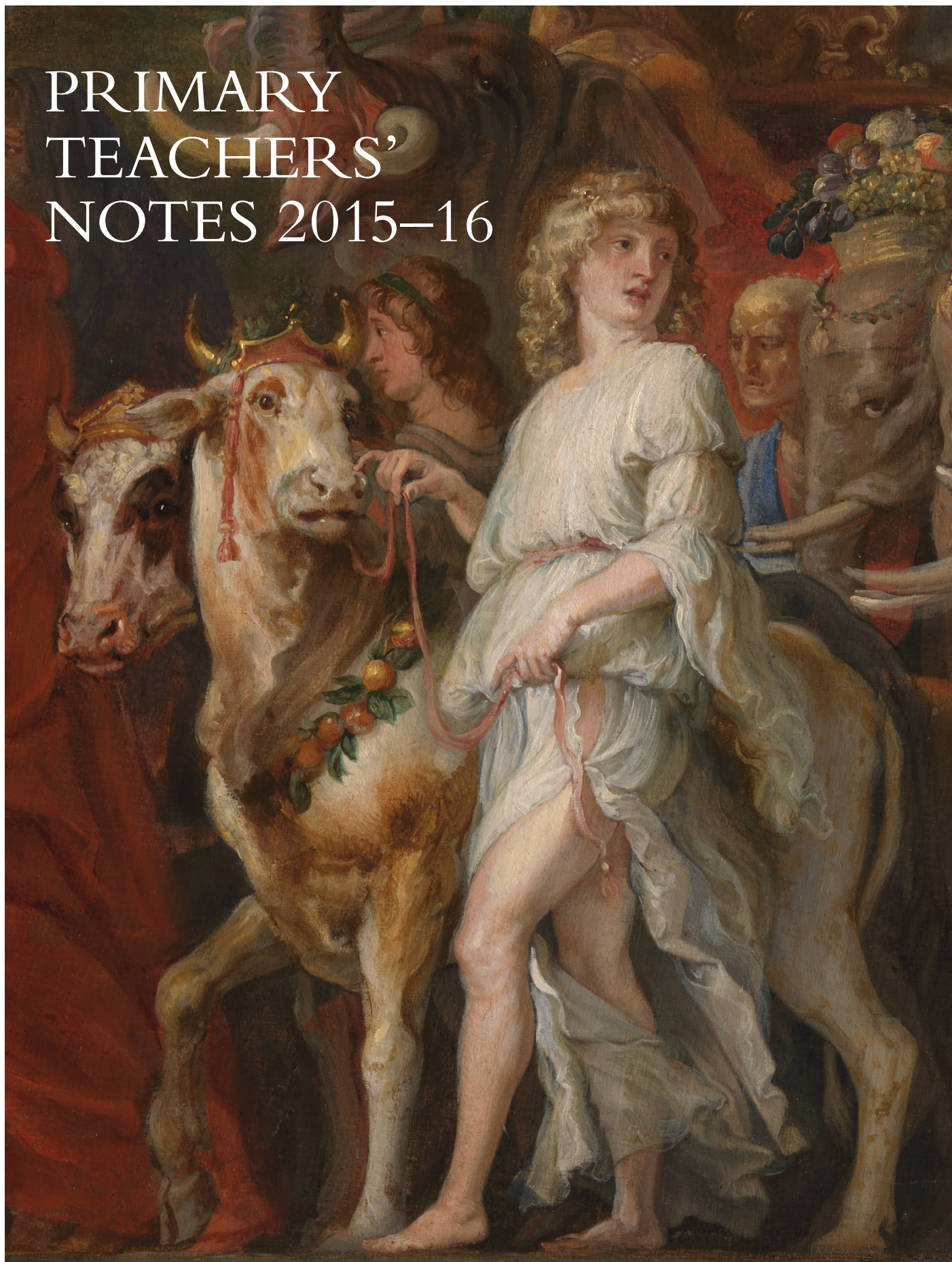


PRIMARY
TEACHERS'
NOTES 2015–16



‘A ROMAN TRIUMPH’,

about 1630

Oil on canvas stuck down on oak
86.8 x 163.9 cm

PETER PAUL RUBENS



© The National Gallery, London

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Peter Paul Rubens was born in exile in Siegen, Germany on 28 June 1577. His Calvinist parents had fled religious persecution in their native city of Antwerp. After his father's death when Rubens was just ten years old, the family returned to Flanders and converted back to Catholicism. Rubens lived and worked at a time of turbulent civil war and religious turmoil. In adulthood, he became both a respected diplomat helping to broker peace and a celebrated artist, developing the new style of Baroque painting that championed the Catholic Counter Reformation.

Having received a humanist education, learning Latin and the Classics, Rubens began his career aged thirteen as a court page to the Countess Marguerite de Ligne. However, he soon left this prestigious position to begin his training as an artist. Once he had completed his formal training - in 1598 - Rubens subsequently spent eight years travelling in Italy, keen to encounter first hand the culture of classical antiquity and the works of the Italian Renaissance. By the time he returned to Antwerp in 1608, his reputation as a painter was already well established and at the age of 33 he was appointed court painter to Archduke Albert and his wife Isabella, the rulers of the Spanish Netherlands.

Rubens was married to Isabella Brandt in 1609. The couple and their family settled at a prestigious address where Rubens housed his studio - a large workshop producing paintings with the help of assistants and pupils - as well as his own extensive collection of antiques, paintings and curiosities. He achieved great fame and acquired commissions from the greatest rulers of 17th century Europe, including Charles I of England, Phillip IV of Spain and Marie de Medici in France. His achievements as a scholar and as a diplomat were also recognised. It is for his work on diplomatic missions in England and Spain that Rubens was knighted by both nations.

By all accounts Rubens was a charming and well-loved man with formidable erudition and exceptional energy. This energy is visible in his numerous works which he executed with the help of his vast studio and which are characterised by visible brushwork, dynamic compositions and vibrant colouring.

In 1630, at the age of 53, Rubens married again. To everyone's surprise he did not marry into the nobility, but chose Helene Fourment, the 16 year-old daughter of a respectable merchant family. Rubens was clearly bowled over by his new wife with whom he has five children, and she figures in numerous portraits, including a version of 'The Judgement of Paris' in which she appears as Venus.

During his last years Rubens spent increasing amounts of time with his new young family in his country house, the Chateau de Steen. He began to paint more landscapes, often for his own enjoyment, rather than for sale.

Having suffered painfully from gout for several years, in 1639 a particularly bad attack left Rubens unable to paint and he died a few months later in May 1640.

ABOUT THE PAINTING

This painting is full of tumultuous movement. Lined up in the very foreground of the composition is a moving procession of figures and animals which parade across the picture from right to left. The viewers are made to feel like spectators watching the parade from the roadside. Indeed we are not the only ones watching; other spectators in the middle ground are seated on a raised bank looking and pointing at the parade. All the figures and animals in the foreground give the impression of being in movement with their raised limbs, fluttering fabrics, brandished torches and instruments and swinging trunks.

The picture is not only full of riotous colour and movement but also full of imaginable sounds: you can almost hear the growls of the animals; the horns and pipes being blown by musicians; the pounding of footsteps. The dancing maidens and animals on the right and left sides of the composition are abruptly truncated. This adds to the overall sense of movement and gives the impression that only a section of this continuous parade is made visible, that even more is happening outside of the frame. In fact, the cut down figures are more likely to indicate that the painting was trimmed down sometime after it was made, so it could well be that Rubens initially painted more of the action.

Produced around 1630, at the height of Peter Paul Rubens' artistic career, this work was initially painted in oils on three separate pieces of canvas, the seams between the canvases being just visible. These sections were then mounted on a wooden panel made up of 12 pieces of oak. Also visible are lots of *pentimenti*. Literally meaning 'changes of minds', these alterations or corrections have become increasingly visible as the oil paints have become translucent with the passage of time. For example the lynx in the bottom right hand corner appears to have an extra leg and initially the young man in white had a larger head of hair.

So reworked and altered is the composition that some scholars have suggested that someone else may originally have painted the right hand piece of canvas. What is certain is that the visible and lively brush marks add to the sense of movement and dynamism of the composition.

ABOUT THE SUBJECT

The parading figures in Rubens' composition depict a Roman 'triumph'. A triumphal procession was the greatest honour that could be given to a Roman general and was usually awarded to celebrate a great military campaign or victory. Young dancing maidens with baskets of flowers and wreaths in their hair called *Camillae* head the procession, followed by young men blowing pipes and trumpets known as *Tubicines*. These are in turn followed by sacrificial animals known as *Hostiae*, led by their handler and executioner - the *Popae*. Most prominent in the parade and central in the composition is a *Pontifex* or priest dressed in a bright red cloak and wearing a laurel wreath on his head. Behind him is the *Augur* or soothsayer carrying a *Lituus* or curled augural wand. Then we see a youth in white leading a reluctant sacrificial cow, followed by elephants bearing incense burners and fruit and other wild and exotic beasts.

Rubens borrowed the subject and many aspects of the composition from a celebrated series of paintings by the Renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna. These were painted between around 1485 and 1506 for the Gonzaga Dukes in Mantua and have been on display in Hampton Court Palace since they were acquired for Charles I in 1630. This large series of nine paintings represent triumphs celebrating Julius Caesar's victorious campaigns in Gaul and Asia Minor. While it remains uncertain whether Rubens saw the paintings on his youthful Italian journey or indeed on his later visit to London, he would have known the composition through

woodcut prints made by Italian engraver Andrea Andreani. Rubens' *Triumph* particularly borrows motifs from the fifth and sixth canvases and transforms Mantegna's meticulous description into his own style inspired by colour, excitement and movement.

STARTING POINTS

EYFS

- Play fanfare music and ask children to imagine the scene the music inspires
- Play different animal noises and growls and ask the children to identify them
- Pass around objects from the painting in a canvas bag so that children can feel and describe them: baskets, instruments, wreath
- 'Listen' with your eyes, what can you hear? What is the noisiest thing in the painting?
- What do you notice first? Why?
- Can you choose your favorite figure and copy their action? Use the class to act out the composition.

Key Stage 1

- Cut the picture in two and only show one half of the image. Can they imagine what the other half of the picture looks like?
- Blow up and isolate different sections/details of the painting and see if the children can identify the different textures such as furs and materials
- Imagine 'jumping' into the painting. What might you hear, smell, feel?
- What does the painting remind you of? Does it remind you of situations, feelings, stories?
- What do you think the young man in white is looking back at? Why? What do you think the girl at the front on the left is looking out at? Why?
- What do you want to know about these people? What questions would you ask them and what would their answers be?

Key Stage 2

- Describe the painting to someone who cannot see it.
- Who stands out? Why? Who would you most like to talk to? What might you ask them? What might their reply be?
- Play 'spot the difference' between Rubens' and Mantegna's Triumphs. How are the paintings different/similar?
- Strike the pose of someone in the painting. Tell me something about that character. How do you know?
- Divide the figures in the painting into groups. How are they similar/different? Who stands out? What might this tell us?
- What word or object would you choose to sum up this painting? Explain your choice. Can anyone add to that idea?

USING THE PICTURE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

LINES OF ENQUIRY

Antiquity & Ancient Rome

Use the painting to explore ancient Roman history, ritual and architecture. Note how much each of these aspects of Roman culture has shaped and influenced our own.

Story Building

Note how different figures in the painting are identifiable as different characters through clothing, jewellery, materials and objects. Note how the range of facial expressions and how specific bodies are positioned to allow us to identify different emotions and actions.

Religion & Ritual

Investigate how other religions and culture participate in similar parades and celebrations today. How are these ancient pagan rites similar and different to our own?

Exotic Animals & Natural History

Identify each animal and think about how much first hand knowledge the artist might have had of these species. How accurate are the different animals represented? How do we have access to these species today? Are any endangered?

World Culture & Trade routes

What cultures are represented by the variety of fabrics and objects on display? Note the variety of different textiles and metal ware, note their different origin and value. Is there any evidence of trade beads? What could this mean for some of the individuals in the procession?

Design & Mark Making

How is the artist's technique and style visible in the painting? Note how sketchy Ruben's marks are and how this adds a sense of movement and spontaneity. Note how other artist's images can be a starting point for new work.

Music & Festivity

What sort of music and sound accompanies parades and festival today? What instruments do we use when parading and why? Explore music written for fanfares and triumphal entrances.

WEB LINKS

Rubens House Museum, Antwerp:

http://www.rubenshuis.be/Museum_Rubenshuis_EN

Hampton Court Palace, Mantegna's Triumphs:

<http://www.hrp.org.uk/HamptonCourtPalace/stories/Mantegna>

Roman History, BBC History website:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/>

Natural History Museum:

<http://www.nhm.ac.uk>