

Rubens's Skepticism

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Peter Paul Rubens's Rockox Triptych is generally thought to represent the incredulity of Saint Thomas, even though the side wound that presented Christ's famously distrustful disciple with proof of the resurrection is nowhere to be seen. This article explores the significance of the missing side wound. Drawing attention to the circulation of skeptical philosophy within the artist's milieu, it argues that he conceived of the painting as an epistemic dilemma that would both elicit doubt and suggest how it might be set aside.

INTRODUCTION

IN THE CENTRAL panel of Peter Paul Rubens's Rockox Triptych (1613–15) (fig. 1), the resurrected Christ offers up his immaculate, gleaming torso and perforated hands for inspection by three of his disciples (fig. 2). Scholars have noted that the picture bears a close resemblance to Caravaggio's famous *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (ca. 1601–02) (fig. 3), a work that Rubens had seen in the Giustiniani collection during his 1606–08 sojourn in Rome.¹ But

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¹ On the resemblance between the two paintings, see Müller Hofstede, 1971, 268; Freedberg, 1984, 85; Haeger, 121; Most, 207–08; Rimmelé, 251; Schlie, 2015, 77–79; Schlie, 2016, 37–42. While the early provenance of Caravaggio's picture is disputed, it was certainly in the possession of Vincenzo Giustiniani in 1606, when it is mentioned in Bernardo Bizoni's *Relazione in forma di diario*: see Bizoni. On the provenance of the picture, see Danesi Squarzina, 278–80.

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Figure 1. Peter Paul Rubens. *Christ's Apparition to the Disciples* (the Rockox Triptych), 1613–15. Oil on panel, 145 x 235 cm. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen. Photograph by author.

while similarities in composition, setting, and palette confirm Rubens's dependence upon Caravaggio's example, certain details in the picture suggest that what he has represented is not the encounter that led Christ's famously incredulous disciple to overcome his disbelief in the miracle of the resurrection but, instead, a slightly earlier episode in the Gospels during which the resurrected Christ first reappeared to his followers after his crucifixion, death, and burial.² Known as the apparition to the disciples, the incident is described at length in the Gospel of Luke, where it is recorded that Christ's sudden reappearance left his companions "troubled and frightened" (24:37).³ Hoping to convince them that he was not in fact a "spirit" (24:37), Christ showed them wounds on his "hands and feet" that he had received during the Crucifixion, inviting them to "handle, and see" (24:39). But Luke's text implies that the disciples never took up Christ's invitation to touch the physical evidence of his death. Had they done so they would likely have overcome their doubts on the spot, just like Saint Thomas, but as it is the evangelist reports that they "yet believed not" (24:41), even after seeing the wounds on Christ's extremities. It was only later, after Christ consumed a simple meal of "broiled fish, and a honeycomb"

² On the iconography of the central panel, see Müller Hofstede, 1965, 309; Haug, 1335; Mossel, 61.

³ All citations are from *The Douay-Rheims Bible* (Baltimore, 1899), accessed at <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Douay-Rheims-1899-American-Edition-DRA-Bible>.



Figure 2. Peter Paul Rubens. Rockox Triptych (detail), 1613–15. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen. Photograph by author.

(24:42), that the disciples were finally convinced of the materiality of his resurrected body.

The result of an attentive and original reading of the Gospel of Luke, the central panel of the Rockox Triptych is an image of lingering doubt. Unlike Caravaggio, who represents the precise moment of Saint Thomas's conversion to a state of belief, a scene described only in the Gospel of John, Rubens has supplied his three disciples with quizzical expressions that communicate their continuing disbelief. Recalling Luke's explanation of the cause of their skepticism, Rubens has replaced Caravaggio's fleshy Christ with a radiant figure who leans away from his companions, presenting himself less as a physical body to be touched than as an image to be beheld. Most importantly of all, while Caravaggio arranges his entire composition around the gruesome contact with the wound in Christ's side that allows Saint Thomas to overcome his doubts, Rubens has taken the extraordinary step of omitting the side wound altogether (fig. 4), a decision sanctioned by the fact that Luke only mentions the wounds on Christ's hands



Figure 3. Caravaggio. *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, ca. 1601–02. Oil on canvas, 107 x 146 cm. Sanssouci Palace, Potsdam. © bpk Bildagentur / Stiftung Preussische Schlösser & Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg, Berlin / Gerhard Murza / Art Resource, NY.

and feet.⁴ The cumulative effect of these differences is significant. If Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* represents a situation in which rational belief in the resurrection is sustained by seeing and touching a key piece of evidence of Christ's violent death on the cross, then the central panel of the Rockox Triptych represents one in which the possibility of rational belief is momentarily thwarted by the existence of contradictory evidence: Christ's body is visible, as are the wounds on his hands (and presumably also his feet), but his appearance is suspiciously luminous, and the all-important side wound can be neither seen nor touched. The incredulity exhibited by Rubens's three disciples is thus imagined as a logical response to a serious evidentiary contradiction.

Although some might argue that it is unreasonable to ascribe such significance to the absence of a detail that is never discussed in the text upon which Rubens based his painting, the side wound, which is also mentioned only in the Gospel of John, was conventionally included in representations of the resurrected Christ.⁵ Moreover, a pair of subtle references to Saint Thomas's

⁴ This possibility is raised, but rejected, by Mossel, 61.

⁵ On the iconography of the resurrected Christ, see Schiller, 68–88. On the iconography of the side wound, see Gurewich, 1957.



Figure 4. Peter Paul Rubens. Rockox Triptych (detail), 1613–15. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen. Photograph by author.

probing finger and Christ's injured torso in the side panels of the Rockox Triptych, where the artist has represented his patrons, the prominent Antwerp couple Nicolaas Rockox (1560–1640) and Adriana Perez (1568–1619) (fig. 5), make it clear that he intended for the missing wound to organize the viewer's response to the central panel. In a clever allusion to Thomas's famous confirmatory gesture, Rubens has drawn special attention to Rockox's index fingers, one of which points to his heart and the other of which is isolated between the pages of a prayer book, as if to suggest that it is only in these places that one might hope to find proof of the resurrection.⁶ Equally clever is the decision to represent Perez holding a five-decade rosary, the five largest beads of which have often been understood to symbolize the five wounds that Christ received during the Crucifixion (including, of course, the wound in his side).⁷ By artfully alluding to Thomas's contact with Christ's side wound, the hand gestures of Rockox and Perez suggest that what is absent from the representation of Christ's body in the triptych's central panel is present in the hearts and minds of the devout patrons on either side. The carefully calibrated gazes of the two figures further enhance this suggestion. While at first it might seem as though Rockox is watching the encounter that takes place in the central panel, his unfocused expression suggests that he is actually contemplating a passage in his prayer book. For her part, Perez stares directly at the viewer, prompting them to carefully consider what they see—and what they don't see—in the center of the triptych.

⁶ Schlie, 2016, 41.

⁷ Schlie, 2016, 42. On the origins of the connection between the rosary and Christ's Passion, see Fallberg Sundmark.



Figure 5. Peter Paul Rubens. Rockox Triptych (detail), 1613–15. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen. Photograph by author.

The claim of this essay is that Rubens designed the Rockox Triptych as an epistemic dilemma. Unsure of what has appeared before them, and, of course, unable either to see or touch the grisly evidence that according to the Gospel of John would later allow Saint Thomas to overcome his own disbelief in the resurrection, Rubens's three disciples are faced with a choice: either give in to doubt and conclude that their eyes deceive them or suspend judgment and have faith that this is indeed the resurrected Christ. Turning away from the evidentiary impasse of the central panel, the patrons in the side panels attend to the private devotions through which they hope to achieve a more spiritual understanding of the resurrection. All of this poses a challenge for the viewer, who, faced with an image of Christ that defies expectations regarding the number of wounds he suffered during the Crucifixion and denied the visual testimony of

the disciples' conversion to a state of belief that the subtle allusions to the story of Doubting Thomas have prompted them to expect, must reckon with the equivocal visual evidence provided by the painting itself. The connection with Caravaggio's insistently corroborative *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* was therefore central to the conceit of the Rockox Triptych. To the artist, his patrons, and their closest friends, the two related but in certain crucial respects different works would have presented a contrast between the relative certainty of knowledge grounded in empirical evidence and the more epistemologically perilous leap of faith of religious conviction. That contrast, I argue, is best understood in relation to local manifestations of the widespread early modern preoccupation with the nature of truth and the methods of its verification.

"The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw more self-conscious theoretical reflection on how to discover and confirm the truths of nature," R. W. Serjeantson has written, "than any period before or since."⁸ It was during this period, as ever greater value was attached to knowledge acquired through observation and experience, that the scientific application of the ancient rhetorical techniques with which scholars sought to persuade their audiences of the truth was first called into question.⁹ The definition of *evidence* (*enargeia*, *evidentia*) started to shift, from a form of rhetorical persuasion—the ability of an artist, orator, or performer to produce an image so vivid that the viewer or listener feels as though they are actually present at the represented event—to a form of empirical proof.¹⁰ Likewise, *belief*, which had previously indicated trust in a person or authority, came to mean justified assent to propositions that are supported by reliable evidence.¹¹ The growing desire to place knowledge on a more secure footing was visible in a range of new intellectual pursuits, including observational science, antiquarianism, and textual criticism, but the advent of empiricism also coincided with the reemergence of philosophical skepticism, an ancient school of thought that insisted upon the importance of evidence while at the same time casting doubt on the possibility of achieving certain knowledge.¹² Though often regarded as a milestone in the history of rationality, the new science was in fact plagued by epistemic anxieties stemming from the reliance not only upon a range of instruments and images that mediated

⁸ Serjeantson, 132.

⁹ See Serjeantson.

¹⁰ On *enargeia* in the rhetorical tradition, see Plett. On the emergence of a competing, empirical definition of *evidence* during the early modern period, see Jori, 77–171.

¹¹ Harrison, 48–49. On the shifting definitions of *belief*, see Smith, 105–27.

¹² On scientific observation, see Pomata. On the connections between empiricism, antiquarianism, and textual criticism, see Pomata and Siraisi. On early modern skepticism, see Popkin.

between the mind of the scholar and the external world but also upon the seemingly unreliable mechanics of vision itself.¹³ The resulting contradiction between the pressing need for visual evidence and the increasing skepticism regarding its reliability was in fact one of the defining intellectual characteristics of the early modern period, as Klaus Krüger has observed.¹⁴

Similar patterns were evident in other fields. The judicious seventeenth-century pioneers of antiquarianism were often quite cautious regarding the soundness of the historical knowledge that might be derived from the physical remains of the past.¹⁵ Likewise, increasing philological sophistication often did little to paper over the troubling inconsistencies that plagued so many of the authoritative texts—now viewed as historical artifacts—that period scholars sought to restore and understand.¹⁶ These cascading uncertainties had profound religious implications. Concerns about the reliability of visual experience posed a challenge to the orthodox Catholic (Scholastic) position that the senses—and, by extension, images—played a necessary and important role in religious devotion.¹⁷ Meanwhile, scholars engaged in the effort to reconstruct an accurate text of the Bible were often pessimistic about their chances of success. Although conscious of the need for careful editing of the Old and New Testaments, the Dutch Protestant jurist and scholar Hugo Grotius, a friend to both Rubens and Rockox, admitted that it may not be possible to achieve a completely accurate text, writing that “to disclose the truthful meaning is a huge work, and not always a successful one.”¹⁸

Rubens was certainly well versed in commonplace theories of art grounded in the principles of rhetorical persuasion, but his participation in the intellectual circle that had initially formed around the Neo-Stoic philosopher and scholar Justus Lipsius would also have alerted him to the growing epistemological and hermeneutical anxieties of the age—and to their potential implications for makers of religious images.¹⁹ Indeed, a concern with the problem of truth and the nature of evidence runs like a thread through the activities in which the artist, his patrons, and their associates were engaged during the time when he was at

¹³ See Gal and Chen-Morris. On the doubts that surrounded the epistemological value of images, see Freedberg, 2002, 349–416. On early modern critiques of vision, see Clark.

¹⁴ Krüger, 2007, 419.

¹⁵ Momigliano, 295.

¹⁶ On philology and skepticism, see Cao et al.

¹⁷ On the post-Tridentine Catholic view of the senses, see O'Malley.

¹⁸ Quoted in Nellen and Steenbakkens, 29.

¹⁹ On Rubens and rhetoric, see Müller Hofstede, 1977; Muller, 1982; Brassat, 233–67; Heinen, 2004; Thielemann. On images and *enargeia* in early modernity, see von Rosen; Plett, 136–82. On images and the shifting definitions of *evidence* in early modernity, see Wimböck et al. On the Lipsius circle, see Morford.

work on the Rockox Triptych—from the careful scrutiny of the text of the New Testament to the historical investigation of ancient sculptures and coins to the study of optics. Each of these activities was marked by the philosophical skepticism embraced by many members of Rubens's network. Drawing upon the work of ancient skeptics like Sextus Empiricus as well as the contributions of more recent thinkers like Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Charron, both of whom attempted to reconcile skeptical philosophy with Catholicism, figures like Lipsius and Grotius argued that the central tenet of skepticism, the suspension of judgment on all matters for which there is insufficient or conflicting evidence, offered a means of setting aside doubt and living a tranquil life in religiously, politically, and intellectually tumultuous times.

The following suggests that the skeptical principle of the suspension of judgment informed the making of the Rockox Triptych on both an iconographic and a conceptual level: the image of the dilemma faced by Christ's disbelieving disciples in the central panel of the triptych is intended to solicit the viewer's own rational doubts, and, indeed, to exacerbate them, while the behavior of the patrons in the side panels suggests how those doubts might be set aside—a process that skeptical thinkers described as fundamentally therapeutic in nature.²⁰ Marked by the skeptical ideas that circulated in the milieu for which it was made, the Rockox Triptych represented an adaptation of the Catholic image to the conflicting philosophical and confessional pressures of 1610s Antwerp, a city that was just beginning to emerge from a half-century of intense religious conflict marked by repeated challenges to the Catholic cult of images.²¹ Those pressures resulted in a painting in which truth and artifice collide.²² Exploring the artistic implications of an emerging distinction between the rhetorical and empirical conceptions of evidence, Rubens offers a strikingly equivocal statement about what might be called the evidentiary power of art at a moment in his career in which he was regularly called upon to create paintings that persuasively communicate the central tenets of the Catholic faith. By drawing attention to the subtle evidentiary thematics of the Rockox Triptych as well as to the picture's reliance upon ideas drawn from the skeptical tradition, the present essay seeks both to complicate our understanding of Rubens's early career, a period in which a young painter of supposedly settled religious and philosophical convictions is said to have made enormous artistic contributions

²⁰ See Nussbaum. On the therapeutic function of early modern works of art, see Gage; Merback.

²¹ On the Antwerp iconoclasm and their effect upon local artistic production, see Freedberg, 1988; Jonckheere. On the self-aware pictorial experimentation generated by the confessional polemics of the early modern period, see Stoichita.

²² On truth and artifice in seventeenth-century art, see Argan; Delbeke.

to the Catholic Revival in his native city, and to contribute to our growing knowledge of the role played by doubt in the visual culture of early modern Europe.²³

RUBENS, ROCKOX, AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

Commissioned by Nicolaas Rockox and Adriana Perez in around 1613 to serve as their funerary monument in the Church of the Friars Minor Recollects, a French branch of the Franciscan Order, the Rockox Triptych was one of many religious works painted by Rubens in the years following his 1608 return from Italy for Catholic churches in Antwerp that had been whitewashed during periods of Protestant control.²⁴ Made possible by the relative peace and prosperity that followed the signing of the Twelve Years' Truce with the Dutch Republic in 1609, these altarpieces, epitaphs, and devotional paintings are generally understood as important contributions to the reassertion of Catholic control over the city.²⁵ In the case of the Rockox Triptych, the subject chosen for the central panel abided by a 1610 decree by the Synod of Antwerp according to which only images of Christ and scenes from the New Testament could be given pride of place in triptychs.²⁶ Now lost, a Latin inscription below the painting once highlighted the patrons' faith in Christ and fidelity to each other, as well as Nicolaas Rockox's service to his hometown.²⁷ A humanist, collector, and former civic official, Rockox was one of Rubens's closest friends and most important patrons during this crucial period in his career.²⁸ Within months after the artist's return from Italy, Rockox had commissioned him to paint *Samson and Delilah* (ca. 1609–10), a picture that explores the seductiveness of sensual experience, and helped him to secure the contract for the

²³ On Rubens as a resolutely Catholic artist, see, most recently, Sauerländer. In recent years art historians have begun to assess the artistic ramifications of the early modern preoccupation with doubt. See Pereda; Sapir, 2012 and 2021. On skepticism, Neo-Stoicism, and Rubens's later decorations for the Torre de la Parada, see Georgievska-Shine and Silver.

²⁴ On the dating of the picture, see Freedberg, 1984, 84. On the Church of the Recollects, see Herremans, 24–59.

²⁵ On the Counter-Reformation in Antwerp, see Freedberg, 1993; Thijs.

²⁶ On the 1610 decree, see Freedberg, 1993, 139–42.

²⁷ "In Christo vita. Nicolaus Rockox Eques hujus Urb. Consul VIII Adrianae conjugii clariss. P. Cum qua XXX ann. Concors vixit. Decessit XXII septemb. An. MDCXIX aet. LI. Ille conjugem secutus pridie idus Decembris anno MDCXL aetatis LXXX. Bene de sua bene de postera aetate meritus": Freedberg, 1984, 87n26. Added after Rockox's death, the inscription was lost when the Church of the Recollects was torn down, in the early nineteenth century: Herremans, 28.

²⁸ On Rockox, see Baudouin, 2005a; Huet and Grieten.

Adoration of the Magi (1609, reworked 1628–29), a work commissioned by the Antwerp city council around the time of the signing of the Twelve Years' Truce.²⁹ In 1611, Rockox used his influence to help steer the commission for the Antwerp Cathedral's *Descent from the Cross* (1612–14) Rubens's way.³⁰ At around the same time, the two men began collaborating on the production of a numismatic text, the *Imperatorum Romanorum Numismata Aurea* (Gold coins of the Roman emperors, 1615); both were avid collectors of ancient coins and valued them for the historical evidence of antiquity they provided.³¹

Moreover, the Rockox Triptych was one of three images depicting Christ's wounded body that was commissioned from the artist by his most stalwart patron for the Church of the Recollects. In the period before he began work on the *Descent from the Cross*, Rubens was engaged by Rockox to paint *Christ Expiring on the Cross* (ca. 1610–12), a picture that exhibits a somewhat ambivalent approach to depicting the injuries suffered by Christ during the Passion (fig. 6).³² Drawing upon Lipsius's rigorous historical analysis of the practice of crucifixion in *De Cruce Libri Tres* (The cross, 1595), Rubens has shown Christ's feet affixed to the cross with two nails instead of one, which was more conventional in art of the time.³³ Similarly, he has chosen to move the wounds on Christ's hands to a position between his palms and wrists, a detail that suggests his awareness of recent discussions about the anatomical evidence of the Crucifixion purportedly offered by the Shroud of Turin.³⁴ But the confident scholarly approach that characterizes Rubens's representation of the wounds on Christ's hands and feet did not carry over to the representation of the wound on his side, an aspect of the Crucifixion about which Lipsius had relatively little to say. Although the injury itself is not visible, the pool of blood that has collected on the large knot securing the loin cloth over Christ's right hip seems to suggest that it is merely obscured by the angle of his torso. Yet this suggestion is complicated by the presence of a second, miniscule spot of blood by Christ's left hip, a detail that would seem to indicate that both stains are the result of blood trickling down from the wounds on his hands.

²⁹ On Rockox's collection, see van de Velde, 2007. On *Samson and Delilah*, see Georgievsk-Shine. On the *Adoration of the Magi*, see Fucci.

³⁰ See Judson, 2000, 162–70.

³¹ Judson, 1978, 167–71; Bertram, 2018, 114–21. On Rockox's antiquarianism, see Scheller.

³² See Judson, 2000, 123–26. Although undocumented, Rockox's involvement in the commission is suggested by the initials "N.R.," which appear on the base of the cross: Judson, 2000, 26; Herremans, 46–47. On Rubens's tendency to omit or move Christ's side wound, see Gurewich, 1957, 361; Judson, 2000, 33–34.

³³ Judson, 2000, 124. On Rubens and *De Cruce*, see de Landtsheer, 2000.

³⁴ Judson, 2000, 124.



Figure 6. Peter Paul Rubens. *Christ Expiring on the Cross*, ca. 1610–12. Oil on canvas, 221 x 121 cm. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen. © Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen / www.artinlanders.be / Hugo Maertens / Creative Commons.

Previously the topic of an unresolved theological debate, the precise location of the side wound was largely a matter of artistic taste by the early seventeenth century, and Rubens was under no obligation to include the injury in representations of the episode during which Christ received it.³⁵ But the hesitancy of his characterization of Christ's torso, which alludes to but does not represent the wound, is nevertheless striking. J. Richard Judson has argued that works like *Christ Expiring on the Cross* were intended to complement the meditative devotional practices described by Jesuits like J ronimo Nadal by providing devotees with visual material out of which they might construct mental images of the Gospel stories so vivid that they would feel as if they were actually present.³⁶ But *Christ Expiring on the Cross* would have presented the devotee with curiously unresolved devotional material. Considered together, the scholarly treatment of the wounds on Christ's hands and feet and the furtive omission of the wound on his torso imply both a desire for historical accuracy and a hesitancy about representing his crucified body.

Painted for the Recollects several years after the Rockox Triptych and *Christ on the Cross*, the large altarpiece known as the *Coup de Lance* (1620) (fig. 7) could scarcely be more different in its treatment of Christ's injured body.³⁷ The use of four nails once again demonstrates Rubens's adherence to Lipsius's interpretation of the Crucifixion, but, unlike the two earlier Rockox commissions, both of which are characterized by their reticent handling of the side wound, the *Coup de Lance* includes an arrestingly matter-of-fact representation of the moment when, according to the Gospel of John, "one of the soldiers with a spear opened [Christ's] side" (19:34).³⁸ Installed close to one another in the Church of the Recollects, the three Rockox pictures demonstrate that Rubens approached epitaph paintings and devotional works differently than he approached altarpieces. Designed to reaffirm the central doctrines of Catholicism, arouse viewers' sense of devotion, and persuade them to believe in what they see, the altarpieces that he produced for Antwerp's churches were indeed bound up with the reestablishment of Catholic control over the city.³⁹ In contrast, the smaller devotional and epitaph pictures that he painted

³⁵ Gurewich, 1957, 361. Judson suggests that in Rubens's paintings of the Crucifixion, the presence or absence of the wound depends upon whether Christ is represented as alive or dead: Judson, 2000, 33.

³⁶ Judson, 2000, 31. On the centrality of images to Jesuit devotion, see Dekoninck, 2005; Melion, 2009. On Rubens's knowledge of Nadal's text, see Freedberg, 1984, 139, 191, 195; Freedberg, 1993, 137; Haeger; Melion, 2003, 99.

³⁷ See Judson, 2000, 139–46.

³⁸ Judson, 2000, 144

³⁹ On Rubens's Antwerp altarpieces, see Martin; Baudouin, 1972; Heinen, 1996; G ttler, 1999a; Muller, 2005; Sauerl nder; Timmermans. On rhetoric and persuasion in seventeenth-century Catholic art, see Argan.



Figure 7. Peter Paul Rubens. *Crucifixion (the Coup de Lance)*, 1620. Oil on panel, 429 x 311 cm. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen. © Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen / www.artinlanders.be / Hugo Maertens / Creative Commons.



Figure 8. Peter Paul Rubens. *Christ's Charge to Peter*, ca. 1616. Oil on panel, 139.2 x 114.8 cm. Wallace Collection, London. © Wallace Collection, London, UK / Bridgeman Images.

for members of his circle presented him with opportunities for iconographic experimentation keyed to the personal lives and interests of those he commemorated.⁴⁰

Examples of this more personalized approach to epitaph paintings can be seen in *Christ's Charge to Peter* (ca. 1616) (fig. 8) and *The Resurrection of Christ* (ca. 1612) (fig. 9). Commissioned by the Flemish statesman Nicolas Damant, who may have hoped that its subject would remind viewers of the important public offices he held during his life, *Christ's Charge to Peter* conflates Matthew 16:19, in which Christ says to Peter, "I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven" while on the road to Jerusalem, and John 21:17, in which

⁴⁰ On Rubens's epitaph paintings as a group, see Freedberg, 1978.



Figure 9. Peter Paul Rubens. *The Resurrection of Christ* (the Moretus Triptych), ca. 1612. Oil on panel, 185 x 128 cm. Antwerp Cathedral. © Bridgeman Images.

the resurrected Christ instructs Peter to “feed my sheep,” a fact that suggests Rubens recognized the passage in Matthew as a promise, not an act, and reasoned that the giving of the keys would only have taken place after the resurrection.⁴¹ Painted for the printer Jan Moretus, *The Resurrection of Christ* omits the sarcophagus that is usually included in representations of the Risen Christ, indicating that Rubens was aware of—and anxious to avoid—the debate over whether Christ’s tomb was open or closed at the moment of the resurrection.⁴² The critically astute iconographic innovations evident in these pictures suggest that among the educated elite of the Spanish Netherlands, Rubens was known for creating monuments in which the ambiguities of scripture were addressed in a thoughtful, scholarly manner. In the case of the Rockox Triptych, the omission of Christ’s side wound is suggestive of a particular interest in the discrepancies that distinguish the individual Gospel accounts of Christ’s resurrected body from one another.

CARAVAGGIO AND THE EVIDENCE OF PAINTING

In the last fifty years, art historians have come to see the central panel of the Rockox Triptych as an inventive reworking of the story of Doubting

⁴¹ Freedberg, 1984, 95–97.

⁴² Freedberg, 1984, 32. On the controversy, see Mâle, 292–94.

Thomas.⁴³ Although some have argued that a small wound is actually visible on the proper left side of Christ's body, the picture does not easily support such a claim, and it is now generally accepted that Rubens omitted the side wound intentionally.⁴⁴ While scholars tend to agree that this omission should be understood in terms of contemporary Catholic preoccupations with the relationship between vision and faith, they disagree about its inspiration and purpose. Arguing that the central panel of the Rockox Triptych represents Christ before Thomas, Peter, and Paul, Adolf Monballieu has suggested that the omission of Christ's side wound was intended to emphasize the importance of believing without seeing.⁴⁵ Likewise, David Freedberg has proposed that Rubens's erasure of the side wound was "meant to evoke a theme traditionally connected with the account of Thomas's incredulity, that of belief in the resurrection of Christ which does not need to depend merely on the evidence of sight."⁴⁶ Barbara Haeger has connected the central panel of the Rockox Triptych with Jesuit devotional texts by Nadal, Franciscus Costerus, and Carolus Scribani, arguing that Rubens eliminated the side wound from his representation of the incredulity of Saint Thomas "in order to enable the viewer to secure a unique and privileged image of Christ, one that transcends historical time, reveals divine mystery, and confirms faith."⁴⁷ More recently, Heike Schlie has suggested that Rubens's image of the encounter between Christ and Saint Thomas was intended to demonstrate the testimonial power of his art: by replacing the side wound with the small and manifestly artificial patch of red pigment that Schlie locates on the proper left side of Christ's torso, the artist implies that seeing his painting is equivalent to seeing, or even touching, Christ's body.⁴⁸ Addressing the important question of patronage, Leen Huet and Jan Grieten have explored the complex confessional histories of the

⁴³ See Monballieu; Freedberg, 1978, 56; Freedberg, 1984, 83; Haeger; Huet and Grieten, 250–94; Jacobs, 274; Schlie, 2016, 39. Sauerländer's identification of the three disciples as John, Peter, and Thomas suggests that he, too, identifies the panel as a representation of the incredulity of Saint Thomas: Sauerländer, 67.

⁴⁴ On the omission of the wound, see Gurewich, 1957, 361–62; Freedberg, 1984, 82–84; Haeger, 119; Rimmelé, 255; Herremans, 55. For a proposal that the wound, originally visible on Christ's right side, was lost in restoration, see Monballieu, 149. Among those arguing that the wound's location, either actual or implied, is on the left side of Christ's body, see Gurewich, 1963, 358 (revising his earlier claim that the wound is "omitted entirely"); Schlie, 2016, 39–41; Mossel, 61–63. Relocating the wound would not have been unprecedented for Rubens, but the generally good condition of the picture suggests that it was absent from the start.

⁴⁵ Monballieu.

⁴⁶ Freedberg, 1978, 57.

⁴⁷ Haeger, 129.

⁴⁸ Schlie, 2016, 40–41; Schlie, 2015, 78–79.

Rockox and Perez families, arguing that the couple's decision to commission an image of the incredulity of Saint Thomas is suggestive of the religious pragmatism and tolerance that characterized many members of the Antwerp elite in the early seventeenth century.⁴⁹

While these contributions have enhanced our understanding of the Rockox Triptych, the desire to accommodate the picture within a traditional art historical narrative of Rubens and Counter-Reformation Catholicism in 1610s Antwerp has led some scholars to overlook the more challenging implications of its iconography. Furthermore, the work of several earlier art historians suggests that the current scholarly consensus about the biblical source of that iconography is, in fact, unfounded. In a 1965 essay, Justus Müller-Hofstede reported Ingrid Haug's opinion that the central panel represents not the incredulity of Saint Thomas, or some reworking thereof, but Christ's apparition to the disciples.⁵⁰ While generally overlooked by later scholars, Müller-Hofstede and Haug's arguments have recently been taken up by Alexander Mossel, who argues that Rubens chose to represent the apparition to the disciples instead of the incredulity of Saint Thomas because of the increasingly negative perceptions of the saint in the early seventeenth century.⁵¹ While it is difficult to be certain about the identities of the three disciples in the central panel, those who have described it as an image of the apparition to the disciples, an episode that is often understood as a prequel to the incredulity of Saint Thomas, have plausibly argued that Thomas is not among them.⁵²

Like the incredulity of Saint Thomas, the story of the apparition to the disciples is a story about the materiality of Christ's resurrected body and the relationship between the senses and belief.⁵³ The key features of the central panel of Rubens's triptych were derived from Saint Luke's account of the episode, wherein he reassures the reader that his narrative is based upon eyewitness testimony of Jesus's life and ministry.⁵⁴ According to Luke, the episode in

⁴⁹ Huet and Grieten, 250–94.

⁵⁰ Müller Hofstede, 1965, 309. Haug included the Rockox Triptych in an *RDK* entry published two years later: Haug, 1335. See also Müller Hofstede, 1971, 261.

⁵¹ Mossel, 61. See also Kramer and Schily; Herremans, 54–56.

⁵² Haug and Mossel both identify the figure on the far right as Saint John and the gray-haired figure next to him as Saint Peter, though they disagree on the identity of the dark, bearded disciple who stares at Christ. Haug offers no identification of the figure, while Mossel identifies the figure as Paul. Haug, 1335; Mossel, 62–63. Arguing that the painting represents a scene not described in the Gospels, Mireille Madou identifies the figures as Saints James, Peter, and John: see Madou.

⁵³ On the apparition to the disciples, see George; Most, 18–23.

⁵⁴ "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a narration of the things that have been accomplished among us; according as they have delivered them unto us, who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word": Luke 1:1–2.

question took place after the Supper at Emmaus (24:13–35), as the disciples gathered for dinner in Jerusalem:

And rising up, the same hour, they went back to Jerusalem: and they found the eleven gathered together, and those that were staying with them, saying: The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon. And they told what things were done in the way; and how they knew him in the breaking of the bread. Now whilst they were speaking these things, Jesus stood in the midst of them, and saith to them: Peace be to you; it is I, fear not. But they being troubled and frightened, supposed that they saw a spirit. And he said to them: Why are you troubled, and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? See my hands and feet, that it is I myself; handle, and see: for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as you see me to have. And when he had said this, he shewed them his hands and feet. But while they yet believed not, and wondered for joy, he said: Have you any thing to eat? And they offered him a piece of a broiled fish, and a honeycomb. And when he had eaten before them, taking the remains, he gave to them. And he said to them: These are the words which I spoke to you, while I was yet with you, that all things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then he opened their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures. (24:33–45)

Luke's description of the magnitude and duration of the skepticism displayed by Christ's followers in response to his sudden reappearance is noteworthy. It is only after Christ consumes the humble meal provided by the disciples that they are finally convinced of the materiality of his body and arrive at an understanding of what has transpired. Yet even the final resolution to the episode, proof of bodily materiality through the consumption of broiled fish and honeycomb, may not be enough to satisfy the reader that the disciples' disbelief, which the evangelist has emphasized, was fully assuaged. Luke clearly recognizes that the surest way for them to have overcome their doubts would have been to touch Christ's body, but his silence on the possibility of actual contact is thunderous.

The lack of contact between Christ and his followers would later come to distinguish artistic representations of the apparition to the disciples from representations of Doubting Thomas, in which the incredulous saint is always shown touching or on the verge of touching Christ's side wound.⁵⁵ Indeed, when representing the episode, some medieval illuminators chose to fully cover Christ's side with his robe in order to avoid any possible confusion with the Doubting Thomas.⁵⁶ While serving a similar function, Rubens's decision to omit the side

⁵⁵ On the iconography of the apparition to the disciples, see Haug, 1327–49; Schiller, 106–08.

⁵⁶ Haug, 1333–34.

wound from the central panel of the Rockox Triptych, and thereby to preclude the very possibility of contact between Christ and his disciples, also suggests that his painting was based upon a close reading of the Gospel of Luke, a text that only mentions the wounds on Christ's hands and feet. As Mossel points out, the existence of similar paintings by the artist's pupils Anthony van Dyck (1625–26) (fig. 10) and Arnout Vinckenborch (before 1620), both of whom emphasize the lack of physical contact between Christ and his disciples, confirms that Rubens's painting was not just a reworking of the Doubting Thomas story but a representation of an entirely different episode from the resurrection narrative (although it must be noted that both van Dyck and Vinckenborch include Christ's side wound in their paintings).⁵⁷

The tendency to see the central panel of the Rockox Triptych as a clever reworking of the Doubting Thomas story is nevertheless instructive, and in a certain sense justified, because it draws attention to the intertextuality that binds Rubens's painting to Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. An important source of inspiration for the young Fleming in the years following his return from Italy, Caravaggio's picture provided the starting point for a number of works painted in the 1610s, including *Christ's Charge to Peter*, *The Giving of the Keys to Peter* (1612), and *The Tribute Money* (1612–14).⁵⁸ The connection between the two paintings would also have been recognized by the educated members of Rubens's circle, many of whom had developed a taste for Caravaggio's work.⁵⁹ Chief among them was, of course, Nicolaas Rockox himself, whose own interest in the Italian's work can be deduced from the Caravaggesque qualities scholars have detected in the other pictures he commissioned from Rubens in the years following the artist's return from Italy.⁶⁰ But it was not merely to Caravaggio's style that Rubens and Rockox were drawn. Instead, the central characteristics of the Rockox Triptych betoken an interest in the epistemic implications of Caravaggio's seemingly uncompromising naturalism similar to that expressed by several of the most attentive early commentators on the Italian's work.⁶¹ For instance, in his *Schilder-boeck* (The book of painters, 1604), a text that Rubens knew well, the Flemish artist and critic Karel

⁵⁷ Mossel, 63. On van Dyck's painting, identified as *Doubting Thomas*, see Barnes et al., 165–66. On Vinckenborch's painting, also identified as *Doubting Thomas*, see Vlieghe.

⁵⁸ On *The Giving of the Keys to Peter*, see Freedberg, 1984, 91–94 (no. 23). On *The Tribute Money*, see Bulckens, 140–45 (no. 31). On Caravaggio's influence on the young Rubens, see Müller Hofstede, 1971, 272, 274, 302; Schaudies, 339; Büttner.

⁵⁹ Schaudies, 352.

⁶⁰ On the Caravaggesque qualities of Rubens's *Samson and Delilah* and *Adoration of the Magi*, see Bodart, 54; Devisscher and Vlieghe, 1:117; Schaudies, 352.

⁶¹ For a critical analysis of Caravaggio's naturalism and its early reception, see the essays collected in Warwick.



Figure 10. Anthony van Dyck. *Christ's Apparition to the Disciples*, 1625–26. Oil on canvas, 147 x 110.3 cm. State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. © HIP / Art Resource, NY.

van Mander writes, “[Caravaggio’s] belief is that all art is nothing but a bagatelle or child’s work, whatever it is and whoever it is by, unless it is done after life, and that we can do no better than to follow Nature. Therefore he will not make a single brushstroke without the close study of life, which he copies and paints. This is surely no bad way of achieving a good end: for to paint after drawing, however close it may be to life, is not as good as following Nature with all her various colors.”⁶² For early critics like van Mander, who in his text promoted a highly finished, naturalistic approach to painting, Caravaggio’s achievement

⁶² Van Mander, 191^r; translation from Hibbard, 343–44. On Rubens’s copy of the *Schilderboeck*, see Arents and Thijs, 2001a, 93–95.

rested partly upon the apparent epistemological transparency of his art, upon its apparent lack of artifice.⁶³

Modern art historians, too, have sometimes seen Caravaggio as the progenitor of an essentially empirical approach to painting. Arguing that the *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* expresses a “will to verify, to ascertain through proof, and to reach conviction only through ‘experience,’” Ferdinando Bologna suggested that the picture is emblematic of a mode of artistry that, in its commitment to the “direct representation of ‘evidence,’” was equivalent to the scientific vision of Galileo.⁶⁴ But as subsequent scholars have pointed out, the pictorial naturalism that Bologna understood as a manifestation of the desire to transmit precisely the evidence of one’s eyes is in fact implicated a highly self-conscious reflection upon the potentialities—and perhaps also the limitations—of painting.⁶⁵ Building upon Nicola Suthor’s astute observation that the torn seam of Thomas’s cloak on the right side of Caravaggio’s picture echoes the tear in Christ’s body on the left side of the picture, Wolfram Pichler has argued that the way in which the artist plays “evidence” against “counter-evidence” results in an unnatural bilateral symmetry that is intended to undermine the referential force of the *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*.⁶⁶ Although the subject matter of Caravaggio’s picture suggests that it is only through firsthand experience that one comes to know the truth, the carefully staged fictiveness of the work implies a certain skepticism regarding the possibility that painting can do anything more than transmit mere appearances.⁶⁷

Aspects of the central panel of the Rockox Triptych suggest that Rubens was attuned to the tensions that later scholars have discerned in Caravaggio’s picture. Heike Schlie has argued that the mandorla-like fold of red drapery out of which Christ’s left hand emerges is an allusion to the torn seam of Thomas’s cloak, a suggestion that would seem to confirm that Rubens was aware of the calculated artificiality of his predecessor’s work.⁶⁸ The decision to stage the central panel of the triptych as an epistemic dilemma and to omit from it Christ’s side wound, a detail that plays a crucial evidentiary role in the *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, likewise suggests that Rubens understood Caravaggio’s painting as a poignant reflection upon the potential

⁶³ On Rubens’s knowledge of contemporary criticism of Caravaggio’s work, see Muller, 1982, 242–43. On van Mander and highly finished naturalism (*netticheydt*), see Melion, 1991, 60–63.

⁶⁴ Bologna, 154, 168. For a critique of Bologna’s thesis, see Cropper, 49.

⁶⁵ See Krüger, 2001, 259–61; Koos, 1151; Pericolo, 450–64.

⁶⁶ Suthor, 267–68; Pichler, 28. See also Sapir, 2012, 145–51.

⁶⁷ Sapir, 2012, 151.

⁶⁸ Schlie, 2016, 41.

incompatibility of truth and artifice. In the privacy of a chapel located behind the choir of the Church of the Recollects, a space otherwise accessible only to the friars themselves, Rubens, Rockox, and their closest friends would have been able to discuss the implications of these self-effacing iconographic innovations.⁶⁹ Those discussions would have unfolded in full knowledge of an important early modern art-theoretical trope according to which the representation of a particular emotion or psychological state could induce the same state in the viewer.⁷⁰ Desirous of certainty but unsure of what they were seeing, the educated Antwerpens who constituted the original audience of Rubens's picture would have been conscious of their status as the modern avatars of Christ's disciples.

DOUBTING THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Although Rubens's Rockox Triptych and Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* both address the question of painting's relationship with the truth, the two works are distinguished from one another not merely by iconographic differences but by differences in the level of credulity with which their respective authors approached the reading of scripture. At the time of the creation of the Rockox Triptych, a number of Rubens's and Rockox's acquaintances were active in the emerging field of biblical criticism, a discipline whose early participants sought to reprimarinate the text of the Bible in order that it might serve as either a weapon in the confessional polemics of the period or a tool with which to bridge the confessional divides and establish ecumenical consensus (depending upon the individual scholar's outlook).⁷¹ Rubens probably met the biblical scholar Hugo Grotius in 1612, the year before he began work on the Rockox Triptych.⁷² By that time he was certainly familiar with the work of Grotius's teacher Joseph Scaliger, who argued that the corrupted text of the Vulgate could not be trusted.⁷³ Both Grotius and Scaliger took a historical view of

⁶⁹ On the location and accessibility of the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, where the triptych was displayed, see Herremans, 53–54. On the importance of memory to the creation and reception of Rubens's art, see Muller, 1982, 239, 245–46.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, Gian Paolo Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte della pittura* (Treatise on the art of painting, 1595). On Rubens and Lomazzo, see Heinen, 2004, 30–31.

⁷¹ On biblical criticism in the early seventeenth century, see Hardy; Nellen and Steenbakkens, 16–57. On biblical criticism and skepticism, see Mandelbrote.

⁷² See de Smet.

⁷³ Rubens mentions Scaliger's recent death in a 1609 letter: Magurn, 53 (no. 20). The inventory of the library of Rubens's philologist son, Albert, contained several titles by Scaliger. Arents and Thijs, 2001b, 341, 346, 350, 354, 357, 358. On Scaliger's New Testament criticism, see de Jonge, 1996.

the Bible, drawing a distinction between the text and the truth that it represents. Pointing out that each of the four evangelists stood in a different relation to the events he described, Grotius was skeptical that any of them had recorded the episodes of the life of Christ in the correct order.⁷⁴ But it was a previous generation of scholars who, scrutinizing the text of the Bible during the white heat of the Protestant Reformation, had begun to seize upon certain ambiguities in the story of Doubting Thomas.

Recounted in the Gospel of John, the incredulity of Saint Thomas takes place after the apparition to the disciples, when the saint, who in John's account is absent from the earlier encounter, refuses to believe that the resurrected Christ has reappeared to his companions:

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, who is called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him: We have seen the Lord. But he said to them: Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe. And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them. Jesus cometh, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said: Peace be to you. Then he saith to Thomas: Put in thy finger hither, and see my hands; and bring hither thy hand, and put it into my side; and be not faithless, but believing. Thomas answered, and said to him: My Lord, and my God. Jesus saith to him: Because thou hast seen me, Thomas, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed. (20:24–29)

A key episode in John's narrative, the story of the incredulity of Saint Thomas has generally served to reinforce belief in bodily resurrection, a central mystery of the Christian faith, by providing an example of someone whose doubts about the matter were overcome by empirical evidence.⁷⁵ During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Thomas was often held up as an example of the importance of examining evidence and ascertaining the truth, whether in a religious, scientific, or juridical context, and representations of the central episode of the saint's life were thought to have a profound impact upon the faith of the laity.⁷⁶ Citing Pope Gregory the Great, the Louvain theologian Joannes Molanus argued that ordinary viewers found images of Doubting Thomas to be much more inspirational than images of Christ's other, apparently more credulous disciples.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ See de Jonge, 1994.

⁷⁵ See Most, 122–54.

⁷⁶ See Benay.

⁷⁷ Molanus, 165^v.

Almost all textual interpretations and visual representations of the incredulity of Saint Thomas have assumed that the apostle assuaged his doubts about the resurrection by inserting his finger into the side wound that Christ had received at the hands of a Roman soldier during the Crucifixion.⁷⁸ But, as Glenn Most has noted, John's text actually implies that the saint never did anything of the kind: the grammatical structure of the exchange implies that Thomas's statement of submission, "My Lord, and my God," was immediate, and Christ addresses the disciple using the words "because thou hast seen me," not "because thou hast touched me."⁷⁹ According to Most, John's purpose in first raising and then denying the possibility of physical contact between Christ and Thomas was to demonstrate that belief in the resurrection should not depend upon sensory confirmation, even if the "hyperbolic" nature of Thomas's doubt has led most Christians to assume that confirmation was indeed required.⁸⁰ The ambiguity of the story had in fact been noted by a number of the Church's most thoughtful exegetes, including Augustine, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas, all of whom pointed out that in his admonition to Saint Thomas Christ refers to sight alone.⁸¹ But it was only during the sixteenth century, when Lutherans like Johannes Bugenhagen denied that Thomas touched Christ and John Calvin criticized the saint for failing to understand the difference between mere knowledge and true religious faith, that John's text was subjected to sustained critical attention.⁸² Casting doubt upon the traditional interpretation of the episode, the Reformers instead favored a metaphorical understanding of the incredulity of Saint Thomas as a story about the importance of faith—a condition to which the empirical evidence provided by the senses has little to contribute.

In response, Catholic scholars forcefully reasserted that Thomas had indeed touched Christ. In 1584, Carlo Borromeo exhorted the faithful at Milan Cathedral to imagine that they were touching Christ's side wound just as his disbelieving disciple had. Quoting Christ's words to Thomas, Borromeo claimed that "this is the invitation which the Lord is still addressing to us today, for his desire is that we enter the wounds and that we read in them what is written inside them."⁸³ In his *Adnotationes et Meditationes in Evangelia* (Annotations and meditations on the Gospels, 1595), Jéronimo

⁷⁸ On representations of the incredulity of Saint Thomas, see Schiller, 108–14; Most, 155–214.

⁷⁹ Most, 57–58. The ambiguity of the passage is also noted by Schlie, 2016, 36, 39.

⁸⁰ Most, 68.

⁸¹ Most, 139–41.

⁸² Most, 145–49.

⁸³ Borromeo, 360; cited in Most, 152–53.

Nadal described the importance of Thomas's gesture at length, writing, "Thomas obediently puts his finger in the place of the nails, and his hand into Christ's side, touching the wounds. He knows for certain that these are the real wounds of a living man, JESUS. His mind is rid of all doubt. He not only sees plainly an object which he didn't handle as a ghost, but his higher sense of faith is also awakened. He grasps the intimate link with Christ's divinity, and acclaims JESUS as Lord and God."⁸⁴ Yet in upholding the traditional interpretation of the Doubting Thomas story, Catholic theologians like Borromeo and Nadal were faced with a potentially serious contradiction concerning the nature of Christ's resurrected body, which is material enough to be touched by Thomas only moments after it appeared in a room that John describes as having been inaccessible.⁸⁵ Nadal tried to explain this apparent contradiction by repeating Thomas Aquinas's explanation that the "subtlety" of Christ's resurrected body allowed him to pass through the tiniest of spaces.⁸⁶ But the problems with John's account of the incredulity of Saint Thomas remained; as Most has suggested, the very comprehensiveness of the Catholic response to Protestant critique was symptomatic "of an anxiety that no single truly decisive argument is available to prove the case once and for all."⁸⁷

The central panel of the Rockox Triptych seems to have been painted in response not only to the *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, with its ambivalent statement of the evidence of experience, but also to the vexatious ambiguity of the text upon which Caravaggio based his picture. The well-connected and well-read Rubens may have been aware of the discussions of the Doubting Thomas episode contained in the commentaries of Catholic and Protestant theologians, or he may have arrived at his own conclusions regarding the shaky textual ground upon which the iconography of Caravaggio's picture rests.⁸⁸ Either way, it was probably a desire to avoid the problems plaguing John's text that led him, in a move redolent of the judicious philological skepticism of contemporary biblical scholarship, to choose a different but related story. Rarely represented in the early modern period, Christ's apparition to the disciples probably came to his attention because of its inclusion in Nadal's *Adnotationes*, in which the episode serves as a prequel to the incredulity of Saint Thomas. Synthesizing Luke's lengthy description of the episode with

⁸⁴ Nadal, 114.

⁸⁵ Most, 50.

⁸⁶ Nadal, 105.

⁸⁷ Most, 151.

⁸⁸ As Elizabeth McGrath has noted, the artist's correspondence shows that he often asked friends abroad to obtain books by Protestant authors that were hard to come by in Antwerp: McGrath, 1:57.

the much terser account contained in the Gospel of John (20:19–23), Nadal's discussion of the apparition to the disciples recommends itself as a source for the Rockox Triptych for two reasons. First, the Jesuit scholar devotes significant attention to the problem of the disciples' persistent disbelief. In his annotation on the episode, Nadal writes, "the Disciples are terrified and confused at their first sight of Him, and all kinds of thoughts flood their minds. Some think they're seeing a ghost, others something else. Yet all rejoice at the sight of the Lord. Joy, fear, weak faith, and confusion tumble together in the minds of most."⁸⁹ Attempting to explain the causes of the disciples' disbelief in his subsequent meditation, Nadal claims that the "first sight of Christ elates the Disciples. The profound blessings and spiritual gifts of Jesus give a deep joy to their faith and its spiritual sense that exceeds faith itself in its fervor. It's as though they don't believe what they believe most of all, absorbed and awed as they are. Great Jesus multiplies his mercy. He leads physical to spiritual taste of His resurrection."⁹⁰ Attributing the disciples' doubts to the excitement of the moment, Nadal upholds the Jesuit conviction that our "physical" senses provide an adequate foundation for religious belief, even as he admits that they might also be led astray.

Nadal's discussion of physical sensation is not restricted merely to the sense of sight. Acknowledging what Luke clearly recognizes but does not say—namely, that the surest way for the disciples to overcome their doubts would have been to touch Christ's side—he suggests that that is precisely what some of them did: "Physical sensation such as touch is often taken as insight, especially if it is accompanied by discretion and certainty. Some disciples, whom Jesus had inspired to do so, touch his body. They realize he isn't a ghost, and truly has a human body such as no ghost could ever have (ghosts do take something similar, however, though it isn't a true, living flesh, and they don't have real bones). Christ had endowed their physical touch with the power of truth."⁹¹ Yet while claiming that some of the disciples did indeed touch Christ's body, Nadal is adamant that neither sight nor touch should be understood as a kind of empirical proof, writing, "Of course these were not arguments for Christ's resurrection that would prove it, but they could provide certainty for a well-disposed person."⁹² In sum, in his rather willful reading of the apparition to the disciples, Nadal is so determined to explain away the disciples' doubts that he is forced to read into Luke's text something that is not there. That reading he then qualifies almost immediately.

⁸⁹ Nadal, 104.

⁹⁰ Nadal, 107–08.

⁹¹ Nadal, 105.

⁹² Nadal, 105. On this, see Melion, 2003, 15.

The second reason why the *Adnotationes* would have attracted Rubens's attention is because it contains one of few representations of the apparition to the disciples produced after the Middle Ages. Unlike the explanatory text it accompanies, wherein Nadal proposes that Christ's disciples did indeed touch his wounds, Anton Wierix's engraving (fig. 11) shows no physical contact between Christ and his followers. In accordance with the description contained in the Gospel of Luke, Christ displays the wounds on his hands but does not reveal the wound on his side. The wound is then introduced in the subsequent engraving of the incredulity of Saint Thomas (fig. 12), in which the saint is clearly shown touching Christ's torso.⁹³ Like the other images included in the text, the engravings of the apparition to the disciples and the incredulity of Saint Thomas were crucial to Nadal's devotional program. Grounded in rhetorical theory, the notion behind the *Adnotationes* was that meditation upon physical images would allow the devotee to produce mental images so striking that they would feel as though they were present at the events described in the New Testament.⁹⁴

A similar commitment to the techniques of rhetorical persuasion lay behind Rubens's engagement with yet another visual source for the Rockox Triptych: the *Hermes Belvedere*, a work whose beauty and proportions he had singled out for praise during his time in Rome.⁹⁵ The *Hermes* provided the artist with a model for the body of Christ: the dramatic raking perspective onto Christ's torso as well as the chiseled abdomen, muscular arms, and elevated hip are all found in one of the surviving copies of his original drawings of the sculpture (fig. 13).⁹⁶ His eye was also drawn to the swatch of fabric that surrounds Hermes's left arm, a detail that the artist transformed into the flowing red drapery that falls off Christ's left shoulder and encircles his left wrist. Marked not only by an attentiveness to anatomy but also by a sensitivity to the affective dimensions of bodily comportment, Rubens's engagement with the *Hermes* demonstrates the general principles of his approach to imitation, which was based upon the rhetorical prescriptions of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian and predicated upon the careful selection of esteemed examples of classical sculpture that were thought to provide a proper foundation for convincing

⁹³ Nadal, 114–17.

⁹⁴ On the images in Nadal's text, see Melion, 2003. On Jesuit image theory, see Dekoninck, 2005.

⁹⁵ On the *Hermes Belvedere*, see Bober and Rubinstein, 58 (no. 10). Rubens's comments are found in his notes for a treatise on the human figure: Rubens, 2003, 55, 61. On Rubens and the sculpture collections of Rome, see van der Meulen, 1:41–68.

⁹⁶ A pair of drawings attributed to Willem Panneels in the Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen (nos. 3, 25, and 26), records lost studies of the sculpture by Rubens: van der Meulen, 2:48–49. On Rubens's use of mythological statuary as a model for the figure of Christ, see Göttler, 2007.

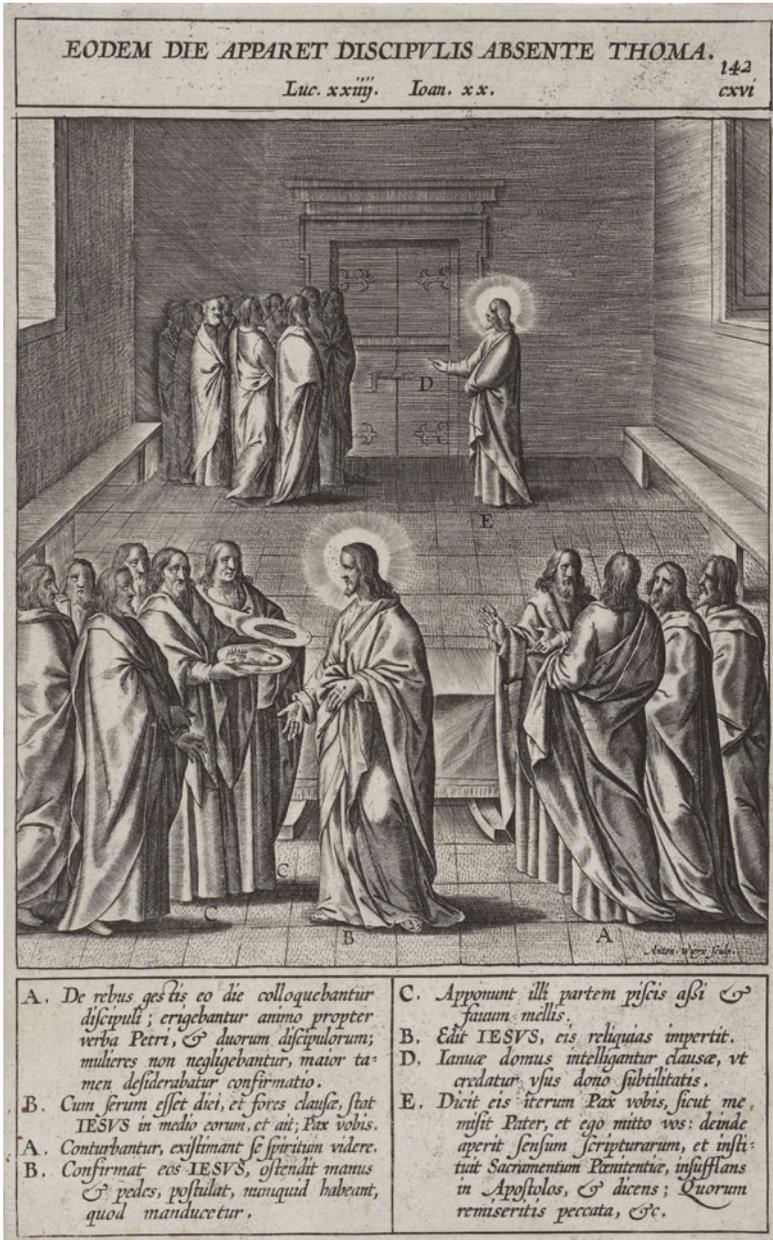


Figure 11. Anton Wierix after Bernardino Passeri. *Christ's Apparition to the Disciples, Thomas Absent*, in Jeronimo Nadal, *Annotaciones et Meditationes in Evangelia* (Antwerp, 1595). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts. © Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco / Randy Dodson.



Figure 12. Anton Wierix after Bernardino Passeri. *Incredulity of Thomas*, in Jeronimo Nadal, *Adnotationes et Meditationes in Evangelia* (Antwerp, 1595). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts. © Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco / Randy Dodson.



Figure 13. Willem Panneels after Peter Paul Rubens. *Hermes Belvedere* (“*Antinous*”), seventeenth century. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen. © Statens Museum for Kunst / SMK Photo / Jacob Schou-Hansen.

pictorial naturalism.⁹⁷ The goal of imitation was to transform these sculptures into lifelike, technicolor bodies—and in so doing to make the past come alive. Moreover, like many of his scholarly friends Rubens valued ancient statuary for the evidence it could provide about life in antiquity.⁹⁸ The adaptation of the muscle-bound physique of the Vatican sculpture reflected the widespread belief that classical works of art offered accurate representations of the bodies of the ancients, who were understood to have been much closer to physical perfection

⁹⁷ On Rubens’s theory of imitation, see Muller, 1982; Thielemann.

⁹⁸ Thielemann, 51–52. On early modern antiquarianism, see Momigliano; Burke.

than early seventeenth-century Europeans.⁹⁹ The remnants of drapery on the sculpture's right arm have been transformed into a *pallium*, a period-appropriate garment that emphasizes Christ's role as an important teacher and philosopher.¹⁰⁰ Yet while motivated by a desire for historical and mimetic plausibility, Rubens has also retained some of the surface luminosity of the *Hermes* in his representation of Christ's body, a decision that contravenes his own rules for the transformation of marble statuary into paintings that effectively convey the sense of pulsating flesh and blood.¹⁰¹ This unnatural radiance provides an *ex post facto* justification for Luke's claim that the disciples feared they were seeing a ghost. In short, Rubens's careful study of the Belvedere *Hermes* did not serve simply to enhance the vividness of his representation of Christ. Instead, the adaptation of the sculpture contributed to the picture's highly ambivalent characterization of the moment in which Christ's companions first respond to the sight of his resurrected body. In other words, in the Rockox Triptych the en energetic mechanics of painting—the practice of transforming revered classical sculptures into vivid imagery that will compel the viewer to believe—are compromised by the textual inconsistency of scripture and the disbelief it describes.

SUSPENDING JUDGMENT IN EARLY MODERN ANTWERP

The kind of uncertainty in the face of unclear evidence displayed by Christ's disciples in *The Rockox Triptych* was a condition with which Rubens, Rockox, and their friends were well acquainted. Many members of the group were familiar with the tenets of philosophical skepticism, an ancient school of thought recently repopularized by modern editions of texts like Sextus Empiricus's *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes* (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*), the only complete work of philosophical skepticism to have survived from antiquity, Diogenes Laertius's *Vitae philosophorum* (*The lives of the philosophers*), a text containing biographies of the leading philosophers of Greek antiquity, and Aulus Gellius's *Noctes Atticae* (*Attic nights*), which provides an overview of the main schools of skeptical philosophy.¹⁰² Republished in Geneva in 1562, Sextus's second-century-CE text describes the tenets of Pyrrhonism, a

⁹⁹ On Rubens and ideas of humanity's physical decline since antiquity, see Muller, 1982, 231–32; Thielemann, 73–79.

¹⁰⁰ On Rubens and antique costume, see de Grummond; Burke, 277.

¹⁰¹ In his essay “*De Imitatione Statuarum*” (*On the imitation of statues*) Rubens writes, “In regard to light, as well, statues are completely alien to all that is human, the difference being that, because of the shine and brilliant gleam of the stone, they make surfaces stand out more than they should, or at least exercise fascination on the eyes”: Rubens, 2018, 100.

¹⁰² On the reception of ancient skepticism in early modern Europe, see Popkin.

form of skepticism developed by the Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis in the fourth century BCE that involved the suspension of judgment on all questions for which there appears to be conflicting evidence. At the heart of the text was a series of ten tropes or modes that provided examples of the ways in which the skeptic might actively induce the suspension of judgment.¹⁰³ Among these are a number of epistemic dilemmas that, by demonstrating that the same thing might appear differently to different individuals or in differing conditions, suggest to the reader that their grasp of the world is an imperfect and highly relative one. These include the tricks played upon our eyes by the light and the climate, the deceptions produced by mirrors and the reflective surface of water, and the differences in the relative brightness of candles viewed in daytime and nighttime, each of which would present a contradictory equipollence (*isostheneia*) between the appearance of reality and one's understanding of it.¹⁰⁴ The epistemic contradictions resulting from these dilemmas were intended to emphasize the value of *epoché*, defined by Sextus as "the state of the intellect on account of which we neither deny nor affirm anything," the attainment of which would in turn bring about *ataraxia*, an "untroubled and tranquil condition of the soul."¹⁰⁵ Sextus's arguments were repeated in slightly distilled form by later grammarians and pedagogues like Diogenes Laertius and Aulus Gellius, both of whom provided summaries of the principal tenets of skeptical philosophy, including the suspension of judgment.¹⁰⁶ As Martha Nussbaum has shown in an important analysis of ancient skepticism, the techniques described by Sextus and his fellow skeptics were understood to be therapeutic in nature.¹⁰⁷ Thus, in the concluding chapter of *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes*, Sextus compares the skeptic who combats dogmatism with argument to the doctor who cures illness with remedies.¹⁰⁸ For Sextus as for later skeptical thinkers, the suspension of judgment offered a cure for the spiritual and intellectual ravages of belief.

Ancient philosophical skepticism exerted a profound influence upon several of the most important thinkers of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe, including Michel de Montaigne, who in his *Essais* (Essays, 1580) emphasizes the importance of combining skepticism with a faith in God and an acceptance of the rituals and traditions of the Catholic Church.¹⁰⁹ In the

¹⁰³ See Sextus Empiricus, 94–110 (*Outlines* 1.36–163).

¹⁰⁴ Sextus Empiricus, 89 (*Outlines* 1.8).

¹⁰⁵ Sextus Empiricus, 90 (*Outlines* 1.10).

¹⁰⁶ See Diogenes Laertius, 2:474–519 (*Lives* 10.61–108); Aulus Gellius, 1927, 2:309–13 (*Attic Nights* 11.5.1–8).

¹⁰⁷ See Nussbaum, 280–315.

¹⁰⁸ Sextus Empiricus, 217 (*Outlines* 3.32). On this passage, see Nussbaum, 296.

¹⁰⁹ On Montaigne's skepticism, see Popkin, 44–63; Cardoso.

“Apology for Raymond Sebond,” Montaigne writes, “Our faith is not of our own acquiring, it is a pure present of another’s liberality. It is not by reasoning or by our understanding that we have received our religion; it is by external authority and command. The weakness of our judgment helps us more in this than its strength, and our blindness more than our clear-sightedness. It is by the mediation of our ignorance more than of our knowledge that we are learned with that divine learning.”¹¹⁰ For Montaigne, as for Sextus Empiricus before him, skepticism was a means of living a tranquil life in untroubled times; in the “Apology” he writes that “there is general agreement among all the philosophers of all sects, that the sovereign good consists in tranquility of soul and body.”¹¹¹ But unlike the ancients, Montaigne also believed that the attainment of tranquility required a certain deference to authority, which in his case meant the teachings of the Catholic Church, for “humility and submissiveness alone can make a good man.”¹¹² Montaigne’s Catholic Pyrrhonism was further developed by his pupil Pierre Charron, who in *Les trois Véritez* (The three truths, 1595) and *De la Sagesse* (On wisdom, 1601) argued that religion and rationality were anathema to one another, that religious belief could not be confirmed by the senses, and that true Christianity consisted of inward piety rather than outward ceremony.¹¹³ Although he had lived through a period of intense religious strife in France, Charron avoided polemical attacks upon Protestantism, instead emphasizing the limits of human understanding and the similarities between all religions.

As Stuart Clark has shown, a central question in the work of both Montaigne and Charron concerns the epistemic status of vision.¹¹⁴ Like their ancient predecessors, early modern skeptics cast doubt upon the apparent reliability of the senses. In so doing, they implicitly challenged the devotional role accorded to sensory experience by the Catholic Church. And so Montaigne concludes his “Apology for Raymond Sebond” by arguing that “man,” hampered as he is by his own fallible faculties, shall only come to know God “if God by exception lends him a hand; he will rise by abandoning and renouncing his own means, and letting himself be raised and uplifted by purely celestial means.”¹¹⁵ Skepticism, with its acknowledgment of the frailty of humanity’s perceptual and intellectual “means,” provided a perfect tool with which to cleanse the mind of false beliefs and prepare it to accept God: “[Pyrrhonism] presents

¹¹⁰ Montaigne, 1973, 369.

¹¹¹ Montaigne, 1973, 360.

¹¹² Montaigne, 1973, 359.

¹¹³ On Charron’s skepticism, see Popkin, 55–61; Maia Neto.

¹¹⁴ Clark, 266–99.

¹¹⁵ Montaigne, 1973, 457.

man naked and empty, acknowledging his natural weakness, fit to receive from above some outside power; stripped of human knowledge, and all the more apt to lodge divine knowledge in himself, annihilating his judgment to make more room for faith; neither disbelieving nor setting up any doctrine against the common observances; humble, obedient, teachable, zealous; a sworn enemy of heresy, and consequently free from the vain and irreligious opinions introduced by false sects. He is a blank tablet prepared to take from the finger of God such forms as he shall be pleased to engrave on it."¹¹⁶ In a similar vein, Charron writes in *De la Sagesse* that it is the fallibility of human senses and human reason that prevents us from appreciating the "divine truths which eternal wisdom has revealed to us and which one must accept with all possible humility and submission, simply believing and adoring."¹¹⁷ For Charron as for Montaigne, the suspension of judgment and the abandonment of all dubious beliefs and opinions did not preclude an acceptance of God; instead, it helped to prepare the individual mind to accept God's grace and thereafter to live a more just and peaceful life.

Skeptical ideas circulated widely in the Low Countries. The work of Michel de Montaigne was especially popular, including among members of Rubens and Rockox's circle.¹¹⁸ Justus Lipsius, mentor to the artist's scholarly brother, Philip, and friend of Nicolaas Rockox, had been familiar with Sextus's work and corresponded with Montaigne.¹¹⁹ In his Stoic dialogue *De Constantia* (On constancy, 1584), Lipsius describes the benefits of the suspension of judgment, which can help to achieve the tranquil imperturbability necessary to withstand the passions and to live a good and virtuous life in troubled times. Echoing Montaigne's and Charron's views on the possibility of rational knowledge of God, he argued against the Stoic position that one might come to know God through the application of reason in his *Manuductio ad Stoicam Philosophiam Libri Tres* (Guide to Stoic philosophy, 1604), instead suggesting that knowledge of God was in the nature of a divine gift.

The Protestant scholar Hugo Grotius, whom Rubens visited in Leiden in 1612, was also familiar with philosophical skepticism.¹²⁰ Responding to the adoption of Pyrrhonism by Montaigne, Charron, and others, on the one

¹¹⁶ Montaigne, 1973, 375.

¹¹⁷ "Cecy ne touche point les veritez divines, que la sagesse eternelle nous à revelez, qu'il faut recevoir avec toute humilité, & submission, croire & adorer tout simplement": Charron, 1601, 308–09.

¹¹⁸ On the circulation of Montaigne's works in the Low Countries, see Smith and Enenkel.

¹¹⁹ On Lipsius and Montaigne, see de Landsheer, 2007. On Lipsius and skepticism, see Levi.

¹²⁰ On Grotius's moderate skepticism, see Popkin, 216–17. On Rubens's 1612 visit to Leiden, see de Smet.

hand, and to the ongoing debates between Catholics and Protestants about scripture, on the other, Grotius argued that a moderate form of skepticism would establish a new basis for a rational form of religious belief. In his 1611 essay *Meletius sive de iis quae inter Christianos Conveniunt Epistola* (Letter on the points of agreement between Christians), he began to explore the possibility of a minimally doctrinal, conciliatory form of Christianity supported by careful scholarly reasoning.¹²¹ Those ideas would be further developed in *De Veritate Religionis Christianae* (On the truth of the Christian religion, 1627), in which he argued that limiting the Christian creed to beliefs that could be supported with evidence would resolve the ongoing religious controversies generated by conflicting interpretations of scripture.¹²² Drawing a distinction between empirical knowledge and religious faith, Grotius argued that “to confirm something as being true, either about God’s nature or about His will, on the basis of human reason alone, would be a very dangerous and deceitful thing to do, as becomes clear from the myriad dissenting opinions not only held by different schools, but even by their individual members.”¹²³ Like many engaged in the difficult task of reconstructing the original text of the Bible, Grotius had grown ever more inclined to avoid passing judgment about those who held different beliefs.¹²⁴

Skepticism also played an important role in local debates about the mechanics of vision that unfolded in response to Johannes Kepler’s *Ad Vitellionem Paralipomena, quibus Astronomiae Pars Optica Traditur* (Supplement to Witelo, in which is expounded the optical part of astronomy, 1604).¹²⁵ Casting doubt upon the Scholastic theory of vision, which held that sight is the result of *species* that carry the likenesses of objects directly to the human eye, Kepler argued that all optical images are the product not of *species*, which directly connect objects in the world to the human eye, but of rays of light, which mediate between the two, sometimes unreliably.¹²⁶ Sensing a threat to the Scholastic model of vision, which supported the image-based devotional practices of the Jesuits, the Antwerp Jesuit Franciscus Aguilon reinstated the doctrine of the *species* in his the *Opticorum Libri Sex* (Optics, 1613).¹²⁷ Aguilon’s text was an attempt to bolster the epistemological reliability of the senses, but the problems broached by Kepler remained; vision no longer

¹²¹ On the *Meletius*, see Nellen, 2015, 137–41.

¹²² On *De veritate*, see Nellen, 2012.

¹²³ Grotius, 96; translation from Nellen, 2012, 39.

¹²⁴ On Grotius’s irenicism, see Miller, 102–29.

¹²⁵ For an overview of early modern theories of vision, see Lindberg and Steneck.

¹²⁶ On Kepler, see Chen-Morris.

¹²⁷ See Dupré.

seemed to furnish the mind with direct and unimpeachable knowledge of the external world.

Rubens's exposure to these questions was significant. The records of his library suggest that he read extensively in the areas of ancient and modern political theory, philosophy, and optics that were touched by skepticism, and because the artist mentions borrowing books from Rockox in his letters, it is not unreasonable to assume that a text owned by one may have been familiar to the other.¹²⁸ Both men both owned numerous works by Lipsius, including *De Constantia*, and Rubens also owned copies of Grotius's works.¹²⁹ An annotation from February 1615 in the records of the Plantin Press refers to recent purchases by Rubens of two critical sources on ancient skepticism, Diogenes Laertius's *De vita et moribus philosophorum libri X* (1566) and Aulus Gellius's *Noctes Atticae* (1602), which may provide evidence of the artist's interest in skeptical ideas during the period in which he was at work on the Rockox Triptych.¹³⁰ While no such record exists to document his acquisition of Sextus's *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes*, a later edition of the complete surviving works of Sextus, the *Opera omnia quae extant* (1621), was recorded in the 1658 inventory of the library belonging to the painter's son Albert, who inherited many books from his father.¹³¹ Rubens probably also knew Charron's *De la Sagesse*, a copy of which was also recorded in the library of Albert Rubens, and may even have known Montaigne's *Essays*, a work with which his teacher Otto van Veen was intimately acquainted.¹³² Finally, the artist's work on the Rockox Triptych coincided with his work on the illustrations for Aguilon's *Opticorum Libri Sex*.¹³³ Illustrating the optical principle of the horopter (fig. 14), one of these images includes an elderly, bearded figure whose countenance and focused expression are remarkably similar to those of the eldest disciple in the Rockox Triptych. Although certainly familiar with debates about the Scholastic theory of vision from his work on Aguilon's text, Rubens may also have known

¹²⁸ For introductions to Rubens's and Rockox's libraries, see Baudouin, 2001; van de Velde, 2005. For Rubens's references to Rockox's books, see McGrath, 1:57–58.

¹²⁹ On Rubens's and Rockox's copies of Lipsius's works, see Arents and Thijs, 2001a, 130, 271, 274, 275, 279, 280; Fabri et al., 141–42 (no. 36). On Rubens's and Grotius's work, see Arent and Thijs, 2001a, 211, 212, 213; Arents and Thijs, 2001b, 351, 352. Pierre Dupuy sent Rubens a copy of Grotius's *De Veritate* in 1628: Magurn, 242–44 (no. 151).

¹³⁰ Arents and Thijs, 2001a, 142–43.

¹³¹ Arents and Thijs, 2001b, 354.

¹³² A copy of *De la sagesse* was recorded in Albert Rubens's library, but the entry does not include the publication date: Arents and Thijs, 2001b, 362. On the annotated copy of Montaigne's *Essais* owned by Otto van Veen's brother, Pieter, see Kolfin and Rikken.

¹³³ On Rubens and Aguilon, see Held; Bertram, 2016. On the impact of Aguilon's ideas on Rubens's work, see Winner.

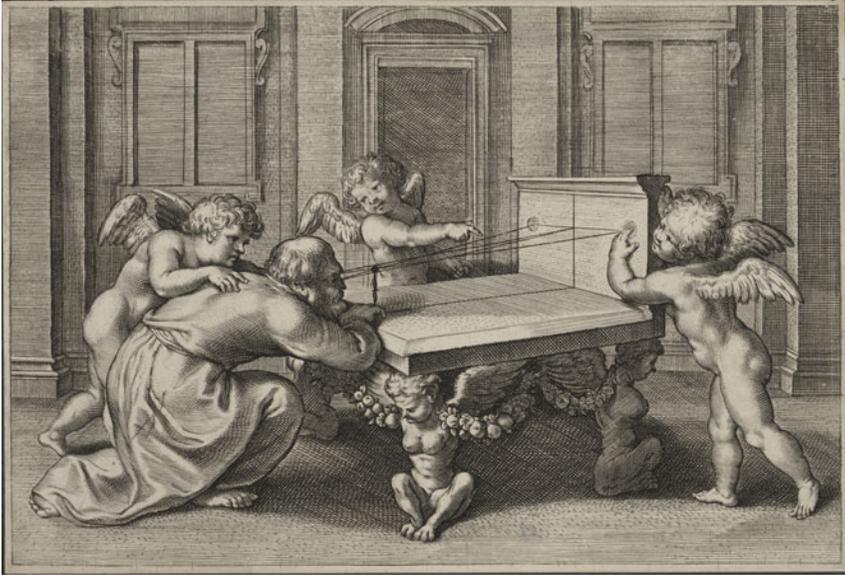


Figure 14. Theodore Galle after Peter Paul Rubens. Vignette from book four of Aguilon's *Opticorum Libri Sex* (Antwerp, 1613). British Museum, London. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Kepler's influential text, a copy of which was later recorded in his son's library.¹³⁴

The appeal of skepticism to members of the Antwerp elite was surely magnified by the tumultuous times in which they lived. In the early 1610s, the Spanish Netherlands were just emerging from a half-century of uninterrupted religious strife. Of vital strategic importance to the Spanish, Antwerp had proven to be especially fertile ground for Reformation ideas and the new skepticism, even if many residents were unwilling to break publicly with the Catholic Church.¹³⁵ In the second half of the sixteenth century, control of the city changed hands between Protestants and Catholics a number of times. The *Beeldenstorm* of 1566, during which the Calvinist community of Antwerp erupted in violence, overthrowing the Spanish authorities and white-washing the city's churches, was followed by a second, "soft" iconoclasm in 1581, during which the city's churches were once again emptied of decoration. The political and religious turmoil of the period divided many of the city's most prosperous families, including those of Nicolaas Rockox and Adriana Perez.

¹³⁴ Arents and Thijs, 2001b, 347.

¹³⁵ On the religious climate of late sixteenth-century Antwerp, see Marnef.

The latter's Catholic father, Luis Perez, was the son of Spanish *conversos* who had arrived in Antwerp during the early sixteenth century.¹³⁶ Her uncle, Marcus Perez, was a leading member of the Calvinist community during the iconoclastic outburst of 1566.¹³⁷ Rockox's grandfather Claes was known to be a Lutheran, and his uncle Nicolaas was rumored to possess Lutheran sympathies.¹³⁸ (Jan Rubens, city alderman and father of the artist, was forced to flee the city because of his Protestant faith.¹³⁹)

This already complex family history is further complicated by the involvement of Luis Perez and Claes Rockox with the *Familia Caritatis*, a secret ecumenical group whose sympathizers are thought to have included Lipsius, the printer Christopher Plantin, the cartographer Abraham Ortelius, and the Spanish theologian Benito Arias Montano.¹⁴⁰ Hendrick Niclaes and Hendrik Jansen van Barrefelt, the leaders of the *Familia Caritatis*, preached conformity with the prevailing denomination while emphasizing the importance of an individual, spiritual reading of the Bible. In the preface to his illustrated biblical commentary *Imagines et Figurae Bibliorum* (Images and figures of the Bible, ca. 1592), Barrefelt implores his readers to look beyond mere appearances and concentrate upon the true, spiritual significance of the Bible; only then, when humanity finally grasps the meaning behind what he calls God's "figurative ministry," will the divisions that trouble Christianity finally be overcome.¹⁴¹ While there is little evidence of the continued existence of the *Familia Caritatis* after 1600, the tolerant, skeptical outlook that characterized the group remained widespread among members of the Antwerp elite.¹⁴²

With the signing of the Twelve Years' Truce, in 1609, the Catholic authorities in Antwerp began to adopt a more relaxed attitude toward Protestantism, focusing less on the persecution of heretics and more on the promotion of new religious orders and the enforcement of stricter standards for religious education, through which they hoped to prevent a recurrence of the religious tumult of the past.¹⁴³ In theory, Protestants living in the Spanish Netherlands still faced a choice between conversion or exile, although in practice those who kept their private beliefs to themselves were usually left alone. Two months

¹³⁶ On the converso community in Antwerp, see Révah; Fuks-Mansfeld.

¹³⁷ On Marcus Perez, see Hauben.

¹³⁸ Huet and Grieten, 275; Marnef, 119.

¹³⁹ On Jan Rubens and the artist's early years, see Baudouin, 2005b.

¹⁴⁰ On the *Familia Caritatis*, see Verwey; Hamilton; Zagorin, 100–29. On Claes Rockox's possible involvement in the *Familia Caritatis*, see Huet and Grieten, 280.

¹⁴¹ For the French edition of the preface, see Dekoninck, 1999, 125–30 (quotation on 126).

¹⁴² On the later history of the *Familia Caritatis* in the Low Countries and in England, see Verwey, 258.

¹⁴³ See Spohnholz.

after the signing of the truce, the Antwerp Jesuits organized a series of debates between Catholic and Protestant theologians on the subject of Christ's presence in the sacrament, which provided the inspiration for Rubens's *The Real Presence in the Holy Sacrament* (1609–11), an altarpiece that according to Cynthia Lawrence advocates for a conciliatory approach to Protestantism based upon the teachings of Erasmus, Seneca, and Saint Paul.¹⁴⁴ Yet despite such high-level attempts at reconciliation, outward conformity to the Catholic faith was still nonnegotiable. In the decades ahead, Rubens would on a number of occasions alter the iconographies of paintings in order to demonstrate the orthodoxy of patrons whose families had complicated religious histories.¹⁴⁵ The possibility that the commission of the Rockox Triptych was also motivated by its patrons' desire to demonstrate conformity cannot be discounted. But neither can the irenic uncertainty of a work of art that implies that religious faith begins where rational understanding ends.

CONCLUSION: SKEPTICAL PAINTING

Well known to Rubens and his friends, Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* had raised difficult questions regarding the relationship between evidence and artifice, knowledge and belief, persuasion and deception. Casting doubt upon painting's epistemic credentials by drawing attention to its artificiality, Caravaggio implies that works of art are ultimately incapable of providing the kind of certainty that contact with Christ's side wound, the paragon of proof, had provided to the incredulous Saint Thomas. Rubens's omission of the very same wound from the central panel of the Rockox Triptych, a work created in a context of heightened epistemic anxiety, likewise calls into question painting's capacity to provide evidence capable of sustaining rational belief. But this does not mean that his picture would have been understood by its intended audience as riven by outright self-negation.

Seeking not simply to delimit the respective domains of the rational and the religious but to suggest that the skeptical point of view embraced by many of his contemporaries was in fact consistent with Catholic faith, Rubens addresses painting's limitations with rhetorical sophistication, staging the central panel of the Rockox Triptych as an epistemic dilemma in which an equipollence of evidence triggers doubt among Christ's companions. Although Christ's body is visible, its immaculate, shimmering appearance leads his disciples to feel as though they cannot to trust their eyes. Meanwhile, the omission of the side wound, a detail that the viewer expects to find in any representation of

¹⁴⁴ Lawrence.

¹⁴⁵ See Göttler, 1999b.

Christ's resurrected body, precludes the kind of authenticating contact that would later assuage Saint Thomas's disbelief. Elided but alluded to, Thomas's probing gesture haunts the central panel of Rubens's triptych, representing a path to certain knowledge that is not open to its three disciples; there is, after all, no wound to touch. In the moment represented by the picture, Christ's companions are faced with a difficult choice between seeing and believing. This dilemma, in turn, poses a challenge to the viewer, who is faced with a thorny question regarding the evidentiary status of the triptych itself. But while the central panel of the triptych implies that the misleading appearances of our worldly existence cannot provide a basis for knowledge of God, the behavior of the patrons in the side panels, who display the external signs of an internal devotion to the suffering Christ, instead suggests that by setting aside rational judgment grounded in sensory experience one can achieve the faith that brings with it what the philosopher Sextus Empiricus had called an "untroubled and tranquil condition of the soul."¹⁴⁶ Rockox's countenance is particularly suggestive of the limitations of our physical senses; his enthralled, glassy-eyed expression suggests that he is concentrating not upon the scene unfolding in the central panel but upon a much more vivid, internal image in which the evidentiary contradictions of the central panel melt away. In sum, Rubens's sophisticated pictorial rhetoric works not to conflate the imperfect physical image before which the viewer stands and the more perfect mental image that they are led to believe is visible in Rockox's mind's eye but to disaggregate them and, in so doing, to instigate the suspension of judgment.

But Rubens's innovative iconography is also provocative. Although the decision to omit Christ's side wound has a notional basis in the text of the Gospel of Luke, it is inconsistent with the conventional iconography of Christ's resurrected body. Evident in the radically different approaches to the wound found in the various pictures commissioned for the Recollects by Nicolaas Rockox, Rubens's willingness to explore the discrepancies that distinguish the individual Gospel accounts of the resurrection is notable given the insistence upon the avoidance of confusion, provocation, and error in religious art that was expressed by many Catholic clerics in the decades following the conclusion of the Council of Trent.¹⁴⁷ More importantly, the self-effacing conceit of the Rockox Triptych is arresting enough to raise questions about the strength of the artist's fidelity to the Scholastic and, later, Tridentine principle that our senses can provide access to the divine and that images are therefore a suitable vehicle to transport the devout beholder "per visibilia ad invisibilia." Inflected by the skeptical ideas that circulated in the artist's milieu, that conceit places enormous

¹⁴⁶ Sextus Empiricus, 90 (*Outlines* 1.10).

¹⁴⁷ See, for instance, Paleotti.

pressure upon what Klaus Krüger has called the “mediality” of the Christian image—that is, its status as a self-consciously artificial creation that is nevertheless capable of mediating between corporeal and spiritual vision.¹⁴⁸

When considered in relation to the challenge to the cult images leveled by the Antwerp Iconoclasm of 1566 and 1581, the creation of a fundamentally skeptical religious image suggests that the context in which the young Rubens’s career unfolded was less religiously and philosophically resolved, and more self-critical, than is sometimes thought. That context has often been characterized as one of militantly self-confident Counter-Reformation Catholicism, but many members of the artist’s circle were well aware of recently rearticulated philosophical arguments that cast doubt upon the very possibility of certainty—especially when it came to religion. For men and women who had been driven by the chastening experiences of religious and political turmoil into new intellectual endeavors through which they sought to uncover evidence that would secure the foundations of historical knowledge and religious belief, the practical utility of the skeptical principle of the suspension of judgment, understood by Catholic Pyrrhonists as a necessary precondition for the acceptance of God’s grace and by Neo-Stoics as a means of living a quiet life in unquiet times, was obvious.

In the Rockox Triptych, it is painting’s subtle epistemic equivocation—even its potential untruth—that is intended to induce the suspension of judgment through which the viewer might arrive at true faith. By first soliciting viewers’ doubts and then demonstrating how that they might be set aside, the picture elicits a mode of skeptical viewing that was designed to reconcile them to uncertainty and provide spiritual comfort in an uncomfortable world. The complicated evidentiary thematics of the picture therefore imply a somewhat circumspect attitude toward art’s capacity to sustain belief—at least in the new, more empirical guise that belief had begun to adopt in the early seventeenth century. In the final analysis, Rubens’s uncertain image suggests that it is ultimately not possible for a painting to offer the kind of proof upon which Saint Thomas is said to have insisted, for paintings can only ever trade in appearances. A work of art that is consistent with the more self-critical image of post-Reformation Catholicism that has emerged in recent years, the Rockox Triptych communicates the full force of Christ’s admonition in the Gospel of John to be among those “that have not seen, and have believed.”

¹⁴⁸ See Krüger, 2001.

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