



CURATOR
Alejandro Vergara

An Explosive Struggle in the Prado

22

Rubens's *Hercules and Cerberus* from 1636-37 is a small picture (28 x 31.6 cm) bursting with formal power. The sense of compressed energy is palpable – handling the painting at the Prado feels like holding an explosive.

We usually think of Rubens as an artist who favoured large-scale work, but approximately one third of his paintings are small. Most of them are sketches, as is the case here. This type of picture, made in preparation for a larger work, offers us visible traces of the creative process, and a sense of privileged access. In *Hercules and Cerberus*, the brown tone of the oak support glows through the overlapping translucent layers. Two lines drawn in black mark two axes of the composition: one runs through the head of Hercules, the other, to the left, through the head of one of the Furies and the hindquarters of the three-headed dog. Strokes of paint pile over each other as traces of the painter's evolving thoughts.





Peter Paul Rubens, *Hercules and Cerberus*, c. 1636-1637,
oil on panel, 28 x 31.6 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado

In spite of the dazzling show of craftsmanship, the painting is not boastful. The perfect fusion of content and form is characteristic of Rubens, and key to understanding his art. His goal is to activate empathy, to make us feel the emotions involved in the stories that he paints as if they were lived experience. Virginia Woolf, talking about her writing, once explained that words lead people to think and feel, but 'to think and to feel not about them, but about something different' (in the BBC radio recording *Craftsmanship*, 1937). Rubens shares this approach to art-making. His painterly skills, the qualities and powers that he brings to bear in his art, are never self-serving.

Hercules and Cerberus illustrates an episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VII, 409-419): 'There is a dark cavern with a gaping mouth, and a path into the depths, up which Hercules, hero of Tiryns, dragged the dog, tied with steel chains, resisting and twisting its eyes away from the daylight and the shining rays'. Rubens's telling of the story in this sketch exemplifies how he translates meaning into form. The impressions left by the vigorous strokes of the brush over the surface animate the scene. Dynamic forms and lines create an impression of ebb and flow, pulling us into the contest of strength taking place before the gates of Hell. Because of how they are characterised, the figures appear as if engaged in an exalted moment, yet they also seem close and real, as if directly witnessed. Rubens makes the struggle between the youthful hero and the forces of the underworld feel as an event where great things are at stake.



