

## Peter Paul Rubens

1577-1640 Flanders (Belgium)

Inside The Metropolitan Museum of Art, it sounds like a chorus of out-of-tune angels.

The shrieking sopranos of hormonal students clash with the annoyed baritone of aficionados and the nervous tenor of tourists. The solos of tour guides are drowned out in the din.

Maslow turns left and goes forward into the past: The blank stare of a Roman emperor. A Greek amphora paying homage to war-horses and the promise of *nepenthe*. A child-like Pharaoh, his family illuminated by a beneficent sun.

He turns right, walking past the modern art with his head down until he discovers America, where he speculates on the sex life of the couple who slept in that four-poster canopy bed—and the safety of the baby in the antique cradle at their feet. Glancing furtively to see where the nearest guard is, he lifts one of the exquisitely carved ivory pieces on the lacquered chessboard and moves Pawn to King 4.

He knows he's taking a risk coming to the Met. Every object threatens to shatter the increasingly thin veil that separates *their* past from *his* present. An hour later, after pondering the inner life of a mounted knight, encased in armor, he takes

refuge in the cafeteria and sips on a half-decent double *latte*.

Returning to the main gallery, he watches visitors ascending and descending the central staircase like angels on Jacob's ladder. Taking a deep breath, he begins to thread his way up.

"Let's look at the paintings...the ones to the right. It's a special exhibition."

The voice comes from a few steps up. A teacher leading a group. Maslow follows them into a room where he is surrounded by weighty portraits and mythic scenes in ornate gilded frames.

He sits on a cushioned bench behind the group, picking up snippets of their conversation as they look at Rubens' *Venus and Adonis*:

"Look at the tension in Adonis's muscles. The precision of his elbows, knees, and calves. The way he is reaching for and pushing Venus away at the same time."

"Wow, that dog's nose...you can almost smell the woods through it!" a student adds to appreciative nods and murmured "yesses," "definitely's," "and amazing's."

"The angel wings," another student adds, sighing and shaking her head in wonder.

"Not much life left." The voice has a touch of nostalgia but is devoid of self-pity.

Everyone's a critic, Maslow thinks—a final pedestrian thought; the ordinary

mind's instinctive grasp for solid ground before the door swings shut behind it—a hallmark of these encounters.

“A dying myth,” the voice adds.

“He looks like a real asshole to me,” one of the students says.

“Old story,” adds another.

“Typical male wish fulfillment,” adds another to laughter all around.

“Good for them! Fresh eyes!” The voice is so loud Maslow looks around quickly. But it carries the echoes of centuries, not marble halls.

The lecturer rambles on as the students begin to drift away one by one to look at other paintings.

“You painted it, right?” Maslow whispers.

“Yes. Painted.”

He emphasizes the past tense.

“I said what I had to say then. I'm ready to say what I have to say now.”

Maslow reaches into his jacket pocket, brings out a folded piece of paper and a pencil.

The Master's chuckle is a light rumble at the bottom of a deep cavern: “No. Not here. I need the proper tools.”

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The proper tools. Over the next few days, Maslow looks for hints on the streets of New York. An iconic art store in the Village where he finds powdered pigments that would seem to be right up Rubens's alley. Another high-end store near Pratt where he lingers in front of a display of oil sticks, waiting for the Master to signal his approval. Nothing.

Thinking that maybe Rubens wants to try his hand at something more modern, Maslow goes to a mega-drugstore and stares at cheap pens, markers, and pencils of many colors.

But the artist keeps his own counsel...until, a few days later, Maslow sees a billboard on his way out of the city.

It's a picture of a bright green way-larger-than-life Mr. Bendy-type character with a conical hat, bulging psychotic eyes, and a crazed grin, hugging a little boy and girl a little too close for Maslow's comfort. The clearly-deranged figure invites "kids of all ages" to visit the Crayola Crayon Factory Museum in downtown Easton, Pennsylvania.

"Ahh...perfect," Rubens sighs.

Maslow sighs too. He'd been going west on 78, hoping to make it to Harrisburg in time to have dinner with friends. Instead, he'll be staying the night in Easton, waiting eagerly, with a bunch of six-year-olds, for the Museum to open at 10 the

next morning.

He had presumed he'd be walking into a Willy-Wonka-worthy blend of industrial strangeness and magical realism. He's half right. The Museum is a bright and shiny psychedelic showcase to the "Crayola Experience," a place where the operative compound adjectives are "multi-colored," "larger-than-life," and "hands-on." The air is not so delicately fragranced with a pervasive *Eau de crayon* that waxes and wanes from room to room.

The factory itself is at an undisclosed location several miles away, where lawyers don't have to worry about children falling into vats of molten wax.

Rubens doesn't seem concerned with the sleight of hand.

"Fabulous. Absolutely fabulous."

At the Met, Rubens was dismissive. Here he is enthralled.

"Let's take a stroll, shall we?"

First, they stare with childlike fascination at The World's Largest Crayon. It's *True Blue*, 15' long, 16" in diameter, weighs 1,500 pounds, and is made from 123,000 blue Crayola crayon nubs contributed by kids from all over the country.

"I wonder," the artist muses but doesn't elaborate.

They watch a demonstration of a "real" crayon-making machine. Next to the machine is a display that keeps a running tally of how many Crayola crayons have been made in history—more than 150 billion, and somehow still counting.

Rubens shakes his head. “Why blend so many colors in advance?” He’s mystified.

As they continue their self-guided tour, Maslow feels increasingly invisible and conspicuous at the same time. He’s not the only grownup there. But he’s the only grownup who isn’t either working or accompanied by a child under the age of ten. He imagines the elderly volunteers, who wear *Jazzberry Jam* shirts under official-looking *Black* or *Outer Space* aprons, tend to keep a close eye on middle-aged guys wandering around and mumbling to themselves.

Suddenly a jester approaches wearing a hula skirt made from strips of crayon-colored cloth that swish around his khaki pants and sneakers. His jersey is a tie-dyed *Midnight Blue* with large *Laser Lemon* circles on a field of good-old reliable *Red*. He wears the same high conical hat as his doppelgänger on the billboard—shaped exactly like a crayon, made of small diamond patches of different colors.

The character bows and materializes a small box about the size of a pen and pencil set. A gift for visitors? He holds it out to Maslow’s right hand, but, as he reaches for it, the jester pulls it back and holds it out to Maslow’s left. Looking back and forth in pantomime confusion, he shrugs, gives it to Maslow, takes a quick bow, jumps in the air, clicks his heels, and dashes off.

Maslow walks over to a low railing to open the box. It’s the familiar Crayola *Orange-Yellow*. But it has a green wax seal on the front with the letters “PPR.”

There's no flap. The top lifts off. It appears to be a little telescope or spyglass.

Until he looks more closely.

It's a kaleidoscope. Rubens gasps as Maslow puts it up to his eye. The colors are more spectacularly illuminated than Maslow has ever seen. Or that even the master could imagine.

The next room is full of large circular drawing tables. In the center of each, is a 4-foot diameter *Ultra Yellow* teacup filled with 5-foot high crayons. It looks like a stage set for Alice in Wonderland.

At the base of the giant teacup is a revolving carousel with thirty or so plastic bins filled with thirty or so different-color regular-size crayons so kids at the table can spin it around and grab the ones they need.

“What are you waiting for? Draw!”

Maslow's head jerks up as he has a brief flashback to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Flashing forward, he takes a large piece of drawing paper, spins the carousel, grabs a fistful of crayons, and starts scribbling—lines, shapes, swirls, whatever.

“Behold! It's Judgment Day!” The Master sounds as if he's greeting a long-lost friend. “Men tumble to their deaths faces frozen in rigors of fear. Women, their bodies contorted, shield their eyes from unspeakable fates. A riot of flesh! Tortured cries. Faces etched with gashes of anguish. Lucifer himself waits with a self-satisfied sneer!”

Maslow continues grabbing crayons at random, stroking boldly across the page, as Rubens orchestrates.

“But look above! Sweet faces of care, compassion, and hope. Confident muscles clutch the faithful. The soft curves of bodies at peace, rising towards Lord Jesus, Blessed Mary, and the saints, as angels go about their business, anointing the blessed—like bees from flower to flower.”

As Rubens talks, Maslow’s crayon-filled fists continue to fly, coating the edges of his hands in a thin film of wax.

“Now, open your eyes!”

Maslow’s eyes flash open. But he sees only scribbles.

“Ach,” the artist seems frustrated. “Soften them!”

Maslow lowers his lids as he grabs wildly at colors.

“Behold! This apocalyptic scene—hellish fires and celestial light—is, in truth, nothing more than color, shape, and shadow. To reject any part would be to reject the whole,” he sighs, speaking as much to the heavens as to Maslow.

“New sheet of paper!”

Maslow spins the carousel. A little more forcefully than necessary. He looks around...furtive...guilty. But all the other innocents are still standing or kneeling on stools, totally focused, as if reality itself depended on their ability to depict it. Fortunately, none of them seems to mind that a grownup has been monopolizing

the flesh tones. Their parents stand behind them warily. Waiting for the guy to make one false move so they can call security. Even though, at this place, Maslow thinks—relieved his ordinary mind remains somewhat intact—the sheriff would probably be Quick Draw McGraw.

He reaches for even more vibrant colors.

“Christ Lowered from the Cross,” the Master announces. “The full weight of his humanity about to tumble to earth. Celestial radiance illuminates his power. Each brushstroke a balm for the grieving.”

He sighs as Maslow dabs streaks of *Hot Magenta* blood along Christ’s forearm and the wound at his side. He colors Magdalene’s cloak with *Scarlet*, softening it by rubbing it with his thumb. For the cross itself, he reaches for browns and yellows (*Inch Worm, Desert Sand, Macaroni and Cheese*), and to highlight the beard of the apostle who’s struggling to support the torsioned right shoulder of his lifeless Lord.

“Where others use Christ’s torment to stoke the fires of hatred, I stroke it gently...soothe his suffering to rest at long last...so we can move on. Many have come to earth with words of wisdom and love. But the path from mind to heart is long and arduous, filled with twists and turns. Ideals of love metamorphosing into excuses for hate.”

Rubens pauses a moment, considering his own words, and then continuing

softly: “Now, imagine yourself being lowered off the cross.”

A wave of release flows through Maslow’s body as he falls under the sway of deep blues and indigos, the firm grasp of Rubens’ invisible hand, and the insistence of his voice and vision:

“Now imagine your bitterest enemy being lowered off the cross.”

Maslow gasps. A long-forgotten face comes to mind—a petty tyrant of a client whose grandiose praise barely concealed an insatiable desire to manipulate...control...crush. He envisions the man now, full-figured, naked, loin-clothed...the Christ.

Oh my. Oh my.

A little girl, with predictably cherubic cheeks and carefully cropped blonde bangs, slides off her stool and catches a glimpse as she runs off to show someone her own divine drawing. “That’s pretty,” she says, pausing before skipping away.

“New piece of paper!” Rubens commands. “New Day of Judgment. Your life passes before your eyes. Everyone you know. Some fall to the fires. Others rise to the heavens.”

Family, friends, enemies, and strangers appear in Maslow’s mind’s eye, one-by-one as if volunteering for bit parts in the epic.

“Now take those who were ascending and put them in the fires of hell and take those who were falling and raise them to the right hand of the Lord. Continue.

Continue. Continue!”

Maslow does as he commands. Coloring, coloring, coloring...a multitude of familiar forms and faces in various throes of finality. Minute by minute, the painting becomes more complex until he's startled to a halt by Rubens' voice, now soft, sad, avuncular:

“This simple and most elusive of truths surrounds us. Your enemy is that stroke of red. You are that stroke of blue. Your enemy is that stroke of white. You are that stroke of black. You complete each other.

“For, in the end, each spirit is nothing more, nor less, than an infinitely complex but extraordinarily simple swath of colors.”

Like lights slowly illuminating a darkened auditorium, Maslow becomes aware of himself. Hunched over the paper. Muscles and ligaments stretched taught across his shoulders. Hands clenching crayons. Eyes now squeezed in intense focus.

He takes a deep breath, lets his body relax, opens his eyes, and looks at all three drawings side by side.

He sees nothing but scribbles.

At that moment, the little girl comes running back.

“What's that?” she points at the gift box, pulling him back in the general vicinity of the here and now.

“It's called a kaleidoscope. Want to see?”

She nods, picks it up, and puts it to her eye.

“Now turn it down here, you’ll see what happens.”

She does. “Wow! Neat!” She looks all around the room, turning the cylinder.

But when her eye falls on Maslow’s three drawings, she stops, takes the kaleidoscope away from her eye, looks at the scribbles, and then puts it back. And then away. Back and forth a few times. She turns to him with wide eyes and a mischievous smile, like he did a magic trick that she really really wants to be magic even though she knows it’s just a trick.

She starts to hand the kaleidoscope back to him but pauses.

“Could I?”

Maslow hesitates but... “OK. Just let me look through it first. I haven’t even tried it yet.”

She nods enthusiastically.

He takes it and, imitating her actions, looks all around the room ending up at his three scribbled drawings. Now it’s his eyes that grow wide. He takes the kaleidoscope away from his eye. Puts it back. Then away. A few times.

He’s barely aware of handing it to her.

“Thanks!” she says enthusiastically, running off with it.

Maslow slowly and deliberately gathers his three masterpieces and walks quietly to the exit, careful not to break the spell.