



COURTESY OF THE MINT MUSEUM (CHARLOTTE, NC)
MUSEUM BOOK CLUB GUIDE

Master of Shadows

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Master of Shadows: The Secret Diplomatic Career of the Painter Peter Paul Rubens—“Although his popularity is eclipsed by Rembrandt today, Peter Paul Rubens was revered by his contemporaries as the greatest painter of his era, if not of all history. His undeniable artistic genius, bolstered by a modest disposition and a reputation as a man of tact and discretion, made him a favorite among monarchs and political leaders across Europe—and gave him the perfect cover for the clandestine activities that shaped the landscape of seventeenth-century politics.” Page numbers refer to the 2010, Anchor paperback edition.

1. What did you know about Rubens before reading *Master of Shadows*? Did you find the story of Rubens as diplomat interesting? Why or why not? Now knowing the story, has your opinion of Rubens changed? Explain why or why not?
2. P. 255. “We are not likely to see a painter-diplomat like Rubens again. Ours is an age of specialization, and the practice of diplomacy has become a fully professional calling.” Discuss why artists, particularly Rubens, made good diplomats? Are there any modern comparisons?
3. P. 76. “Rubens actively promoted this fascination with his genius. It was good business and it pleased his considerable ego. Painting, he felt, was both a discipline and a performance.” Why would he think that? Give examples of his performances from the book.
4. Works of art can often be difficult to interpret or understand. P. 122. “He openly admitted that the meanings of the paintings were all but impossible to determine without some explanation by the artist himself.” Have you ever encountered a work of art that you felt needed explanation? Or a work that you would love to be able to ask the artist about? If yes, what was it and who was the artist?
5. Why do you suppose art historians have relegated this facet of Rubens’ life to a mere footnote? Is this something you already knew before reading *Master of Shadows*?
6. P. 135. “I have no doubt war will follow. When I consider the caprice and arrogance of Buckingham, I pity the young king who, through false council, is needlessly throwing himself and his kingdom into such an extremity. For anyone can start a war, when he wishes, but he cannot so easily end it.” What would Rubens think of modern diplomacy, leaders, and wars between nations?
7. What would he think of contemporary artists? Particularly those that use art to voice their personal political opinions? Anti-war messages? How are these modern expressions different from Rubens time? How are they similar?
8. How would Rubens feel about Antwerp today? The Netherlands and Belgium? Europe as a whole?
9. Of all the political intrigue Rubens found himself in, which situation was most interesting to you? Why? Was Rubens ever in real danger in the role of diplomat? Why not just be an artist?
10. Discuss American painter Thomas Eakins quote on page 260 regarding Rubens art. “Rubens is the nastiest most vulgar noisy painter that ever lived. His men are twisted to pieces. His modeling always crooked and dropsical and no marking is ever in its right place or anything like what one sees in nature...his pictures always put me in mind of chamber pots.” What is your opinion of Rubens’ art? Any favorites? Where do you think he stands in the canon of art history?