



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI TERAMO



POLO
MUSEALE
del LAZIO

Colour and Tactility: what did Rubens learn in Italy from Gem and Mineral Collecting?

Scholars examining influences on Rubens from his sojourn in Italy have focused on painters and antiquities. My research by contrast addresses the interconnectedness of imagery and minerals. Many years later Rubens recalled *holding* the Gonzaga cameo: knowledge of stones was acquired by touch as well as by sight. Rubens knew Seneca who used stone to illustrate the relationship between sight and touch:

'Soe when we lay our hands upon a stone,
We touch the colour, yet perceive alone
By touching it, the solid hard outside
But not the colour, which doth there abide.'

It was in Rome that Rubens first recorded an Antique gem and in all likelihood purchased the first exemplar in what would become a major collection.

Resident in one of Europe's great centres for processing precious minerals, Rubens and his son eventually owned many important lapidary texts including Albertus Magnus and Cardano. In his will Rubens left instructions for what should happen to his 'agates, jaspers and other precious stones' (all chalcedonies) some of which were worked but some of which were probably rough. In Rome through Philip Rubens, he met Faber and other Linceii. Minerals were more important than plants for the pharmacy and were valued as sources of colour and for their virtues; the development of experimental science notwithstanding, these attributes maintained their position well into the seventeenth century and beyond. Apothecaries, like artists, were members of the Guild of St. Luke and sold both colours and remedies.

Italian museums of natural history were evolving in the late sixteenth century; minerals formed significant elements in museums like Aldrovandi's and Cesi's. The latter's collection appears to have included fine chalcedonies, a mineral much favoured by Rubens in the rough as later evidenced in his correspondence with Peiresc. Among them were the agate 'eyes' ('Achates effigians oculum') that Mercati copied from Aldrovandi's collection, that Cassiano owned, and numbers of which survived in the Hainhofer Kunstschränk, Uppsala.

Immediately prior to his departure from Rome, at work on his altar-piece for the Chiesa Nuova, Rubens participated in a mineral environment. Working on slate, over which was a double layer of ground, Rubens would have been obliged by the dimensions and weight of this surface of thin slices of 'lavagna' spliced together to have worked in situ. Immediately to his left the lavish marmi mischi of the Chapel of S. Filippo (begun 1600) and the Cesi Chapel were being crafted from minerals sent from Firenze dominated by brilliant yellow.



con l'adesione di





SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI TERAMO



POLO
MUSEALE
del LAZIO

I shall argue that one of the first paintings executed on his return to Flanders, *Juno and Argus*, extensively discussed in terms of iconography and colour theory, should also be considered as a work inflecting the artist's lapidary interests. The magical effects of Naples yellow from the rainbow through to the gilded carriage, inflect the brilliant juxtapositions offered in marble inlays in the Chiesa Nuova, while the cascade of eyes are simultaneously organic and mineral, a reminder of what Boetius de Boodt, Rubens's contemporary, refers to as things 'deprived of life'.

Marcia Pointon

BE NIS



con l'adesione di

