</sup> Viewers of Ruben's piece would see firsthand the exchange between Christ and St. Teresa and would be amazed by the important position of the new saint.<sup>35</sup> Images of suffering souls are very effective in evoking religious and spiritual devotion by people concerned for their dead relatives and friends.<sup>36</sup> In addition to stimulating piety, prints of religious paintings were a way for clergy to control religious imagery over the community.<sup>37</sup> Purgatory, in particular, was one of the most compelling ways to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 139.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 140.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 143.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 145.

<sup>34</sup> Christine Göttler, "Securing Space in a Foreign Place: Peter Paul Rubens's "Saint Teresa" for the Portuguese Merchant-Bankers in Antwerp" (The Walters Art Museum, 1999). 145.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 147.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 147.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 149.

encourage viewers to pray and make charitable donation.<sup>38</sup>

Rubens painted St. Teresa as an elderly nun in a typical religious habit, kneeling before the resurrected Christ, whose wounds are on display.<sup>39</sup> Towards the bottom of the composition, purgatory is illustrated as a fiery chasm where two male and two female souls are burning.<sup>40</sup> Teresa points to remorseful souls and the viewer can see that the couple on the left is soon to be released. In Van Diepenbeeck's painting, St. Teresa is similarly kneeling with Christ but there is also the presence of a pope or a priest. Van Diepenbeeck includes the presence of a dove to represent heavenly inspiration while Rubens' does not, using instead a crown of holy light around Christ's head to get a similar message across. While Rubens painting is characteristic of the seventeenth century, Van Diepenbeeck's version seems to demonstrate themes that were more prevalent in fifteenth century Flemish art. In the fifteenth century, Flemish religious art focused on the motivating force of independent devotion.<sup>41</sup> The subject was commonly a personal religious experience and at the focal point would be the vision or meditation.<sup>42</sup> Paintings would portray famous past visionaries as well as modern figures representing saints which was a common interest of artists and patrons.<sup>43</sup> Fifteenth century men and women would be depicted intensely engaged in their own prayers and devotion, stressing the significance of visions and meditation.<sup>44</sup> However, differing from Italian and Spanish saints in art, there were no depictions of ecstasy or "delicious agonies" in fifteenth century Flemish art,<sup>45</sup> compared to Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Ecstasy of St. Teresa produced in the 1650s. Visions in Flemish art are suppose to be interpreted as

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 149.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 150.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 150.

<sup>41</sup> Craig Harbison, "Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting" (Stichting voor Nederlandse Kunsthistorische Publicaties, 1985). 88.

<sup>42</sup> Craig Harbison, "Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting" (Stichting voor Nederlandse Kunsthistorische Publicaties, 1985). 90.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 94.

expectations of the future.<sup>46</sup> If Rubens' painting had been created in the fifteenth rather than seventeenth century, St. Teresa would have most likely been displayed with her companions kneeling before the priest and having a vision of the effects of her intercession.<sup>47</sup> In the fifteenth century, interpretations of phenomenal other-worldly events and stories were told on two levels, where the setting is fixed on earth and the heavenly aspects are suspended in a vision above.<sup>48</sup> Differing from Rubens' painting, Van Diepenbeeck emulates these fifteenth century ideals in his composition. He's showing St. Teresa pleading for souls in purgatory on two different earthly levels: in heaven and on earth on a prayer bench having a vision of her intercession.

After comparing Rubens' *Saint Teresa of Ávila Interceding for Souls in Purgatory* to Van Diepenbeeck's *St. Teresa of Avila Pleading for Souls in Purgatory*, it is evident that Van Diepenbeeck drew from Rubens' altarpiece when painting his own version. The subject matter is, of course, very similar but each artist also employs varying techniques when describing the narrative. Diepenbeeck chooses to adhere to the fifteenth century trait of expressing the scene on two different planes: on earth where St. Teresa is having her vision and in heaven where she is pleading with Christ for souls in purgatory. Diepenbeeck included the dove to symbolize the holy spirit that was commonly featured in Teresa's visions while Rubens did not. In addition, Rubens actually incorporates physical purgatory and the souls that are trapped but Diepenbeeck's lacks this feature, leaving the viewer to have to interpret the scene on their own. Despite these differences, the purpose of these paintings are the same. Each painting and artist strive to evoke religious devotion and encourage viewers to pay indulgences in order to save their loved ones from eternal torment, to faithfully pray to the great intercessor, St. Teresa of Avila.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>47</sup> Salinger Margaretta, "Representations of Saint Teresa," (*The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1949) 107.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 108.



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