

RUBENS AND HIS LEGACY

Exhibition review written for Priceless Cities by MasterCard, 2015

When was the last time you experienced an exhibition that was both thought-provoking and emotionally stirring? The latest Royal Academy of Arts exhibition, Rubens and His Legacy takes you on a gripping journey, almost like an opera, through Ruben's career and its rippling impact on art. Each showroom explores one of six themes through a centrepiece canvas by Rubens and an orbit of artworks influenced by his style.

The first theme, *Poetry*, draws you into a lyrical world of bucolic landscapes and joyous gatherings of young couples. *Elegance* focuses on Rubens' portraits of the aristocracy, while *Power* studies the grandiose mythological scenes in which he depicts the Medici and the crowned heads of his day as Greek deities.

Dismal crucifixion scenes nail your attention in *Compassion*; and in *Violence* emotions escalate further in fierce hunting stories and fantastical Judgement days in which sinners hurtle through the heavens down to the depths of hell. Finally, the abductions of Greek nymphs in *Lust* are followed by Rubens' well-known voluptuous goddesses bringing you back to a romantic meditative state.

From portraits to landscapes, from peasants to deities, the "prince of painters and painter of princes" turned his brush to any subject with unrivalled success. Yet, the exhibition aims to draw your attention to his heritage more than to him alone. Thus you are constantly invited to seek parallels between his work and that of following generations.

Rubens' personal copyist and apprentice, Van Dyck was the first directly influenced by his master. His portraits, displayed side by side with those of Rubens, reveal the continuity but also the contrasts as Van Dyck's portraits strike you as less dramatic and far more intimate.

Centuries later Delacroix was fascinated by the old master and studied Rubens' sketches diligently. Seeing their leaping lions and twisting horsemen next to each other reveals how Delacroix sought to recreate a whirlwind of dramatic action, yet his radical brushstrokes also speak of the emerging impressionism.

The parallels continue with representatives of diverse schools and generations, from Watteau to Cezanne and Picasso, and even a crucifixion scene by Rubens that have been copied onto a ceramic plate by a Qing dynasty painter.

Whether you and your friends find Rubens' influence astounding or dubious, one thing is certain – it is a bold study of art history and a powerful exhibition that stays with you long after leaving.