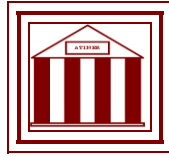


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**Italian Influence in the Composition of
Rubens' Early Self-Portraits with Friends**

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Abstract

Peter Paul Rubens (1577 -1640) is one of the great historical Flemish painters. I will argue that Rubens' exposure to Mediterranean painters is visible in the composition for two of his early self-portraits: the *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* (1602-1606) and the *Four Philosophers* (1611-1612). The distinctive feature in the composition of these paintings is that they are self-portraits that include Rubens among a circle of intellectual peers. Although there are instances of an Italian artist painting himself alongside elite educated companions, there is no case of a Flemish artist doing so before Rubens. We will first examine several Italian painters' self-portraits in group portraits. We notice that they carefully selected their companions who are people of high social status, and that they sometimes omitted persons who should have been represented there. After this, we investigate the similarities between the *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* and the *Four Philosophers*. In order to do so, we examine the pose of Rubens, the composition of the painting and the background landscapes in the two group portraits. As a result of these investigations, we find that Rubens painted his self-portrait amongst his humanist peers, who were among the most highly educated people in the seventeenth century Spanish Netherlands. Furthermore, in his self-portraits, Rubens followed the traditional Flemish portrait painting style, but placed these works in a "new frame" inspired by Italian self-portraits. Rubens' deviation from the norm of self-portrait painting adhered to by the Flemish artists of his time had a wider social and cultural significance.

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Introduction

Peter Paul Rubens (1577 Siegen-1640 Antwerp) is one of the great historical Flemish painters. I will argue that Rubens' exposure to Mediterranean painters is visible in the composition of two of his early self-portraits: the *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* (1602-1606) (Figure.1) and the *Four Philosophers* (1611-1612) (Figure. 5). The distinctive feature in the composition of these paintings is that they are self-portraits that include Rubens among a circle of intellectual peers. Typical self-portraits in the seventeenth century Spanish Netherlands either depicted the artist by himself or portrayed him among his family or with guild members.

Although there are instances of an Italian artist painting himself alongside elite educated companions, there is no case of a Flemish artist doing so before Rubens. This fact makes the two aforementioned group portraits by Rubens historically very important. For this reason, we will first consider Italian painters' self-portraits in group portraits and compare them with the early self-portraits of Rubens. Many studies have been made about Rubens in Italy (1600-1608), however, none of them have mentioned Italian influence in the composition of Rubens' self-portraits. After this, we will investigate the similarities between *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* and *Four Philosophers*. In order to do so we will examine the pose of the painter, the composition of the figures and the background landscapes of the two group portraits. Based on this analysis, we will consider why Rubens painted such unique self-portraits.

1. Italian painters' self-portraits in a group: "close-up" type

Italian painters included their self-portraits in two types of group portraits. The first is a "close-up" (normally half-length) group portrait, depicting several persons in a group. This type of group portrait is not based on a specific theme. The second is a "theme type" painting where a large number of people are painted based on a religious or historical theme. Some of the individuals depicted are actual persons, but they are of secondary importance in these paintings. The *Last Judgment* by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1537-1541), the *School of Athens* (1510-1511) by Raffaello Sanzio (1483-1520) and the *Holy People of God* in the cupola of Florence cathedral¹ (1572-1579) by Federico Zuccaro (c. 1542/43-1609) fall into this category. We will not study this latter type of group portrait in this paper since *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* and the *Four Philosophers* seems to belong to the first category of a group portrait. In this chapter, we will examine 16th and 17th century Italian portraits from this category which might have inspired Rubens.

There exists a group portrait in which Titian (c. 1488/1490-1576), Andrea de' Franceschi (d. 1551), and an unknown man, referred to as "Titian's friend," are depicted together (Figure. 10). Andrea de' Franceschi, who was the Italian Grand Chancellor, must have been well-known in those days because even now, seven Franceschi portraits based on the same image exist². The date for this painting has

¹ It was painted by Vasari and after his death in 1574, Federico Zuccaro succeeded.

² Locations of the seven portraits: 1. Hampton Court (which we are discussing); 2. Windsor Castle (de'Franceschi and Titian are painted); 3. Earl of Wemyss, England; 4. National Gallery of Art, Washington (inv. 1037.1.35); 5. The Detroit Institute of Arts (inv.53.362, Wethey II,34); 6. Messrs. Duveen, New York; 7. Doge's Palace, Venice (in the *Pope and the Doge receiving the son of Barbarossa*).

been estimated to around 1550-1562 since the portrait is assumed to have been painted as a commemoration of Franceschi, who died in 1551 and an original single self-portrait by Titian was painted around 1550-62¹. It is thought that this image of Titian was painted after Titian's own self-portrait by a painter working in his studio². Although the portrait of Titian in this group portrait is not a self-portrait by Titian himself, we can conclude that it was not uncommon in mid-16th century Italy for a chancellor and a great master to be painted together.

Raffaello Sanzio (1483-1520) painted himself with his friend around 1516-1517 (Figure. 11). There are diverging opinions among scholars concerning the identification of Raffaello's friend. He has been variously assumed to be, among others, Baldassare Castiglione, Giovanni Battista Branconio dell'Aqua, Pietro Aretino or Polidoro Caravaggio³. The man is assumed to be of higher social status because he carries a sword⁴. Raphael selected his companions to show himself to his best advantage.

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) painted himself in two group portraits. One of them is *Cosimo I de' Medici surrounded by his Architects, Engineers and Sculptors* (1555-1558) (Figure.12) in the Palazzo Vecchio of Florence. Vasari placed Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574) in the middle of the tondo as a designer of the world. Around Cosimo I, he painted contemporary artists including himself⁵. He excluded his rival Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572), but painted *Il Tribolo* (1500-1550)⁶, Battista del Tasso (1500-1555)⁷ and G. B. San Marino (1506-1554)⁸ as main figures because these artists had already passed away⁹ and were no longer his rivals at that time¹⁰.

Vasari also inserted his self-portrait in a group in the right corner of *The Return of the Marquess of Marignano to Florence after the Conquest of Siena* (1563-1565) (Figure. 13). The scene depicts the procession of the Marquess of Marignano as he returns from battle. This painting is painted as an historical scene, and it seems that the portrayed persons are among the people who came to see the army of the Marquess of Marignano. However, they do not participate in the event, and their group portrait forms an independent part of the painting. For this reason, I categorized this painting as belonging to this type of group self-portrait. This painting was located on the ceiling of the only public room of the Palazzo Vecchio, just opposite the main entrance¹¹. In this, he included himself¹² showing a paper to Vincenzo Borghini (1515-1580), the president of the Accademia del Disegno¹³. Next to him, the historian

¹ Gore 1958, 351.

² John Gore thought Francheschi was painted by Titian (Bul.1958). The portrait was Charles I's collection. Now Hampton Court.

³ Gould tried to identify the friend of Raphael (Gould 1984, 57-60).

⁴ Woods-Marsden 1998, 124.

⁵ Kirwin 1971, 116.

⁶ His real name is Niccolò di Raffaello di Niccolò dei Pericoli. His full-length portrait was painted on the right hand side, holding a model of a fountain. Cosimo I commissioned *Il Tribolo* to design the garden of the Villa de Castello. Vasari restored and enlarged it (Isabella 2003, 30-31).

⁷ His full-length portrait is painted on the left hand side holding a model of a building. He belongs to the circle of *Il Tribolo*.

⁸ He is painted behind Tasso's left shoulder. Vasari wrote that next to Tasso he placed Nanni Unghero and San Marino (Vasari 1906, VIII, 192).

⁹ In contrast to other artists who wear contemporary clothes, they wear classical clothes like mythological gods.

¹⁰ Woods-Marsden 1998, 150.

¹¹ Woods-Marsden 1998, 152; Storica 1980, 238.

¹² Giovanni Stradano Probably executed (Storica 1980, 241).

¹³ Vasari 1906, 219.

Giovanni Battista Adriani (1511 or 1513 – 1579) is depicted¹. Borghini and Adriani worked with Vasari for this project². Behind his own image, Vasari also included other painters, like Battista Naldini (1537-1591), Giovanni Stradano (1523-1605) and Jacopo Zucchi (1542- 1596)³. Vasari painted himself surrounded by his highly educated acquaintances and peers.

One common point among these Italian group portraits is that the painters very carefully selected the persons who were painted with them. They painted themselves alongside upper class people. In addition, they sometimes disregarded important persons who should have been painted with them due to personal animosity. We find this particularly with the tondo by Vasari. Rubens must likewise have also carefully chosen the persons with whom he represented himself. In the next chapter, we will identify persons who are painted with Rubens' self-portraits.

2. Rubens with Friends in Mantua and *Four Philosophers*

In *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* (Figure. 1), opinions vary with regards to the identification of the individuals portrayed. We will start by examining this before comparing Rubens' self-portraits in the two group portraits; *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* and *Four Philosophers*. After that we will examine common points between the two group portraits⁴; the pose of Rubens, the composition of the portrait (the position of people) and the background.

2.1. Identification

Opinions about the identification, especially of the left hand group of three men, in the *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* are still divergent. Many scholars have tried to identify them. It seems the most influential and a recent opinion is that of C. De Maegd⁵. She identifies the persons in the painting, from right to left, as Justus Lipsius⁶, Philip Rubens, Peter Paul Rubens, Jean Richardot II, Antoine Richardot⁷ and Guillaume Richardot⁸. Lipsius (1547-1606) was a humanist and a founder of neo-stoicism, who taught in the universities of Jena, Leiden and Leuven⁹. Philip

¹ Vasari 1906, 219.

² Rubinstein 1967, 64.

³ Vasari 1906, 219.

⁴ Vlieghe 1987, 131.

⁵ De Maegd 1998.

⁶ Müller-Hofstede 1977,76. The history of the persons identify in the *Rubens Friends in Mantua* is as follows: G. J. Hoogewerff identified the right hand man in profile as Joseph Scaliger in 1936 (Hoogewerff 1936, 106). However, Hans Gerhard Evers identified him, not as Scaliger, but as Justus Lipsius, since Scaliger was not an acquaintance of either Peter Paul Rubens or Philip Rubens (Evers 1943, 325). Justus Müller-Hofstede also thought he is Lipsius, and Rubens painted him from a lost portrait by Otto van Veen (However, there is an etching by C. Boel from that portrait by O. van Veen) (Müller-Hofstede 1977, 78).

⁷ Evers wrote that the young man is Wilhelm Richardot (Evers 1943, 326). Müller-Hofstede thought Guillaume. Richardot (Müller-Hofstede 1977, 76)

⁸ Evers thought that the left hand man in profile might have been Erycius Puteanus, since Erycius was a student of Lipsius from 1601-1606 (Evers 1943, 325). Müller-Hofstede thought Gaspar Scioppius (Müller-Hofstede 1977, 78).

⁹ Müller-Hofstede 1992, 104.

Rubens (1574-1611), Peter Paul Rubens' brother, was his most outstanding student¹. A description of the other persons in painting, whose identification is more controversial, will follow.

The basis for this identification is that Rubens received a commission from Archduke Albert through Jean Richardot II to produce an altar piece for the Basilica di Santa Croce in Gersalemme in Rome². This was his first big commission in Italy, and Jean Richardot II asked the Duke of Gonzaga to allow Rubens to return later so that he could complete the altar³. Moreover, the three brothers of Richardot were in Italy at the same time as Rubens. Furthermore, Guillaume and Antoine Richardot studied under Lipsius alongside Philip Rubens⁴. While this identification has not gained a wide consensus, given the this circumstantial evidence, it remains the most plausible identification of the persons in this painting.

In *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* the person we might assume is Jean Richardot II, places his hand on Rubens' arm while Rubens holds his hand against his chest. Müller-Hofstede has interpreted this gesture by Richardot as expressing sympathy⁵. M. Warnke, saw this gesture by Rubens as an ancient sign of mourning to which Richardot responded by a gesture of consolation⁶.

In contrast, the characters in the *Four Philosophers* (Figure. 5) are clearly identified as Peter Paul Rubens, Philip Rubens, Justus Lipsius and Jan Woverius (1576-1639)⁷ from left to right. Woverius was a lawyer who had been a student of Lipsius and an old friend of the Rubens brothers⁸.

From this we can conclude that Peter Paul Rubens, Philip Rubens and Justus Lipsius are present in both group-portraits. Although for *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* the identification of some persons has still not reached a wide consensus, it is highly probable that they are all humanists connected to Justus Lipsius, with the possible exception of one being a court painter who preceded Rubens⁹.

2.2. The common points

a) Pose of Rubens

First, we will focus on the self-portraits of Rubens in both group portraits. In both cases the pose of P. P. Rubens is very similar. In both group-portraits, Rubens turns his head and looks at the viewer directly. When the painter turns his head to look at the mirror in order to convey his image onto the canvas, he will be painted in this pose typical for self-portraits¹⁰. The result as seen on the canvas will be that the painter looks straight towards us while his body is painted from the side.

¹ Vlieghe 1987, 180.

² Mayer 1945-1948, 159. A letter exists in which Jean Richardot asks Duke of Gonzaga to allow Rubens to stay in Rome so that he could finish an altar piece (Ruelens 1887, 43).

³ Ruelence 1887, 43.

⁴ De Maegd 1998,11. In addition, Philip Rubens was a secretary of their father Jean Richardot (De Maegd 1998,12).

⁵ Huemer 1977, 165.

⁶ Warnke 1965, 23.

⁷ Müller-Hofstede first identified (Müller-Hofstede 1965, 106-108).

⁸ Logan 2004, 86.

⁹ Müller-Hofstede identified the persons on the left of the painting as : Gaspar Schoppius, Guillaume Richardot and Frans Porbus II (Müller-Hofstede 1977, 76-78). The first two persons were humanists and Porbus II was a court painter of the Duke of Gonzaga who preceded Rubens.

¹⁰ Raup 1984, 181.

However, in both Rubens' self-portraits there is a special mood, which other painter's self-portraits do not have. In these portraits, Rubens leans his face back a little and looks at us somewhat dreamily. This is unique among Rubens' self-portraits. There exists one beautiful portrait called *Young Man* (Figure. 8) which was painted by the well-known Flemish portrait master Willem Key (1515-1568). This portrait may have served as an inspiration to Rubens. The pose and mood in this portrait is quite similar to that of these two early Rubens self-portraits. In *Rubens and Friends in Mantua*, not only is Rubens' facial expression dreamy but his hand is placed on his chest¹ just like the youth in Key's *Young Man*². Further evidence for this influence is that Rubens possessed this portrait by Key his entire life³ and even made a lifelike copy from it⁴.

As a result, in both group-portraits, Rubens is the only person who looks at the viewer. The other persons in the two group-portraits do not direct their gaze at the viewer nor do they look at each other.

b)Position of persons

The composition of the two paintings is also very similar. In both portraits, Rubens and his friends are positioned to form a rough circle, and there is a central passage of sight unobstructed by the subjects through which the viewer sees a landscape with distant buildings.

On the other hand, we also find some significant differences in composition. While the image of Rubens is given a prominent place in *Rubens and Friends in Mantua*, Rubens stands a little aloof from the other three men in the *Four Philosophers*. However, the initial composition in the *Four Philosophers* was different from the final composition. From an X-ray examination it appears that Rubens first painted himself just behind his brother, Philip Rubens⁵ (Figure. 7)⁶. In this initial version he wears a hat and it seems that he has just entered the room. Only Woverius notices Rubens coming in. Rubens stands next to a column covered by intertwined vines meant to imply the affection and attachment between the brothers⁷. It is thought that Rubens painted it in commemoration of his brother, since his brother Philip Rubens died shortly before this group-painting was painted⁸.

However, Rubens changed his position in the group-portrait to a position closer to the circle of the three scholars. In order to change his positions, Rubens extended the panel⁹. He used the same strategy when he made alterations to the *Adoration of Magi*

¹ Müller-Hofstede points out that Rubens' portrait *Young Man*, now in the Kassel Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, is another case in which Rubens painted a man putting his hand on his chest (Müller-Hofstede 1987-1988, 136).

² There is a discussion whether this portrait is Key's self-portrait or not. Friedländer argued that it appeared to be a self-portrait (Friedländer, 54). This opinion was also shared by Müller-Hofstede (Müller-Hofstede 1987-1988, 136). However, in his recent catalogue raisonné of Key, Jonckheere contends that it is sheer speculation to call this painting a self-portrait (Jonckheere 2011, 100-102).

³ You will find that Rubens owned the portrait by examining the inventory of Rubens' estate published after his death in 1640 (Müller-Hofstede 1989, 127, Cat. I No.187, Pl. 87; Duverger 1991, 22).

⁴ Müller-Hofstede 1989, 102, No.37; Also see the explanation: Belkin 2009, 171. No. 7.

⁵ C. Galle engraved the same image of Philip Rubens, and a single oil portrait was painted based on this engraving (Vlieghe 1987,180, No. 144, Fig. 206, 207).

⁶ Van Hout 2000, 696.

⁷ Prinz 1973, 423, Vlieghe 1987, 132.

⁸ Vlieghe 1987,131-132. Oldenbourg 1921, 456.

⁹ Van Hout 2000, 697.

in 1628. In this particular case, he used the extension of the panel to paint his self-portrait observing the religious scene¹. From the X-ray examination of the *Four Philosophers*, we also know that besides Rubens' position in the portrait being altered, a vase with four tulips- two of them in bloom and two of them just buds- was also added beside the bust of Seneca². This means that two of the persons are alive while the others had passed away. Justus Lipsius and Philip Rubens had passed away in 1606 and 1611 respectively.

These changes mean that, despite his initial motive, which is assumed to be the death of Philip, a new motive provoked Rubens to move his image into the circle.

In the *Four Philosophers*, Rubens used the image of Justus Lipsius from an engraving based on a portrait by Abraham Janssens (c. 1571/1572-1632)³. This is the last image of Lipsius that was produced during his lifetime.⁴ It was published with the poem of Woverius dedicated to Justus Lipsius⁵. If Woverius commissioned this portrait, it makes sense that Rubens used an image of Justus Lipsius to which Woverius was deeply attached. As result of Rubens's image being moved to a more visible place, the difference between the deceased persons - they look at nothing - and living persons - Woverius looks at Rubens and Rubens looks at viewers- becomes clear. Although this portrait was initially inspired by his deceased brother, Rubens might have ended up altering the painting for the sake of a living person.

c) Landscape as a background

The third common point of the two group-portraits by Rubens is that a landscape is used in the middle as a background. The landscape of Mantua (Figure. 2) is used as the background in the *Rubens with Friends in Mantua*⁶ took from Andrea Mantegna's Mantegna's (1431-1506) *Death of the Virgin*⁷ (1462-1464) (Figure. 3) (Figure. 4). The fact that Mantegna's painting shows people gathered for the death of the Virgin Mary, supports Warnke's interpretation that this is a scene of mourning for the death of J. Lipsius⁸.

A landscape showing the Roman ruins on the Palatine Hill is painted in the background of the *Four Philosophers*. There exists a landscape painting by Rubens, the *Landscape with the Ruins Palatine*, now in Louvre, which depicts the same scenery as is found in the background of the *Four Philosophers* (Figure. 6)⁹. Hans Vlieghe suggested that the Roman ruins and the bust of Seneca implied that Roman culture still gave inspiration to scholars¹⁰. In fact, the Palatine Hill is one of the seven

¹ Vergara 1999, 87.

² Van Hout 2000, 696.

³ Auwera 1994, 229.

⁴ Berryer 1939-1940, 28.

⁵ Auwera 1994, 228. The engraving was also appeared in the Lipsius' Tacitus edition.

⁶ Evers 1943, 321-322.

⁷ Warnke 1965, 23; Mulazzani 1977, 26.

⁸ Warnke 1965, 22.

⁹ Adler 1982, 68. There is an engraving by Schelte Adamsz. Bolswert (c. 1586 - 1659) after the painting by Rubens

(http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectid=1453884&partid=1&output=People%2F!!%2FOR%2F!!%2F131813%2F!!%2F131813-2-60%2F!!%2FPrint+made+by+Schelte+Adamsz.+Bolswert%2F!!%2F%2F!!%2F%2F!!%2F&orig=%2Fresearch%2Fsearch_the_collection_database%2Fadvanced_search.aspx¤tPage=1&numPages=10).

¹⁰ Vlieghe 1987, 131.

hills in Rome and it was believed that Rome originated there. Except for Rubens, the three persons shown in the group-portrait are scholars who studied neo-stoicism. For this reason, the ruins on the Palatine Hill are a suitable motive for this group-portrait.

This small but beautiful landscape placed in the *Four Philosophers* might have been influenced by Paul Bril (1554-1626) and Annibale Carracci (1560-1609). They painted landscapes in which a certain theme or several people were painted in the foreground and a building was painted in the middle of the background (Figure. 9). Paul Bril, who came from Antwerp, enjoyed success in Italy as a landscape painter¹. Rubens acquired and preserved Bril's landscape painting² and retouched it³.

Conclusion

In his early period, Rubens included two of his self-portraits in group-portraits which show the artist with his friends. Our enquiry is based on the fact that he did this, although there existed no such tradition in the Spanish Netherlands. We hypothesized that Rubens was inspired by the self-portraits of Italian painters. There are two types of self-portraits in a group in Italy; the "close-up" type and the "theme type". Rubens' self-portraits belong to the close-up type.

In *Rubens with Friends in Mantua* and the *Four Philosophers*, the pose of Rubens and the composition of the painting are similar. Willem Key's *Young Man* must have served as an example to Rubens. The difference between the two group portraits is the position of Rubens. In the *Rubens with Friends in Mantua*, Rubens painted himself as a central character in the composition. On the one hand, in the *Four Philosophers*, Rubens played a subordinate role in the initial composition, only joining the circle of his friends in the final version. This must have been an honor for Rubens. In the 17th century, "neo-stoicism" was an important movement among humanists initiated by Justus Lipsius.

Rubens painted beautiful landscapes in the middle of the background in both group-portraits. The Palatine Hill in the background of the *Four Philosophers*, is a reflection of neo-stoicism. Rubens took the landscape of Mantua from Andrea Mantegna's *Death of the Virgin*. Mantegna was an Italian court painter of the Gonzaga family.

In the *Rubens and Friends in Mantua* and the *Four Philosophers*, Rubens painted self-portraits inspired by traditional Flemish portrait painting, but he placed them in a "new frame" inspired by Italian painter. Just as Italian painters painted themselves with upper class people, Rubens painted his self-portrait amongst humanist friends who were among the most educated people in the seventeenth century. Rubens' deviation from the usual forms of self-portraits by Flemish artists of his time had a larger social and cultural significance.

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¹ Brown 1996, 26-27.

² Muller 1989, 100, No.26.

³ Pijl 1998, 665-666.

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Figures

Figure. 1, right; Rubens, *Rubens with Friends in Mantua*, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Köln.

Figure. 2, left; Detail of *Rubens with Friends in Mantua*.



Figure. 3, left; Andrea Mantegna, *Death of Vargin*, Prado Museum, Madrid.

Figure. 4, right; Andrea Mantegna, Detail of the *Death of Vargin*.



Figure. 5, left; Rubens, *Four Philosophers*, Palazzo Pitti, Florence.

Figure. 6, right; Rubens, *Landscape with the Ruins of Mount, Palatine in Rome*, Louvre, Paris.



Figure. 7, left; X-ray photograph; Detail of the *Four Philosophers* (the first version of Rubens's self-portrait).

Figure. 8, middle; Willem Key, *Young Man*, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Figure. 9, right; Paul Bril, *Study for Casino del Patriarca Biondo fresco in Palazzo Rospigliosi-Pallavicini*, Paris, Louvre.

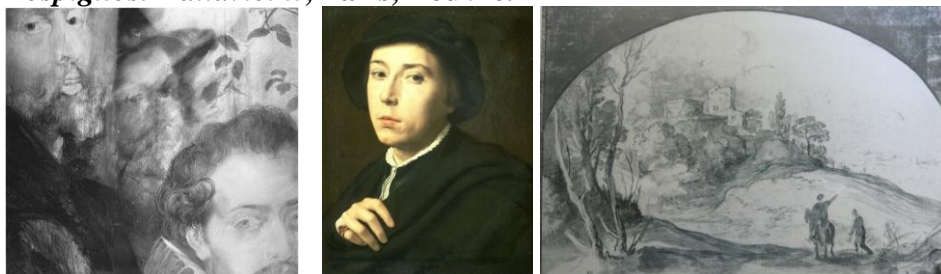


Figure. 10, left; Follower of Titian, *Titian, Andrea dei Franceschi and the Friend of Titian*, Hampton Court Palace, permission of H. M. Queen, London.

Figure. 11, right; Raphael Sanzio, *Self-Portrait with a Friend*, Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Figure. 12, left; Giorgio Vasari, *Cosimo I de' Medici surrounded by his Architects, Engineers and Sculptors*, Sala de Cosio I, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

Figure. 13, right; Giorgio Vasari, *The Return of the Marchese of Marquess of Marignano*, Salone dei Cinquecento, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

