Today, a successful career in science makes one international or global. People move laboratories and change countries. Researchers collaborate and interact around the globe. The notion of the international nature of science was prominent in the recent BBC program “Desert Island Discs,” in which the guest was Sir Andre Geim, a physicist and the winner, with Konstantin Novoselov, of the 2010 Nobel Prize in Physics for their work on graphene (1, 2). Geim was born in Sochi, Russia (then part of the Soviet Union), and his career led him to Moscow, then to the Netherlands, and finally to Manchester University, where his laboratory is presently located. He commented in his earlier biographical note on personal identity in the context of contemporary science. He said, “Having lived and worked in several European countries, I consider myself European and do not believe that any further taxonomy is necessary, especially in such a fluid world as the world of science” (3). Is such an international scientist (or artist for that matter) a contemporary construct?

It is fascinating to find this is not the case. Here I tell the story of another person who would quite easily fit the contemporary international image, although he was born in the 16th century. He was a painter, and his name was Peter Paul Rubens (4–6).

Rubens was born in Siegen, close to Cologne, where his family was temporarily exiled from Antwerp, then one of the largest cities in northern Europe. They returned there when he was 10 years old. Peter Paul received a good classical education, which he cultivated for the rest of his life. He studied art with Italian-trained teachers and mentors, and spent 8 years traveling in Europe. He familiarized himself with the art of the Italian Renaissance and was particularly impressed by the Venetians: Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese. He stayed for a period in Mantua, where his patron was Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga. He also visited Florence and Rome, the latter being extensively renovated in the new Baroque style. In 1606, he returned to Antwerp, where he built an impressive Genoese style house with a large studio, which remained his base for the rest of his life. Soon after he was appointed a court painter to the Archduke Albert and Isabella, the then regents in the southern (Spanish) Netherlands, to which Antwerp belonged.

His main painterly interests were the creation of large altarpieces and classical allegories, but he was also a sought-after portraitist of royalty and nobility. Soon he became one of the leading painters in Europe. He got his first commission in Rome. Subsequently, he created a large number of works in many countries. Among other places, he painted in Mantua, made portraits of aristocrats in Genoa, and created altarpieces for Count Palatine in Neuburg, Bavaria. He painted several altarpieces for Antwerp’s churches and in 1615–1621 was involved in the comprehensive design and decoration of a new Jesuit church there. Later he was commissioned to paint the ceiling of the Banqueting House in Whitehall, London, and a large series of works based on Ovid’s Metamorphoses for Torre de la Parada, Philip IV’s hunting lodge outside Madrid. He also designed several series of tapestries, and was interested in book illustration, collaborating with Balthasar Moretus, the owner of Plantin Press in Antwerp.

In his art Rubens combined the knowledge of classical sculpture with renaissance emphasis on the human body. He famously said that in painting “One must avoid the effect of stone” (7). In his works he created a particular body image—far more realistic than anything painted before.

He did all this in spite of living in a politically highly turbulent period. In the 16th century, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V established the Seventeen Provinces (also called the Spanish Netherlands, roughly the area of today’s Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg) as a separate political entity. On his abdication in 1555–1556, he ceded them to his son Philip II of Spain, whose uncompromising Catholicism clashed with the now partly Protestant provinces. The seven northern provinces (subsequently known as the northern Netherlands) rebelled against the Spanish rule, and in 1581 declared independence. The resulting...
war, known as the War of Dutch Independence, lasted until 1648, when the Dutch Republic was finally recognized by Spain (8, 9). The southern provinces (often loosely referred to as Flanders) remained loyal to Spain. Rubens’ life coincided with the war, apart from the period of truce in 1609–1621.

A wider context was the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), also rooted in the Reformation (10). The fight centered on the area that is today’s Germany, which then was a mosaic of Protestant and Catholic entities. At different times, the war involved Spain, Sweden, Denmark, France, Britain, and Austria. It was catastrophically destructive for central Europe.

Rubens became involved in war-related diplomacy. He visited the Spanish, French, and English courts, and his art commissions were often a cover for diplomatic activity. He was involved in peace negotiations between England and Spain, and also—unsuccessfully—attempted to negotiate the peace between the northern and southern Netherlands. At the end he was ennobled for his contributions (and his art) by two kings, Philip IV of Spain and Charles I of England. Politics also permeated his art. His most politicized work is the series of paintings commissioned for the Luxembourg Palace in Paris, illustrating the life of Maria de Medici, a widow of King Henry IV of France. In the course of this work, Rubens needed to deal with the all-powerful Cardinal Richelieu, who, incidentally, became his enemy (11).

In 1637, after unsuccessfully attempting to negotiate peace between the southern and northern Netherlands, Rubens painted *The Consequence of War* (also referred to as *The Horrors of War*), which expresses his desperation (Fig. 1). It is a quintessential Baroque work (12). One sees a dramatic story told through use of dynamic diagonal composition and the pronounced effects of light. It also, characteristically for the artist, contains layers of allegory. In the center there is Mars, the Roman god of war, pulled by the Fury (a deity of vengeance) by the name of Alecto, with a torch in her hand, and restrained by Venus. The figure of Venus is a typical Rubenesque nude with realistically painted flesh. Notice how Mars tramples over manuscripts and drawings: this symbolizes destruction of arts and letters in wartime. The figure of the wailing woman on the left represents Europe devastated by the long war.

The life achievement of Rubens was immense (13). He exerted lasting influence on European painting. His best pupil was Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) and his successor in Antwerp was Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678); both earned lasting places in art history. In Spain, Rubens’ style influenced Diego Velázquez and

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**Fig. 1.** Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). *The Consequence of War*, 1637–1638 (oil on canvas). ©Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy/The Bridgeman Art Library. Reproduced with permission.
Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. In France, there was a heated dispute in the Academy between the followers of Rubens (Rubenistes) and Nicolas Poussin (Poussinistes), the latter representing a more drawing- and line-based way of painting; the Rubenistes eventually predominated. Later the Rococo painter Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) and the Impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) were also influenced by Rubens, to name only a few.

Thus, the internationality of both science and the arts is far from new. Their borderless nature has been established by individuals whose creativity transcends political systems and withstands periods of major turmoil. In this, they contribute to the preservation of culture in destructive periods. This is an important benefit to humanity, over and above scientific knowledge and artistic creation.

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