



***The Entombment*, Peter Paul Rubens**

The Entombment

Peter Paul Rubens
Flemish, about 1612
Oil on canvas
51 5/8 x 51 1/4 in.
93.PA.9



Questions for Teaching

Look at each figure in this painting. Pay particular attention to gestures and facial expressions. How does the body language of each figure communicate emotion and contribute to the narrative of the story?

What story is depicted in this painting?

What do the background details tell you about the story? (The rock walls behind the figures and the stone slab that supports Christ's corpse reveal that the event is taking place inside Christ's tomb. Peter Paul Rubens cropped the image closely, forcing viewers to focus on the characters' emotions and the wound on Christ's body.)

Rubens made this painting for an altarpiece inside a Catholic chapel. It was intended to serve as an aid for prayer—to focus a viewer's attention on the suffering of Christ and inspire devotion. Pretend that you are not familiar with the religious story depicted in the painting. What kinds of emotional responses do you have to this work of art? What visual elements of the painting make you feel this way?

Background Information

In this painting, Peter Paul Rubens depicted the moment after Christ's Crucifixion and before the Resurrection, when Christ was placed into the tomb. He is being supported by those closest to him in life: John the Evangelist, in a brilliant red robe, bears the weight of Christ; Mary Magdalene cries in the background; while Mary, the mother of James the Younger and Joseph, bows her head in sorrow. Mary, the mother of Christ, holds Christ's head in her hand and looks heavenward for divine intercession.

The Entombment was meant to make the viewer's religious experience personal and encourage the faithful to imagine the physical horror of Christ's Crucifixion. Christ's tortured features confront the viewer, and our attention is focused on his corpse, sacrifice, and suffering. Wounds are openly displayed: blood flows from the gaping laceration in Christ's side and the puncture wounds on his hands. Rubens contrasted the living and the dead by juxtaposing the lifeless body and green-tinged skin of Christ with the healthy complexion of Saint John.

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This painting was probably made to serve as an altarpiece in a small chapel, perhaps one dedicated to the Eucharist (also known as “The Lord’s Supper,” it is a sacrament in the Catholic church in which a blessing or prayer is said over a meal of bread and wine). The slab on which the body is placed suggests an altar, while the sheaf of wheat alludes to the bread of the Eucharist, the equivalent of Christ’s body in the Mass.

About the Artist

Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577–1640)

International diplomat, savvy businessman, devout Catholic, fluent in six languages, an intellectual who counted Europe’s finest scholars among his friends, Peter Paul Rubens was always first a painter. Few artists have been capable of transforming such a vast variety of influences into a style utterly new and original. After study with local Antwerp painters, Rubens began finding his style in Italy, copying works from antiquity, Renaissance masters such as Michelangelo and Titian, and contemporaries like Annibale Carracci and Caravaggio.

He worked principally in Rome and Genoa, where Giulio Romano’s frescoes influenced him greatly. Returning to Antwerp, Rubens became court painter to the Spanish Viceroy, eventually receiving commissions from across Europe and England. Rubens’s energetic Baroque style blends his northern European sense of realism with the grandeur and monumentality he saw in Italian art. His characteristic free and expressive technique also captured *joie de vivre*.

From his workshop, with its many assistants, came quantities of book illustrations, tapestry designs, festival decorations, and paintings on every subject, which his engravers reproduced. He maintained control of the quality, while charging patrons according to the extent of his involvement on a picture. Frans Snyder, Jacob Jordaens, and Anthony van Dyck each assisted him. Rubens’s impact was immediate, international, and long lasting. The works of later artists, such as Thomas Gainsborough and Eugène Delacroix, among others, testify to his posthumous influence.