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Soaring Without Safety

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SOARING WITHOUT SAFETY

By ELYSE M. MIATA AND DAVID KECK



When pilots and aviation enthusiasts find themselves in Washington, D.C., they often plan a trip to the Mall to visit the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. But those who love the skies might also want to walk directly across the Mall and visit the National Gallery of Art, where we recommend taking a look at one of our favorite paintings: Peter Paul Rubens's *The Fall of Phaeton*. This piece of Baroque art speaks powerfully to aviators, as it shows what happens if the rules of the sky are disregarded.

Reflections of a Classic Painting

Rubens, a 17th-century Flemish artist, depicts a dramatic moment from the poet Ovid's version of the famous Greek myth of Phaeton.

Phaeton's mother told him that he was the son of the sun god, Phoebus. Bullied by his peers, Phaeton seeks to prove his legitimacy as the child of one of the gods and journeys east to the palace of the sun. Hoping to convince his son of the truth, Phoebus rashly promises to give him whatever he wanted. Phaeton insists that he ride his father's chariot and pull the sun across the heavens for one day. Knowing that his son does not have the skill or strength to pilot such a craft, Phoebus begs him to choose something else, as the god himself cannot break a sworn promise. But the allure of the skies is too great. The sun god discusses the flight plan of the sun's daily course across the sky and gives his doomed son the ancient equivalent of a safety briefing, warning him to pull hard on the reins and keep the four horses under tight control. But the disaster begins from the very first moment – the horses too want the freedom of the heavens, and sensing an inexperienced pilot, they fly wild. Phaeton, lacking the wise guidance of a flight instructor, panics.

"The story serves as an allegory about disregarding the rules of aviation."

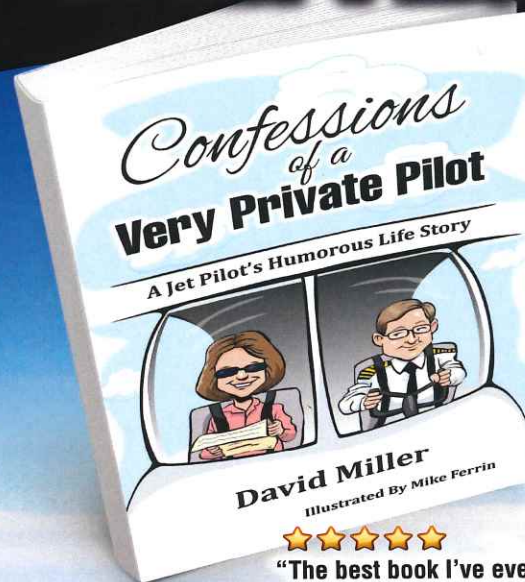
Rubens depicts the culmination of the tragic flight. The out-of-control chariot has become a threat to both the earth and skies. In the lower corner, you can see the flames caused by the sun careening too close to our planet. The female figures, some with elegant butterfly wings, represent the Seasons and the Hours of the day. Normally, they are guided regularly by the predictable movement of the sun, but now they are terrified, bound to the chariot, struggling and desperate. The arc in the upper left corner depicts the heavenly zodiac that is now disrupted; the disastrous flight is throwing the entire natural order into disarray. The extreme contrast between light and dark and the heightened emotional tension typical of Rubens's Baroque style helps convey the horror of the fatal flight. Zeus, the ruler of the gods has no choice – the bright light flashing from the top of the painting illuminating the chaos Phaeton created through his disregard for the natural order, represents the lightning bolt that destroys the chariot and kills the youth. In the painting, the muscular, lifeless body of Phaeton, once so eager and proud, is just about to slip from the chariot. Ovid compares his crashing to earth to a falling star.

The story serves as an allegory about disregarding the rules of aviation. Phaeton represents a young pilot who completely ignores proper protocols. He is at once both insecure and proudly overconfident. And we can understand the young man's temptations. He wants to prove himself, both to his friends, and in some sense to his father, and what better way is there for a young person to demonstrate worth than to master humanity's perpetual aspiration to fly? He seeks the right of passage of a first solo, but his first will be his last. Phoebus, himself a pilot,

who understands full-well the tremendous power of this "4 horsepower" flying vehicle, knows that this flight will kill him; how many parents of pilots have the fear in the back of their heads that any given flight will be their child's last? As both father and flight instructor, Phoebus does everything he possibly can to explain the dangers and difficulties. Everyone who assumes a plane's controls understands that pilots assume not only personal risks, but also that taking a plane off the ground entails taking a potentially dangerous object into the airspace above people's homes and businesses. The fire consuming a portion of the earth in the painting is a poignant reminder of the critical responsibility of learning how to land a failing plane safely. Although this painting and story have such particular meanings for aviation, they also speak to anyone who has gotten overwhelmed and lost control in any other situation.

The National Gallery of Art is well worth an addition to a D.C. trip, and not only to see this classic. It contains other famous paintings by Rubens, such as *Daniel in the Lion's Den*, and it also has great works of other famous artists such as Rembrandt van Rijn, Vincent van Gogh, and Pablo Picasso. The Gallery is in walking distance to other must-see attractions such as the United States Navy Memorial and Naval Heritage Center, The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, as well as the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. The last of these may hold the most allure for pilots, but the story of our enduring quest of flight can also be found in age-old paintings and broken chariots. **C**

A MUST READ FOR EVERY PILOT



"The best book I've ever read!"
Author, David Miller

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