

Text audioguide Theodoor Rombouts - Patrick De Rynck - MSK Gent

O. WELCOME

Welcome to the MSK in Ghent! You are about to see something that has never been seen before: an exhibition devoted exclusively to the work of the painter Theodoor Rombouts, nearly 400 years after his death. Rombouts will take us back to the Baroque era, the age of Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck, and just after the lifetime of the Italian artist Caravaggio. These three unparalleled figures from the history of painting will appear again soon during this tour.

We will be visiting 17th-century Antwerp, Rome, Florence and Mechelen. But also Ghent, where Theodoor Rombouts worked. The MSK is proud to own three of his paintings - you will discover them in a moment. We hope you will enjoy everything you see and hear! The entire tour should take about ??? minutes.

1. Bartolomeo Manfredi, Christ driving the money-changers from the temple, ca. 1616-1617.

We begin the audiotour in Italy. Though he was born in Antwerp, Theodoor Rombouts lived for a long time in Rome and Florence in his twenties, probably starting in 1616. These were formative years for him.

The Italian painter Bartolomeo Manfredi produced this painting during that same period. In this scene from the Gospel, we see Christ violently driving the money-changers from the temple. The figures are true to life and very expressive; the surroundings are dark and murky. And everything is extremely lively. Manfredi paints in the style of Caravaggio, the genius and innovator, and was just as famous as Caravaggio during his own lifetime.

By 1616 Caravaggio had been away from Rome for 10 years and dead for six, after the final turbulent years of his life. But Rombouts would certainly have seen his work in the Eternal City, where Caravaggio's influence was as strong as ever. There is even a name for painters whose works were influenced by those of Caravaggio: Caravaggists. Manfredi belonged to the first generation of Caravaggists, and Rombouts was one, too.

Rombouts returned to Antwerp around 1625. While working there, he also painted scenes of Christ chasing money-changers from the temple. Here are two examples -

the smallest one may be a modello: a sketch for a larger painting. This striking, emotional scene establishes Rombouts as a Caravaggist, and this is emphasised by the pillar and the dramatic poses of the common-looking figures in the painting. Yet he has also put his own stamp on this picture. For one thing, look at the bottom left, where you will see a still life with books and papers. And pay particular attention to the colours, which were a major characteristic of Rombouts' painting. This is a combination of outside influence and individual artistry that we will see often in this exhibition. Theodoor Rombouts may have been a Caravaggist, but there was very much more to him than that.

Rombouts died in 1637, at the age of only 40. Coincidentally, Manfredi also died when he was 40.

2. Theodoor Rombouts, The denial of Saint Peter

Theodoor Rombouts painted this rectangular work soon after his stay in Italy, around the year 1630. The main subject of this dramatic scene is the bald and bearded man on the right: the apostle Peter. On the night of Christ's arrest by the Romans, Peter denied knowing him three times over. Here he does so in a dark inn, in the company of card players and soldiers who look on in amazement. Note the atmospheric interplay of light and darkness: it is one of the main characteristics of Caravaggism, the style of painting inspired by Caravaggio. So, too, are the lively, realistic figures we see here.

If you didn't know the background story here, this might look like a scene taken from everyday life: some kind of disturbance at an inn. Works depicting everyday scenes like this are known as genre paintings. And such scenes are what illustrate the power of works of Theodoor Rombouts, and are what make them so important. Rombouts and his workshop produced quite a number of them, as we will see further on in the tour.

Theodoor Rombouts was an innovator in this area, bringing an Italian dynamic to Southern Netherlandish genre painting. It was a Caravaggist dynamic, full of the same striking, cinematic contrasts of light and darkness.

Make sure to take a closer look at the other two nighttime scenes in this gallery. They depict the very same story: Peter denying Christ. They are also by Netherlandish Caravaggists, contemporaries of Rombouts.

3. Theodoor Rombouts, Saint Sebastian

This is a common subject in painting and sculpture: Saint Sebastian, tied to a tree and pierced - or about to be - by a rain of arrows. For painters, the scene provided a convenient opportunity to present a young male figure in the nude. This picture of Saint Sebastian by Rombouts is more than life-sized.

The background in this painting is dark and murky, in contrast to the brightly illuminated and shadowy areas that contrast with such great effect. Sebastian's naked body is bathed in light, and his blue silk loincloth adds a beautiful touch of colour. Rombouts enjoyed working with very outspoken colour palettes.

Then there is the face of the young Sebastian, sporting a moustache, as he looks to the heavens for God's help. 'Lifelike' is a description that is often applied to works by Rombouts and his contemporaries - *dal naturale*, in Italian. That is how he has depicted Saint Sebastian's face here.

This painting has been brought here from its place in the cathedral of Malta. Rombouts painted it during his time in Italy, from 1616 to 1625. We know of only a few of his works from this period.

4. Theodoor Rombouts, Heraclitus and Democritus

Two men from two different generations: one is clearly enjoying himself, but the older one on the left appears to be crying bitter tears. Lying in front of this curious pair are two open books and two closed ones. And on the left is a globe. Do you see that fat little book, the closed one? On it is the signature of the painter, T. Rombouts. He completed the painting in the 1620s; unfortunately the last digit is illegible.

What do we see here? Who are these two gentlemen? They appear in other paintings here too, including one by none other than Peter Paul Rubens - that is the one with the very interesting globe.

The two men are the ancient Greek philosophers Democritus and Heraclitus. Democritus is the cheerful one, and Heraclitus is his melancholy mate. As far back as ancient times, they have served as an example of two ways of responding to the misery of the world: cheerful Democritus by laughing uncontrollably, and Heraclitus by despairing. This contrasting couple has always been a popular theme, and one that gives painters a chance to create lifelike representations of men experiencing emotions.

The background in Rombouts' painting is empty, in contrast to the men's lively faces and their wild gestures - though we see only half of their bodies. We can trace all of this back to Caravaggio, the man whose innovative attitudes so completely transformed painting around 1600. The same men appear separately in two other paintings near here, both by Hendrick Ter Brugghen. Like Rombouts, Ter Brugghen was also a Caravaggist; he was born in Utrecht and worked in Rome.

5. Theodoor Rombouts, Group at cards

A bare room; shadows on the left, light coming from the right. A long table is covered by a blue-grey cloth; five people sit around it. We see only the top half of their bodies. The figure in the middle, a soldier in a plumed hat, pulls our gaze into the scene. The people are all of different ages, and their clothes look odd. At the same time, they do look realistic - look at how they hold their hands. They are in the middle of a card game. The old fellow on the left looks like he intends to cheat, and the mature lady on the right appears to be making arrangements with the young wine drinker - perhaps for an appointment in her brothel?

Once again we hear his name: Caravaggio, the painter who popularised paintings of café and street life in Rome around 1600. His pictures are populated by card players, musicians, matchmakers and drinkers. Bartolomeo Manfredi was probably one of Caravaggio's students. And under Manfredi's own influence, young painters from the Northern and Southern Netherlands and from France travelled to Rome to paint genre scenes in the style of Caravaggio. These paintings were very popular with collectors. Many of these painters stayed in Rome for some time, living in the same neighbourhood not far from the Spanish Steps.

One of them was Theodoor Rombouts. In his genre paintings, he paid considerable attention to how he depicted objects and fabrics, and to his colour palette. After Rombouts returned to Antwerp, he and the people working in his workshops painted plenty more genre scenes - and that was probably a very profitable business.

6. Theodoor Rombouts, The backgammon players

You stand before a masterpiece created by Theodoor Rombouts at the height of his powers.

Start with the edge of the board, which lies on the beautiful tapestry draped over the table. If you look closely, you can see where Rombouts signed the work, and dated it 1634. The game we see here is known in Dutch as triktrak, or pietjesbak; in English it is backgammon. Arranged around the board are a lively group of men, women and children of all ages. No one seems to be paying much attention to the game.

However, the most striking figure in the painting is intently focused on the board. Dressed in a theatrical red and yellow outfit, he stands with his back to us, an effect that produces a three-dimensional effect. This technique, *repoussoir*, was one that Rombouts used frequently - again, following Caravaggio's example. The abrupt truncation of the figures and the addition of an old woman to the scene are also inspired by the Italian painter's style. But the colourful clothing is typical of Rombouts, and the colour palette and the setting recall Flemish masters such as Anthony Van Dyck. Van Dyck often used a hanging curtain and other props to add depth to his paintings. Here, Rombouts combines a range of traditions - and he does it masterfully.

In Rombouts' era the church generally disapproved of games, as they were thought to lead to laziness, procrastination and violence. But some people considered games to be educational, and a fine way to pass the time. There is no evidence in this painting of quarrelling, excessive drinking, or any other improper behaviour. Is that why Rombouts was happy to use his own wife, Anna van Thielen, and their six-year-old daughter Anna Maria as models here? You can see them on the left, the mother holding her daughter's hand.

7. Theodoor Rombouts, Allegory of the five senses

Antoon Triest was both the bishop of Ghent and a collector and patron of the arts. He commissioned this painting from Theodoor Rombouts in 1632, paying the impressive sum of 600 guilders for it. The painting, the *Allegory of the five senses*, it is now one of the most important works in the museum's collection, and a firm favourite among visitors.

The title tells us exactly what we see here: five rustic figures who embody the five senses. Look at them from left to right. The old man on the left, with his pince-nez

spectacles and his mirror, is sight, and the musician holding the theorbo is hearing. The blind man in the middle - touch - runs his hands over an antique sculpture. Next we have taste, the half-dressed young fellow holding a glass of wine and a carafe, and then smell. There is so much more to wonder at in this particularly rich painting. Take the time to look closely, and pay particular attention to all of the props, which are so beautifully painted. And keep in mind that the earthy, realistic figures are reminiscent of Caravaggio, while the architecture and the decor are more in the style of Van Dyck. This mixing of styles, so typical of Rombouts' work, shows up again and again in this exhibition.

But why would a Catholic bishop commission such a large, expensive painting on the theme of the senses? Perhaps because of the message that is hidden in scenes like this: the idea that our senses are a conduit between our souls and the external world - that was the thinking in the 16th and 17th centuries. Our senses enable us to explore God's creation, and to attempt to understand it. That said, we must not misuse them, and not enjoy them to excess.

A painting like this was also intended as a way to get people talking about its themes - we hope it has the same effect on you!

8. Theodoor Rombouts, Man pouring from a jug

A young man with a friendly face pours liquid from a jug held high above a glass - he is watering down the wine. Despite his theatrical outfit, he looks rather common, as if he has just been plucked from the street to serve as a model. That is what people said about Caravaggio's way of working: that he found his saints and Virgin Marys in the streets of Rome.

The watering down of wine indicates a particular moral quality - a virtue, to put it quaintly. Specifically: temperance. In the Latin, which assigns a gender to words, it is feminine: temperantia. And temperance was often depicted as a woman in paintings. But not here. Instead, Rombouts provides his own interpretation, at the same time showing us a rather pleasant scene. But the message remains the same: be sober. Water down your wine: drink responsibly, and in moderation.

9. Cluster of instruments

Chitarra batente, dulcian, theorbo, lute, chanterelle, viola: these are the beautiful names of the ancient instruments collected here. Theodoor Rombouts took great care to paint objects accurately, and musical instruments were no exception. We have brought a number of instruments together here so that you can compare them to the ones in paintings by Rombouts and other artists.

A painter like Rombouts would have been familiar with musical instruments and the way they were played: the positions of the hands, the angle of the body. In his day, there was plenty of music to be heard in Antwerp, just as there had been in Rome when he was living there in his 20s. Friends and fellow artists made music together in inns, and in the salons of wealthy patrons of the arts. There were also close musical ties between Flanders and Italy, and lots of travelling between the two regions.

Even though we see these instruments and musicians painted with such precision here, we should not forget that music, and the act of making music, could be symbolic of all kinds of things, both positive and negative. Literally and figuratively, the word means harmony. But music is also transitory, and capable of awakening earthly desires. The instruments themselves had their own hierarchy, and some were considered more refined than others. Painters were aware of this. Here's a hint: if you see a musical instrument lying on the ground, it was probably one with a lowly reputation.

10. Theodoor Rombouts, The lute player

Men and women making music, either alone, in pairs or in groups ... they turn up in the paintings of various artists in this part of the exhibition. Musicians were a popular subject for Caravaggists, following in the footsteps of the master himself. Caravaggio painted lute players several times, sometimes accompanied by singers. His influential student, Bartolomeo Manfredi, also painted groups of people making music.

Theodoor Rombouts painted this lute player. He shows us a man dressed in strange, old-fashioned clothes and playing a lute against a hazy backdrop, looking out at us intently. The lute was a very popular instrument in Rombouts' time. But there is something mysterious about this figure, with his piercing gaze and the flamboyant

feathers on his hat. Could he be a washed-up musician, fallen on hard times? Perhaps because of music itself?

Experts in ancient instruments point out how accurately Rombouts painted them, right down to the smallest details - this was a good way for him to show off his talent. The same goes for the Turkish carpet covering the table: look at the details!

At least 12 versions of this painting have been identified. The lute player was one of Rombouts' most successful motifs; he painted as many as he could sell. Given that, this painting is truly iconic.

11. Music instruments

Altviool

P. Phalesius (1510-1575), *Ce qui m'est deu & ordonné* – Gaillarde, 1571, *La Compagnie des Violons du Roy*

Luit

E. Adriaensen (ca. 1554-1604), *Almande Prince Philippe Malfeyt*

Teorbe

A. Piccinini (1566-1638), *Toccata 20*, Philippe Malfeyt

Chitarrone

G. Kapsberger (1580-1651), *Toccata l'Arpeggiata*, Rolf Lislevand

Altschalmei

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmebD71Axm0&ab_channel=MIMBrussels

Aline Hopchet plays "La Spagna" composed by Francisco de la Torre (1483)
Alto shawm, Eric Moulder, Leek, UK, 2018 (copy from original Renaissance instruments)

Recorded at the MIM's concert hall, 21.10.2019, under the supervision of Géry Dumoulin (curator wind instruments)

Video, sound & editing: Matthieu Thonon

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Dulciaan

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c74IQY01D7Q&ab_channel=MIMBrussels

Aline Hopchet plays "Magnificat Quia fecit" composed by Cristóbal de Morales (1545)
Tenor dulcian in C, Eric Moulder, Leek (UK), 2018 (copy from original Renaissance instruments)

Recorded at the MIM's concert hall, 21.10.2019, under the supervision of Géry Dumoulin (curator wind instruments)

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12. Theodoor Rombouts, Allegory of the Court of Justice of Gedele

We have arrived in Ghent! The sheer scale of this painting, composed in the form of a pyramid, is proof enough that this must have been a very important and prestigious commission for Rombouts. And after all: he was more than just a genre painter and a follower of Caravaggio. This opus magnum displays a range of influences inspired by the painters of Italy and the Southern Netherlands, including Rubens and Van Dyck. In the Antwerp of Rombouts' era, they were the market leaders.

But what do we see here? Rombouts worked on this painting from March 1627 to April 1628. The commission came from the city council - specifically, from the town councillors of Gedele, an administrative body comparable to a justice of the peace court, which was also charged with caring for orphans. The eight justices are seated on the stairs, to the left and right. The message? That the law in Ghent is administered righteously, and the city is prosperous.

The composition is balanced, and the decor is Greco-Roman in style. Ruling from above is Ghent, depicted as a woman. Seated under a canopy, she protects five orphans. Lower down, in the middle, three women represent the attributes of a court of justice: Temperance adds water to the wine; Power holds fast to a pillar; and Prudence sits at a table, writing. Other figures also illustrate Ghent's good fortune. The reclining male nude represents the Schelde river, which brings wealth and success - see his horn of plenty? And the women to his right symbolises another river: the Leie.

1628 was an outstanding year for Theodoor Rombouts. For one thing, he was chosen to head the Guild of Saint Lucas in Antwerp, the body that represented the rights of painters. That was a very prestigious appointment indeed.

13. Theodoor Rombouts, Christ's descent from the cross

Theodoor Rombouts was from Antwerp, but some of his most important commissions came from Ghent. This painting of Christ's descent from the cross, from 1629, is an excellent example. It shows us the deeply emotional moment when Christ's pale, dead body is lifted from the cross, in the presence of his grieving relatives and with the help of his friends. The Bishop of Ghent, Antoon Triest, commissioned this painting. Rombouts intended it to be placed above an altar in Saint Bavo's Cathedral, and that remains its home today.

The year 1629 was about 15 years after Rubens painted his famous descent from the cross for the cathedral of Antwerp. This is important to know, since it means Rombouts would certainly have seen the work and taken inspiration from it. This is evident in the diagonal composition, among other things.

From here, look around, especially at the large painting of Christ's entombment, by Abraham Janssen van Nuysen. This prominent painter came from Antwerp and was very probably Theodoor Rombouts' painting master. Janssens had an enormous influence on Rombouts, and it was probably him who encouraged Rombouts to travel to Italy after finishing his apprenticeship - as Janssen himself had done.

14. Theodoor Rombouts, The ecstasy of Saint Francis

'Saint Francis, swooning, held aloft by two angels': in 1640, that was how one unidentified Italian described this painting by 'Teodoro Fiamingo' - or 'Theodoor the Fleming' - as he called Rombouts. This altarpiece shows us Saint Francis at a pivotal moment of his life: as he experiences a holy vision, the stigmata appear in his hands. According to legend, they were exactly the same wounds that Christ himself received on the cross! Angels rush to help him, and his companion, Brother Leo, is a witness to it all. Saint Francis, stunned and ecstatic, was a very popular subject in early 17th-century Italian painting.

Rombouts created this painting for the church of Santi Simone e Giuda, in Florence - and that is still its home today. As far as we know, this was the only public commission that Rombouts received in Italy. He painted this scene around 1623 - exactly 400 years ago. Two years after that, in 1625, he was back in Antwerp.

15. Theodoor Rombouts, The entombment

In this gallery, we can see that Theodoor Rombouts did not create paintings only for private citizens, but also for city governments and religious bodies. This painting of the entombment of Christ is a good example: it was commissioned for the Chapter of Saint Rumbold's Cathedral in Mechelen.

This is a good time to introduce Rombouts' wife, Anna van Thielen. She came from a noble family in Mechelen, merchants who also held political offices in the city. She and Theodoor married in 1627, and it was no coincidence that her new husband later received a number of commissions from religious organisations there. The Van Thielen family's connections were undoubtedly useful.

The first decades of the 17th century were busy times for many painters. After a series of religious upheavals and the Iconoclasm of 1566, during which so many works were removed from churches and abbeys, there was now a need to refill these institutions with Catholic art. This was also the case in Mechelen, the most important city of the Catholic Southern Netherlands.

16. Theodoor Rombouts and atelier, The tooth extractor

Eight different versions, countless copies and even more etchings: there is no underestimating the popularity of Theodoor Rombouts' painting of this tooth extractor, and his amazingly accurate depiction of all of the tools needed for the job. This must have been a very lucrative subject for Rombouts.

Nearby, you can see two examples of these other versions. And we are particularly proud to have the work that served as an example for Rombouts: Caravaggio's own 'Tooth extractor', which Rombouts would have seen in the collection of the Medici in Florence. Once again it is clear just how much influence this Italian artist had on Rombouts, the painter from Ghent. Especially with regard to genre paintings like this one. Look at the interplay of light and dark, the composition, the colours, the way the figures interact with each other - the old man with the pince-nez spectacles and the old woman. Incidentally, Caravaggio was not the first artist to paint a tooth extractor. The subject also turns up in works by 16th-century Dutch painters such as Hieronymous Bosch.

Toothaches were as uncomfortable in the 17th century as they are today - but the way they were treated was very different. There was no anaesthesia, not even for extractions, and grimaces of pain provided painters with plenty of material. Caravaggists in particular appreciated raw realism, and scenes and characters from everyday life. People were eager to buy these works, including people in Ghent. The Bishop of Ghent, Antoon Triest, a patron of Rombouts' whom we have met previously along this route, is thought to have commissioned this painting, which was produced in Rombouts' atelier.

Some experts believe that the grinning face of the tooth extractor is actually a self-portrait. Hold that thought - because we will soon meet the man himself.

17. Theodoor Rombouts, Christ in the house of Martha and Mary

This part of the exhibition explores yet another facet of Theodoor Rombouts' work: his collaborations with fellow artists. In the 17th century it was not unusual for two or even three painters to work on a painting together. Each one was responsible for his own specialist area, or left some of the work to artists employed by the atelier.

Let's start with this impressive, colourful scene from the Gospel: Christ's visit to the sisters Martha and Mary. Theodoor Rombouts painted the human figures, with their rich robes and intense interaction. Just look at the movement in their hand gestures, and their glances: all very theatrical. Then there is the magnificent still life of vegetables and game - a feast for the eye. This was the particular talent of painter Adriaen Van Utrecht, a contemporary of Rombouts'; he also lived in Antwerp and the two worked together often. They must have admired each other greatly.

Near here are two other paintings that Rombouts and Van Utrechts worked on together: 'kitchen pieces', as they are known, each featuring an amorous couple. Now you know who would have painted which parts.

Now that you have reached the end of the exhibition, do you feel you might have seen some of these faces before? If so, you're right. Rombouts had a steady group of models, and they turn up in several of his paintings.

18. Theodoor Rombouts, Musical group with Bacchus

We end our tour of the exhibition on a festive note: with cheerful groups of people who are drinking, listening to music, playing cards ... Rombouts' admirers were

particularly fond of scenes like this. The most striking features of this painting are the lute player in his feathered cap, who looks out at us, and the woman on the right, raising her glass high and holding what appears to be a cornucopia of fruit in her arms. She is a Bacchante - a female Bacchus of sorts. Note the intense colours, the equally intense gestures, and the careful composition: these are the most typical characteristics of Rombouts' oeuvre.

A couple sits in the background; the woman rests her hand on the man's arm. Their songbooks are still closed, and they are both looking at something just outside the painting. The man points to the lute player, who resembles ... Theodoor Rombouts, whom we recognise from a portrait by Anthony Van Dyck. Is this a self portrait? That's a complicated question. People who bought works like this one would have enjoyed it when a painter added himself to the scene. But this isn't a true self portrait. As far as we know, Rombouts was not a musician, and the clothes that this gentleman is wearing would not have been an everyday outfit for him. So perhaps we should call it a portrait in disguise.

19. Paulus Pontius (after Anthony van Dyck), etching

Here is the man himself: Theodoor Rombouts, as painted by Anthony van Dyck. This etching by Paulus Pontius is based on Van Dyck's portrait. Van Dyck created a visual 'Who's Who' of sorts: an iconography, or series of prints depicting the prominent political and cultural figures of his day. Theodoor Rombouts was a member of that select group.

Van Dyck has painted him from behind, in three-quarter profile. We do not see his right hand, but the left is extended in a very particular way. The gesture is familiar from ... yes, from the work of Theodoor Rombouts! As Van Dyck certainly would have known.

The Latin inscription is straightforward: 'Painter of human figures in Antwerp', it tells us. And that is true, as we have seen. Theodoor Rombouts was an excellent painter of human figures, and of all of their everyday ways. Van Dyck's decision to include him in the iconography says much about Rombouts' reputation, as does the fact that he was appointed to head the Saint Lucas Guild of Antwerp. Clearly, Rombouts was a well-known, widely respected and successful painter in his lifetime.

And now that you have seen the works in this exhibition, we hope you will agree!