

## WAR AND DESTRUCTION CONVEYED THROUGH A MASTERPIECE OF ART

**Bledar Kurti**

Albanian University, Tirana, Albania, [b.kurti@albanianuniversity.edu.al](mailto:b.kurti@albanianuniversity.edu.al), [bledarkurti77@gmail.com](mailto:bledarkurti77@gmail.com),

**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to focus on how the consequences of war, and the misery brought by it to European society, were depicted by Rubens, the Flemish Baroque painter, in his masterpiece *The Consequences of War*. The paper is based on an analytical method, with interpretative results and conclusions. This painting was created twenty years into the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), a devastating conflict that involved almost every major power in Europe and left some regions of Germany almost depopulated, but it also serves as a true visual illustration on the situation of Europe today. Wars and conflicts have accompanied humankind since the beginning of time, and despite the different eras, continents, or nations, the consequences in people and society have been equally devastating. The terrors of war affected every sector of life, politics, society, as well as the arts.

This paper will do a thorough analysis of the work, interpreting its symbolism, explaining the figures of Mars, the god of war, with his armor, helmet, red cloak, raised shield and bloody sword. With his left foot forward on a book and a drawing the image symbolizes that war destroys literature and the arts. To his left, Venus, the goddess of love, is seen trying to hold him back and pulling his arm. She tries to seduce him and make him withdraw from the fight. Venus is naked and has a red robe between her legs. That garment unites her and Mars, as a symbol that unites love and war, both driven by human passion.

The whole picture reveals the destruction of life, soul, love, harmony, nations, arts, buildings, literature and music. A full blast of horror. It is a lesson for today conflicts and crisis. In the image there are several arrows, a scepter and an olive branch, symbols of peace, which have fallen to the ground under the flood of war. To the left of the painting is a despondent woman dressed in black, her arms flailing in the air. This woman represents Europe, the war-torn and bloody continent. Her eyes are teary, and she prays to heaven to stop the human folly. Rubens appeals through symbols that war has ravaged the European continent since Roman times. This work is an illustration on how war has a terrible impact on the lives of ordinary people, causing famine, disease and economic destruction in all regions. The allegory painted by Rubens serves as a memorial to the total war that Europeans experienced in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and even today.

**Keywords:** war, crisis, consequences, Rubens, Europe, terror.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The consequences of war, and the misery brought by it to European society, were depicted by many artists throughout the centuries, among them, Peter Paul Rubens, the Flemish Baroque painter, in his masterpiece *The Consequences of War*, also known as *The Horrors of War*.

Peter Paul Rubens is one of the artists most loved by artists. Beyond the virtuosity of his paintings and dizzying compositions there is a mental stimulation, a story or illustration of the era in which he lived with symbolism and allegories taken from mythology and biblical stories but also with war scenes which symbolize universal conflicts, so, even those of today. In *The Consequences of War* (1638), a large-scale painting, Rubens, the Flemish Baroque painter, used his delicate and sensitive style to shed light on a dark subject like war, and the misery it brings to society.

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### 2. METHODOLOGY

The basis of this paper has been focused on a visual artwork of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It conveys the historical, political, artistic background and the thorough interpretation of the masterpiece. Rubens painted *The Consequences of War*, also known as *The Horrors of War*, around 1638, twenty years into the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), a devastating conflict that involved almost every major power in Europe and left some regions of Germany almost depopulated. Rubens used Baroque art tools to emphasize diagonals, movement, and contrasts of light in order to reveal the human cost of war without portraying it directly.

The whole work is allegorical and full of symbols. Before we get to know the figures and symbols, we notice how the whole picture moves from left to right. It moves with a dramatic dynamism, like a storm that breaks out suddenly. Look at the bottom left corner, imagine a nail with twine coming out of each figure in the painting. All the

figures seem to be related to that angle. From that focal point every movement and figure seems to radiate, but a zero point from which all life springs, in this case the entire scene. In the center of the painting, we see Mars, the god of war, with his armor, helmet, red cloak, raised shield and bloody sword. Mars has his left foot forward on a book and a drawing to symbolize that war destroys literature and the arts. To his left, Venus, the goddess of love, is seen trying to hold him back and pulling his arm. She tries to seduce him and make him withdraw from the fight. She looks tempting but also pleading. Venus is naked and has a red robe between her legs. That garment unites her and Mars, as a symbol that unites love and war, both driven by human passion. Below the right leg of Venus are two small winged Cupids trying to help her. Beneath their feet are seen lying on the ground several arrows, a scepter and an olive branch, all symbols of peace, which have fallen to the ground under the flood of war.

To the left of the painting is a despondent woman dressed in black, her arms flailing in the air. This woman represents Europe, the war-torn and bloody continent. Her eyes are teary, and she prays to heaven to stop this human folly. To the left of this woman is an angel holding a globe with a small cross on it. Above the angel is the Temple of Janus in the Roman Forum in Rome. Rubens appeals through symbols that war has ravaged the Christian continent since Roman times, and that Roman civilization had to be learned to build a developed civilization and not a murderous and dying age. To the left of Mars, near his shield, is Alectos, one of the Erinyes, whose job it is to punish the moral crimes of men. Alectos is a spirit of punishment, often represented as one of three goddesses who executed curses cast on criminals, tortured the guilty with pangs of conscience, and caused famine and pestilence. Alectos has a torch on one side to show him the way, and is tugging on Mars' left arm to engage him in battle. Below Alectos is the goddess Harmonia, who holds a broken mandolin and is pushed to the ground. To her right is an architect lying on the ground holding a compass and some of his other tools thrown on the ground. Above them are a mother and child, frightened and terrified by the violence of war. The Thirty Years' War had a terrible impact on the lives of ordinary people similar to that of later world wars, causing famine, disease and economic destruction in all regions. The allegory painted by Rubens serves as a memorial to the total war that Europeans experienced as something new and frightening. This picture of the passion of war symbolizes the death of art itself. The whole picture reveals the destruction of life, soul, love, harmony, states, arts, buildings, literature and music. A full blast of horror.

In this painting, the naked body of Venus stands out. Her body is plump, unlike the concept of female beauty we have today. All the women in Rubens' paintings are overweight, thus causing criticism from today's viewers, but big bodies expressed class and was used to deify female figures, since with their large body shapes they did not convey the message of seduction and sexual temptation, but of the deity. Healthy figures show prosperity and give the message that they do not lack food, abundance or anything else. Also, health symbolized peace, and was associated with childbirth, and childbirth was a peaceful miracle, not a symbol of war. Health was also a symbol of power.

But all the figures in his works are not just numbers and symbols, they contain a prominent vitality and dramatic movement creates a dramatic rush. Rubens loved exaggerated composition, dramatic action, and strong forms; but the look of fury and speed, especially in his earliest paintings, was not the effect of haste or rapture of mind and hand. This effect was deliberately planned and it took years for Rubens to achieve complete harmony between the treatment of the painting and the composition of the works.

His compositions express a painterly treatment full of pain and shyness. Rubens is considered the master of the "pictorial" style, a style that features open, loose brushwork and an emphasis on color. Unlike the "linear" style, which used strong, sharp contour lines to clearly define the edges of objects, Rubens' style depends more on suggestion and implication to understand forms. With his style, it seems that he also influenced Rembrandt, Velasquez, etc.

### 3. RESULTS

In the work *Consequences of War* we see the hand of a great master of painting, but in fact it originated from the mind of a very intelligent man and formed, in fact, from the imagination of a diplomat. Rubens was a professional diplomat, so even many of today's art lovers must search through books or the Internet to learn about the historical context in which he lived, as well as the mythological names, symbols, and ancient stories that unfold in his works. Even if he had never touched a brush with his hand, we would still hear his name today. He worked as a high-ranking diplomat under the authority of Queen Isabella, monarch of the southern Netherlands. As a devout Catholic, he worked under Spanish orders to convert the Protestant Netherlands to the Catholic faith. In 1629 he went to London, charged with promoting peace. His task was to facilitate a meeting of ambassadors between Britain and Spain, which he achieved, leading to the peace treaty signed on November 15, 1630. But Rubens did more than just talk. He illustrated it. He made a painting in England as a gift to King Charles I, an allegorical painting on war and peace.

Rubens' art was always put at the service of diplomacy. So the artist within him was under the control of the diplomatic mind he had. Thus, diplomacy, with its message, was put at the service of art, and art was put at the service of diplomacy to achieve peace between two or more nations. Today, an art lover can rightly ask why Rubens didn't paint a more direct panorama of the war? Why didn't he act like other artists who depicted murdered people or burned villages? Why symbols and allegories? Rubens has left us many letters written in his own hand, and some of them contain vivid commentary on refugees pouring into the Dutch frontier, as well as on outbreaks of plague and dysentery, but Rubens was a cosmopolitan artist and his art circulated worldwide. The messages he gave had to be understood both in Protestant London and in Catholic Madrid, and just as there was a special language in diplomacy, so there was a diplomatic style in painting.

Rubens painted Europe as a weeping woman in black, although he commented on it even more verbally in his personal letters. "The woman in black is Europe ravaged by war and emptied of wealth," he wrote in a letter to a Flemish artist. If he described in words who was the culprit, who was the extortionist and who was the victim, he would never achieve the desired peace in his diplomatic efforts, so he chose symbolism and allegory to make the kings aware of the horrors of war. As an artist and diplomat, Rubens truly believed in peace. He even became a zealous diplomat as he sincerely believed in the possibility of achieving peace between European countries. But just as he undertook almost impossible diplomatic initiatives, he did the same in art. Successful, popular and prosperous, above all Rubens was aware of his abilities, in a letter from 1621 he wrote boastfully and confidently: "I am so gifted that I have never lacked the courage to undertake any composition, however large and varied in content."

Rubens' epic art represented only one facet of his manifold genius. An outstanding artist, loved and appreciated by all the monarchs of Europe, a famous diplomat in his time, he was also a scholar and humanist, an educated classicist and scholar of antiquity, a master of several languages, and even an amateur architect. His deep studies drew him to biblical stories, Catholic theology, hagiography, Greek and Roman history and mythology, which he used repeatedly for the themes and iconography of his art. A devout Catholic, devoted husband and father of eight, this prosperous, energetic and perfectly balanced artist is the antithesis of the modern notion of the suffering artist. Works such as *The Consequences of War*, but also the *Massacre of the Innocents*, *The Three Graves*, *The Wolf and the Fox Hunt*, *The Four Continents*, *The Lion Hunt*, *Daniel in the Lion's Den*, *Venus and Adonis*, and more, are magnificent paintings that make even today's painters with the unique angles of the figures, unimaginable movements of human bodies but also horses and lions, with female bodies which, although inflated and large, different from today's standards, make every viewer experience emotions of indescribable that only true art offers.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Rubens himself said in one of his letters: "The whole world is my homeland." And he was right, as the whole world today studies and admires his art, but also remembers his works as images of war and human cruelty that seem universal, occurring even today, in the modern world. The *Horrors of War* is an illustration on how war has a terrible impact on the lives of ordinary people, causing famine, disease and economic destruction in all regions. The allegory painted by Rubens serves as a memorial to the total war that Europeans experienced in the 20th century and even today like the conflict in Ukraine. The whole tableau reveals the destruction of life, soul, love, harmony, nations, arts, buildings, literature and music. A full blast of horror. It is a lesson for today conflicts and crisis. There is nothing noble about war. There is only destruction. Peace is the solution and the best formula for harmony between people, nations and continents.

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