

# Peter Paul Rubens

OIL PAINTINGS AND OIL SKETCHES

BY DAVID FREEDBERG

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

WE ARE INDEBTED TO Prof. David Freedberg of Columbia University whose impeccable standards as essayist and scholar were vital contributions to this catalogue.

The generosity of lenders is of course crucial to the realization of any historical exhibition. Needless to say, a willingness to lend these marvelous Rubens paintings and oil sketches to a gallery that specializes in 20th Century art is all the more noteworthy.

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Last, a great debt is owed to Anthony Speelman, and to his father, the late Edward Speelman.

—LARRY GAGOSIAN

# The Hand of Rubens

DAVID FREEDBERG

**H**IS FIGURES SEEM to be executed with one stroke of the brush and are as inspired as a breath of air." This is how Giovanni Pietro Bellori, the most articulate of Rubens's seventeenth century critics, described the paintings in the Medici cycle, the series of 26 vast canvases painted by Rubens in 1623–25 to glorify the Queen Mother of France. Scion of the famous Medici family of Florence, Marie de Médicis (as she was known in France) had taken over the reins of government in 1610, when her husband, Henri IV, was assassinated and their son—the future Louis XIII—was not yet seven years old. By the early 1620s, Louis had grown irritated with the conduct of his mother, and the wily Cardinal de Richelieu was just beginning to build his power base by supporting son against mother. She needed to justify her policies, and Rubens was summoned to make painted propaganda on her behalf. He had to show her as a great, wise, and talented Queen, faithfully continuing the supposedly exemplary politics of her late husband. Not everyone seems to have got the message, but everyone wondered at the pictures. Marie went on to lose in the political battles that ensued (she was soon exiled from France), but she won perpetual admiration for her judgment in employing Rubens.

To us, however, the paintings in the Medici cycle often seem elaborate, even ponderous; the political issues which fired them are no longer

clear; and while we can admire their scale, their colour, and their spectacular inventiveness, it is obvious that much of the actual painting was entrusted to the large workshop of painters which Rubens then directed. He was the grand producer of concepts and ideas; they were responsible for the execution. Here and there we may see traces of the finishing touches he applied to the large pictures, to give them extra brio and panache; but what we miss in them is precisely the evidence of the renowned spontaneity and vitality of Rubens's own hand.

For this, rather, we must turn to his preparatory sketches for the cycle. Preserved in St. Petersburg and Munich, they are such brilliant productions, so swift, vigorous, and apparently spontaneous that we seem to be caught up in the process of artistic creation itself. These, we think, rather than the finished paintings, are what Bellori must have been speaking of when he praised the Medici cycle, and when he went on to refer, in a famous phrase, to the fury and speed of his brush, *la gran prontezza e furia del penello*. In fact, the words apply to all of Rubens's oil sketches. Never in the history of art does there seem to be so infinitesimal a gap between idea and execution. Whether large or small, the oil sketches take us into the heart and mind of the painter, and reveal a fluency with the brush that was justly celebrated in its own time and has remained so ever since.

But what more precisely was the role of the oil sketch in Rubens's work? The stages in his preparation of the final product generally followed the same pattern. First he would jot down his rough idea (or ideas) for the composition in pen and ink; then he would prepare an oil sketch, in which the composition (and the colours) would be more definitively established. After that Rubens worked from the oil sketch himself (in the case of works entirely by his own hand), or he handed it over to his assistants, to be executed in his large workshop. At this stage he often provided assistants and pupils with rather more finished drawings, of figures taken from the life, or of architectural details, in black or coloured chalks, to serve as models for particular elements within the final composition. Then, if the commission required it, Rubens himself painted in the final touches, adding highlights, enlivening the landscapes, improving the

draperies, giving vitality to faces and bodies, and generally bestowing an air of energy and sparkle upon the final work. But in cases where this was entirely a studio production, or where the final product was not painting at all, but rather some other genre, such as a book illustration or a tapestry, only the surviving sketches provide us with the evidence of Rubens's personal touch. The testimony of the sketches is thus doubly crucial in cases where the bulk of the painting was entrusted to the workshop, or where the final product was not a painting at all, but rather some other genre, such as a book illustration or a tapestry. Indeed, Rubens seems to have been in particular demand as a designer of tapestries, and throughout his life he would be commissioned to design them. In such instances he often prepared two series of sketches, first a set of very small sketches, or *bozzetti*, and then a number of larger and more detailed *modelli*, which in turn provided the basis for the cartoons (or full-scale drawings) from which the actual tapestries would be woven.

Rubens, to be sure, was not the first painter to have used oil sketches to note down his ideas for paintings or to serve as guides in the making of the finished product, whether painted by himself or by his studio. Before him, a number of sixteenth century Italian painters, especially in Florence and Venice, had done so. Tintoretto in Venice and Barocci in Rome offer the most immediate precedents; but neither they nor anyone else made such extensive use of preparatory sketches in oil, and none of their sketches reveal anything like the combination of brilliance and clarity that may be seen in Rubens's own—whether preserved in the great museums of the world or in the selection of works gathered together on the occasion of the present exhibition. However great the bravura of Tintoretto's brush, his sketches are not as legible as those of Rubens; however clear Barocci's preparatory *modelli* (as such sketches were often called), they are entirely lacking in Rubens's consummate pictorial flair.

No one has ever doubted the spontaneity and the sheerly painterly qualities of Rubens's brush, but even Bellori—like almost every critic after him—felt that these qualities were purchased at a price. And the price, the critics alleged, was his drawing: "drawing," of course, in the

broad sense, meaning his use of the painted line in paintings and sketches, and “drawing” in the narrower sense of drawings in chalk and ink. The distinction between the linear and the painterly, between the drawn line and the broad touch of the brush, has its roots in Italian art theorists of the fifteenth century like Leonardo and Leone Battista Alberti, and was canonized in the mid-sixteenth century *Lives of the Painters* by Giorgio Vasari. Vasari, arguably the first great art historian, expressed his clear preference for the linear art of Raphael and Michelangelo over the more painterly talents of the great Venetians, especially Titian. *Pittura*, or painting, rested squarely on the shoulders of good *disegno*, or drawing; and it is this ranking that is carried over into the writings of those, like Bellori and his near contemporary the influential French theorist Roger de Piles, who praised Rubens’s fire but found fault with his drawing.

We too, when we now look at Rubens—especially in his oil sketches—may think we can fault him. Physiognomies often look rather perfunctory; facial features such as eyes and mouths can seem careless and in apparently haphazard relation to each other; the digits of both hands and feet sometimes seem too knotty and exaggerated; the landscape settings, for all the beauty of their colours and their enchanting depiction of the times of day, have trees that seem too hastily executed, trunks and branches that are too coarse, leaves that are too broad. But just as others did in the past, we readily pardon such apparent shortcomings, precisely because the overall effect is always so brilliant; but when the earlier critics carped about such things they were also motivated by their allegiance to the old hierarchy which placed *disegno* above everything. Their tastes were fundamentally classical. To put it bluntly, both Bellori and de Piles found Rubens a little too baroque. For Bellori, the only problem with Rubens was his deficiency in the representation of “beautiful natural forms”; and this, Bellori maintained, was simply a consequence of his “lack of good drawing,” or *disegno*. Roger de Piles declared a few years after Bellori, that “the faults of Rubens’s drawing arise only from the rapidity of his productions” (but at the same time de Piles could not resist suggesting that the problem had also to do with the Flemish

“character,” which “caused Rubens to make bad choices despite himself, and which thus had a poor effect on the evenness of his drawing”).

Such reservations continued unabated. When Sir Joshua Reynolds lectured to the students of the Royal Academy of Painting in London on the occasion of the annual distribution of prizes on 10 December 1772, he delivered an enthusiastic eulogy on Rubens, all the while comparing him to his antithesis, the French painter Poussin. According to Reynolds, what made Rubens great was “the facility with which he invented, the richness of his composition, the luxuriant harmony and brilliance of his colouring, [which] so dazzle the eye, that whilst his works continue before us, we cannot help thinking that all his deficiencies are fully supplied.” It is an almost perfect tribute. But what were the “deficiencies” to which Reynolds alluded? The self-confident arbiter of English painting did not shrink from enumerating them. Unlike the dry and severe art of Poussin, that most classical of painters, Reynolds asserted that Rubens’s sensual forms could sometimes be “florid, careless, loose, and inaccurate”; and these shortcomings—saved, once again, by the overall élan and brilliance of his works—could be ascribed to the lack of purity of his drawing. By which, of course, Reynolds simply meant that Rubens drew—or seemed to draw—too fast.

But Rubens *had* to draw fast—not just because he was impelled to do so by his inborn talent, but because there was so much to do. The scale and range of Rubens’s output is legendary. He simply *did* more than any other painter in the history of art. When the Danish doctor Otto Sperling visited Rubens’s studio in 1621, he found the great artist not only busy with his own paintings, but also supervising the work of his many assistants. At the same time he was dictating a letter and having Tacitus read aloud to him. The visitor to the studio was stunned into silence, but “when we kept silent so as not to disturb him with our talk, Rubens himself began to talk to us, while still continuing to work, to listen to the reading, and to dictate his letter, answering our questions and thus displaying his astonishing powers.”

## II

Ever since 1609, when he returned to Antwerp from an eight year sojourn in Italy, where he established his reputation and studied the works of both ancient and modern art, Rubens was flooded with work. Private patrons wanted pictures for their homes from him, the churches needed ever grander and more sumptuous altarpieces, and city governments, princes, kings and emperors, were all too aware of the prestige of having a Rubens or two to show off in public or to adorn their palaces. And if they could not have paintings from him, they asked him to design tapestries for them, in those days generally a still more sumptuous form of decoration.

Immediately Rubens set up a large workshop of painters, to whom he entrusted the large-scale execution of almost all his public commissions, as well as many private ones. His assistants would do much of the actual painting, following the oil sketches and detailed drawings which Rubens supplied them in abundance. He would supervise their work to a greater or lesser extent, making changes where necessary, and finishing off all but the cheapest productions with the touch of his own hand. This is why Rubens's paintings, especially on a large scale, vary so widely in quality, and this is why the best insight into his art is most often provided by his drawings and his sketches. Bellori's, de Piles's and Reynolds's comments were made about the totality of Rubens's art, but they apply above all to the preparatory sketches in oil.

The present exhibition provides an excellent opportunity to assess the qualities so long admired in the sketches, as well as the merits of a few examples of finished paintings that come entirely from Rubens's own hand. The chief reason for modern resistance to the art of Rubens is that he is so often known only from large-scale workshop productions; and these generally lack his distinctive touch and handling of paint. Sometimes, indeed, such works can seem quite pedestrian; for many people the most immediate access to his pictorial talent is through his sketches. This has always been the case when it came to selling a sketch of a *Holy Family with Saint John and Elizabeth* that belonged to Sir Joshua



Reynolds himself, an auctioneer wrote in 1795 that "Many of this great master's designs are superior to the large finished pictures; and like this possess all his genuine fire and spirit." The comment is typical, and not just the sales pitch of an eager auctioneer.

But the situation is more complicated than this. After all, there are many finished paintings from Rubens's own hand that undeniably reveal the vigour, flair, and passion so admired in the sketches. People always knew this, and took elaborate precautions to ensure that what they bought was not just some studio piece or copy. When, in 1618, the Englishman Sir Dudley Carleton offered Rubens his notable collection of classical statues in exchange for a large group of works by the master himself, he was particularly anxious about their status. He wanted everything to be by Rubens's own hand—if not originals then at least finished by him. And so, in a letter of April 28 of that year, Rubens tried to reassure him about just this matter. Even though, "I am so burdened with commissions both public and private that for some years to come I cannot commit myself," he promised that he would make a special effort to finish with his own hand the works he was sending Carleton. In a list which he appended to this letter, he noted down all the works he proposed to send, along with an indication of their exact status. It bears quotation at some length:

A Prometheus bound on Mount Caucasus, with an eagle which pecks his liver. Original by my own hand, and the eagle done by Snyders. 500 florins. Daniel among the lions. Original, entirely by my hand. 600 florins. Leopards with Satyrs and Nymphs. Original by my hand, except for a beautiful landscape done by the hand of a master skillful in this department. 600 florins.... A Crucifixion, life-sized, considered perhaps the best thing I have ever done. 500 florins. A Last Judgment, begun by one of my pupils, after one which I did in a much larger size for the Prince of Neuburg, who paid me 3500 florins cash for it; but this one, not being finished, would be entirely retouched by own hand, and by this means would pass as original. 1200 florins.... A picture of Achilles clothed as a woman [a reference to the classical subject of the discovery of the young Achilles by Ulysses when he was hiding amongst the daughters of Lycomedes], done by the best of my pupils, and the whole retouched by my hand; a most delightful picture, and full of many very beautiful young girls."

Nothing could be more revealing than this repeated insistence on originality and what the Germans appropriately call *eigenhändigkeit*, the quality of authenticity guaranteed by the presence of the artist's own hand. Even a picture by a pupil, or a studio replica could "pass as an original" if retouched by the master himself. "It is not just the assignment of a name that interests the connoisseur of paintings; he seeks to feel the authentic *touch*, for which the name is merely an index," wrote Edgar Wind in a memorable discussion of the problem of connoisseurship some thirty years ago (in his series of lectures entitled "Art and Anarchy"). But the letter to Carleton (and another similar one a few days later) seems just a little *too* insistent. It strains so much to reassure the slightly naive English courtier-diplomat that one begins to doubt the genuineness of its guarantees, and it hardly comes as a surprise to discover that many of the paintings which did go to Carleton in the end were indeed little more than studio productions.

But at the same time the letter is revealing because it tells us so much about the role of the studio in Rubens's output. After all, Rubens is the prime example in the history of art where works come to be attached to an artist's name even if they are not actually executed by him. It is enough that they should have been designed and conceived by him. The closest parallel in our own time is with the role of the studio in the production of films. Before Rubens, of course, there were artists like Raphael, who directed a much smaller workshop; and long after him, Rodin, in the field of sculpture.

But in all this there lies a paradox. On the one hand, works that come from the studio have often—and rightly—been called Rubens. On the other, works like the oil sketches have always seemed to provide more direct access to the artist's mind and more invigorating evidence of the force of his brush. It is in them, and in the swifter of the drawings, that we may grasp him most fully and most intimately. And this has to do not just with the fact that they are at once so brilliant and so intimate. It has to do with something deeper and more complex.

Already in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, one finds the apparently modern notion that the value of a work of art lies more in the idea or concept behind it than in its actual execution. Everyone knows that for Plato the idea is purer and more beautiful than its expression in sensory form. In the Middle Ages, following St. Augustine, the dominant view was that all created, external beauty is derived from a "beauty that is above the souls." The highest beauty is essentially invisible and existed on the level of ideas. Why? Because the artist is merely the earthly imitator of God, who made the world itself by an act of His intellect. This was the view of St. Thomas Aquinas. Just as there is in the divine mind a form which Aquinas called an "idea" according to whose pattern the world was made, so too the creative artist proceeds from an original idea, that is, the abstract concept present in his mind at the very start of the act of creation.

No wonder, then, that the Renaissance came to value the notion of "invention" so highly. Invention precedes execution. It consists of the discovery and organization of ideas prior to their transformation into art. What the artist follows when he puts his works into concrete form is in fact an inner plan or *design*, just as God himself did when he created the things of this world. And here the terms become absolutely crucial. The much-used Renaissance phrase for "inner design" is *disegno interno*. But *disegno* also meant drawing, and so drawing itself came to be regarded as the foundation of all the other arts. Actual drawing was nothing more than a reflection of the inner "design" (or drawing) on which all created art fundamentally rests. The Renaissance laid the foundation for the decisive transition from *disegno* as creative faculty to *disegno* as a tangible object. Vasari put this quite bluntly when he wrote that "*Disegno* [i.e. design or drawing] is father of all the arts; it makes its judgments on the basis of many things, and is similar to the form or idea of all the things in nature. . . ." The basically conceptual nature of drawing was thus made clear, and from then on *disegno* was inextricably linked with the idea of the concept itself. What is most important in art

is the internal design, or concept, the *disegno interno* or *concetto*. The actual works are merely external elaborations of thoughts that exist only on the level of intellect. The best artists are regarded as somehow divine, not because of the beauty of their external forms, but because the act of human artistic creation parallels the way in which God himself works.

This is all very well and good, but a little impractical. Aside from the special case of modern conceptual art, where words may suffice as indices of the artistic idea, how can one know artists *except* through their works? One cannot; but there are different kinds of works. Some, as we have seen, are much more elaborated than others, and are therefore all the more removed from the fundamental act of creation. Since this latter exists on the level of the intellectual, and since it is on this level that the work of the artist most closely parallels the divine work of God, one has to seek out those manifestations of the artist's genius that are nearest to the moment of conception and inspiration. And these, needless to say, are drawings and sketches, rather than the finished works; and if not finished works, then ones that reveal the artist's own hand, rather than ones which have been delegated to others.

## IV

In accounting for the esteem in which the final and uncompleted works of artists were held, Pliny the Elder maintained that in such works we see the traces of the design and the very thoughts of the artist. But sketches were even more direct indices. Franciscus Junius, one of Rubens's many antiquarian friends, and librarian of his great English patron Thomas Howard, the Earl of Arundel, held that connoisseurs of painting "delight themselves as much in the contemplation of the first, second and third drafts which great masters made of their works as in the works themselves, seeing in these lineaments [i.e. the "drafts" or sketches] the very thoughts of the studious artificer." Leonardo had already claimed that the sketch revealed the very moment when inspiration was put into concrete form. This is a notion that runs through the whole of the history of art. "The moment of genius is that of the sketch/

It is here that one sees the verve and the freshness of the plan," wrote Antoine-Marin Lemierre in his poem *La peinture* of 1770. De Piles put it even more bluntly when he said that when the artist makes a drawing "he abandons himself to his genius, and reveals himself exactly as he is," faults and all. The word he used was *dessein*, the French equivalent for *disegno*, and it carried the same overtones of internal plan as well as actual drawing or sketch. A later critic, the loquacious Dezallier d'Argenville, added that the drawing represents the moment in which the artist throws down the first fire of his thoughts. And with this we return directly to the central issue raised by Rubens's sketches themselves, to the issue of his verve, the *furia* of his brush, and the price he paid for his boldness and vigor.

## V

The general consensus has always been that one must pardon Rubens for his "mistakes" because of the brilliance of his ideas and the fecundity of his inventions. In this view, such faults as may be detected are evidence itself of the proximity of the sketch to the moment of inspiration. And inspiration was regarded as something even more urgent and vital than the conceptual planning of a work. The ancients, it will be remembered, referred to inspiration as the *furor poeticus*, or even the *furor divinus*. It is this that lies at the origin of Bellori's description of the fire—nay, the frenzy—of Rubens's brush, his *furia del pennello*.

Furthermore, the very idea of imperfection in a sketch (or a drawing, or even a painting) is related to the question of finish. "There are beautiful things which have more brilliance in them when they remain imperfect than when they are too finished," wrote the greatest of all French aphorists, La Rochefoucauld. Byron expressed a similar sentiment when he said that "poems, like paintings, may be too highly finished. The great art is effect, no matter how produced." Nothing could seem to apply more to the art of Rubens. Because the effect is so astonishing, often so breathtaking, we forgive the faults we find in him.

## VI

These then, are some of the roots of the admiration for Rubens's sketches and drawings. They, more than anything else, are the manifestations of his genius that reveal the moment of inspiration. They bring us that much closer than the paintings to the actual concept of his works. Unlike so many of the finished paintings, executed chiefly or entirely by the studio, they show the traces of his own hand. But there are two further reasons for their appeal.

It was Vasari who first articulated the view that drawings and sketches are superior to the finished work simply because the creative energy is likely to flag where the effort of execution is prolonged. He gave the example of Giulio Romano, whose drawings were so much better than his paintings because they were done when Giulio was "all fired up" by his ideas. One begins to understand the importance of the metaphors of fire and fury for the understanding of the preliminary sketch. The spontaneous sketch, as Wind noted in his discussion of the origins of scientific connoisseurship, retained in its freshness what the labours of execution tended to stale. To some extent, this remark does not apply to Rubens, since even in the paintings he executed himself (as opposed to those that came from the hands of studio assistants) one could hardly call him stale. But in Rubens, more than in any other artist, the best works very often approach the condition of the sketch, precisely because of their occasional lack of finish, the vigour of their brushwork, and all the "errors" which more academic painters would never have committed.

While there is no doubt that one of the reasons for the appeal of Rubens in general, and the sketches in particular, is precisely that one is so often caught up in the sheer excitement of the painting, there is another and perhaps deeper psychological reason for their hold on the thoughtful beholder. This too has a long history, and is rooted in convention; but like all conventions it too contains within it a more general truth.

It was Roger de Piles who yet again contributed to the discussion of the sketch not just by reaffirming the commonplace idea that the most finished works are not always the most agreeable, but by introducing the element of imagination into the discussion. In his *Conversations on Painting* first published in 1677, de Piles has his protagonist defend the fiery genius of Rubens against all those who alleged that it was precisely this that prevented him from properly finishing his works. The problem with highly finished paintings, de Piles observed, was that they stood in the way of the pleasures of the imagination. They stopped one from imagining what the artist had in his mind. Since everything was so clearly defined, imagination could not roam. With the sketches, on the other hand, imagination could flourish, because it had to supply—and had to work to supply—that which was not defined or described. Similar ideas are to be found in Reynolds in England and Denis Diderot in France, perhaps the finest eighteenth-century critic of painting. As Delacroix—another great believer in sketches and a fierce admirer of Rubens—put it in his diary for 1853, the sketch is always more pleasing than the finished work, because once the latter is completed and coordinated in all its parts, it arrests and circumscribes the imagination. Thinking as much of himself as of Rubens, perhaps, Delacroix noted that imagination loves vagueness, and must expand where it will. It thrives, said Delacroix on imagining vast objects on the basis of the most summary indications. For this reason alone, the sketch of a painting, was like a ruin: parts of it were missing, and so it had a greater effect on the soul. This is exactly what the great German Romantic philosopher Schopenhauer bluntly asserted nine years earlier, when he said that: “The sketches of the great masters often have more of an effect than their finished paintings.”

## VII

Schopenhauer, Delacroix, and before them de Piles, were all speaking of the *effect* of the sketches on the mind; but what were the *effects* that drew the beholder to them in the first place? We have already rehearsed

many of them, and they rightly become commonplace in the literature on Rubens. But aside from the vigour and brilliance of both handling and colour, there are a few other qualities that particularly appealed to critics both in the seventeenth century and ours. Chief of these was the quality of *sprezzatura*, a term that is perhaps best known from its use in that famous sixteenth-century guide to courtly and gentlemanly manners, Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, or *The Book of the Courtier*, first published in 1528 and reprinted over and over again.

There is no easy English equivalent for *sprezzatura*—perhaps because it is not something that one so readily associates with the English. *Sprezzatura* is all about style, but about style that must give the impression of being as little contrived as possible. It conveys a sense of elegance and flair that are unforced, effortless, and spontaneous. It was mostly used in connection with *personal* style—whether in clothes, speech, gesture, and general social deportment—but it was self-evidently applicable to works of art. Already in 1557 the Venetian writer Lodovico Dolce had praised *sprezzatura* as the true hallmark of the artist's genius. When it comes to the idea of effortless and spontaneity, the relevance to the sketch in general and to Rubens's sketches in particular, could hardly be clearer.

In a well-known article, Irving Lavin defined Dolce's *sprezzatura* as "calculated spontaneity"; but in an important sense this does not apply to Rubens. While the spontaneity that is so fundamental a part of *sprezzatura* may often have been very carefully judged, one has the impression with Rubens (and this one sees best in his sketches, even more than in drawings) that it is a real and genuine spontaneity. And what is so remarkable about this quality in Rubens is that it generally seems to "work"; it does not fail, in the way careless spontaneity so often does. It has flair, fire, and vigour; it makes mistakes; but still it hardly ever transgresses the bounds of elegance. In the end, the sheer stylishness of these objects is never in doubt, however vigorous they may seem. They are energetic in their brushwork and richly inventive when it comes to composition and iconography. At the same time there is nothing uncontrolled about them. For all that they seem wholly unforced, and



their spontaneity almost irrepressible. It is precisely this combination of freedom and control that distinguishes the art of Rubens and seems in him more perfect than in others.

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## VIII

Because the oil sketches epitomized the most distinctive qualities of Rubens's work to a greater degree than even his freest paintings and drawings, it is no wonder that they were particularly prized even in his own lifetime. Perhaps the most striking evidence for this is provided by the contract he signed in 1618 to provide the newly-built Jesuit Church in Antwerp with no less than 39 ceiling paintings and at least three altarpieces. This sumptuously adorned building—a veritable temple of marble and gold—would become, at least for a time, the most splendid church in Christendom west of Rome. No other artist could have been more qualified to provide it with its painted decoration than Rubens. No one doubted that it would be a huge task, in which all the resources of his already large studio would have to be mobilized. That was taken for granted. After all, as the first clause of the contract set out, Rubens not only had to provide the thirty-nine paintings for the ceilings of the upper and lower galleries of the Church, he was also expected to provide them before the year was out. No one could possibly have supposed that he would do the painting himself. But the second clause contained two crucial stipulations. It laid down that Rubens's best pupil, Van Dyck, had to have a hand in the execution of the large paintings, and it insisted that "the aforesaid Sr. Rubens shall be obliged to make with his own hand the sketches for all the aforesaid thirty-nine paintings." If the studio was to be entrusted with the actual execution of the pictures—with Van Dyck, the young master whose flair with the brush almost approached that of Rubens, leading the crew—then the Superiors of the Order had to ensure that Rubens himself did the designs for each one of them, "*with his own hand.*" More than that: the Fathers inserted another clause into the contract to the effect that Rubens was to "execute with his own hand another painting for one of

the four side altars of the aforesaid church... *or instead of this last painting he shall deliver to the aforesaid Father Superior all the thirty-nine small sketches mentioned above.*" Nothing could offer clearer testimony to the status of Rubens's sketches at the time than these stipulations in what was, after all, not a contract between Rubens and a local art lover, but between Rubens and an ecclesiastical functionary.

And so it would continue. Rubens painted his sketches not only to serve as guides to his studio. He did them to show to his patrons, so that they might have some sense of what they would receive, or to give them the chance to suggest changes, even—in the beginning—to choose between various possibilities for the final composition. They were shown to private patrons, to church authorities, to princes, kings, and queens. Although her advisors may well have taken the more active role in planning the Medici cycle, Marie de Médicis must have seen at least some of the preparatory sketches in oil. Isabella Clara Eugenia, The Archduchess of the Netherlands, took an active interest in the designs for the tapestry series she commissioned to decorate her favourite nunnery in Madrid. Her brother, Philip IV of Spain, would almost certainly have studied most if not all of the beautiful sketches Rubens prepared at the end of his life for Philip's private hunting-lodge near the Escorial, the *Torre de la Parada*. And Charles I of England, probably the greatest art collector of the day, was presented with one of the finest sketches of all, the so-called "Glynde sketch" for the ceiling of the new Banqueting House in Whitehall in London, designed by Inigo Jones. Nothing else could explain the extraordinary beauty, detail, and exceptional golden tonality of this work. Rubens would never produce so complex a sketch again; but the sketches, like the drawings, continued to be sought after, for all the reasons that have been set out in the course of this essay, and because, by the last decade of his life, Rubens had become a household name. Everyone wanted to have something by him, especially works that showed the clear evidence of his hand.

It is true that the drawings were also highly prized, for many of the same reasons as the sketches, and Rubens left a provision in his will that all his drawings be kept together, at least for a time. But it was the

sketches that were sought after most of all. They seemed just as close to the mind of the artist as the most fleeting of the pen drawings, but at the same time they provided a more direct and more colourful link with the final works.

## IX

When prestigious visitors were given a tour of the Medici Cycle in its original location in the Gallery of the Luxembourg Palace in Paris, they were invariably accompanied by the Queen Mother's counsellor, Claude Maugis, the Abbé of St. Ambroise. His task was no easy one, because already by the time the pictures were installed, the Queen's son, the young Louis XIII, was consolidating his power. To have revealed the true purpose of the cycle—the justification of the policies of the Queen Mother—would only have been damaging, since those policies were increasingly recognized as having been contrary to the best interests of the son and his supporters, notably Richelieu. And so the Abbé was obliged to give a false reading of the subjects of the cycle, “by artfully dissimulating their true meaning,” as Rubens himself records on the first visit of the young King to the Gallery. One might have thought that the Abbé wanted to have nothing further to do with the troublesome cycle; and yet we know that he was desperate to have Rubens's preliminary sketches for it. Eventually he was able to obtain a set, quite probably the series of sketches now preserved in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich.

The lesson is a broad and obvious one. While the political and propagandistic purposes of great works such as the Medici cycle may ultimately fail, their artistic value remains. Only a few had the resources to fund such immense productions—and even Marie de Medicis seems to have had some difficulty in issuing payments by their due date, as Rubens himself complained in a number of letters in 1625. But the preparatory sketches had a special value all of their own, and then, like now, offered insight into the mind of the artist and evidence of his incomparable powers of execution. Some might have been fortunate enough to obtain paintings entirely painted by Rubens himself, where

the same seamless conjunction of concept and execution could be seen but for compact brilliance there was nothing to equal the sketches.

A few months before he signed the contract for the Medici cycle, Rubens wrote to the English envoy in Brussels, William Trumbull about a major commission in London. Never one to let a good opportunity slip by, Rubens had just heard of the impending completion of the Banqueting House in Whitehall: "As regards the Hall in the new palace, I confess that I am more inclined to make large works than small curiosities. . . . My talent is such that no undertaking in size, or how varied in subject, has ever exceeded my confidence and courage." Rubens could indeed speak with confidence. He had just finished the ceiling paintings for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, and must have had some idea of his impending commission from the Queen of France. At the same time he was seeking—and then successfully obtained—the most important artistic commission in England, from the King himself. With perfect justification, Rubens could write of his capacity to undertake a project of any size or subject; but the first part of his letter seems just a little too obviously tailored to the situation. His natural instinct may indeed have been more inclined to large works than "small curiosities," but when he painted in small (and this emerges most particularly in the works of his retirement between 1631 and 1640) the effect can be as compelling and as moving as in any of his larger commissions, if not more so. Nothing could take away from the fecundity and originality of his invention, and nothing could diminish the brilliance and vigour of his painting. But if his inventiveness shines through even in the large commissions entrusted to the studio, the evidence of his brushwork is inevitably lacking in such works (except in those places where he added the finishing touches himself). It is for this reason that people like Dudley Carleton were so keen to ensure that the paintings they acquired from Rubens were by his own hand and it is for this reason that the sketches have never lost their appeal. The question is not simply one of authenticity. What matters is that there is no clearer visible evidence of Rubens's genius than the way in which he transformed concept into picture by means of his incomparable mastery of the brush.

Oil Paintings



# Portrait of a Man in Armour, Probably as Mars

OIL ON PANEL

82.6 × 66.1 CENTIMETRES (32½ × 26 INCHES)

PRIVATE COLLECTION

**T**HIS HAUNTING and compelling picture presents an unusual paradox in Rubens's oeuvre, for it stands on the borderline between two very different genres. Is it a portrait or is it a generic representation of a figure from mythology or history? Is this man a contemporary of Rubens garbed in such a way as to suggest strength and virtue, or is it just a picture of Mars or some such ancient hero? Dressed in armour, helmet, and a lion's pelt, the figure certainly suggests the ancient god of war, although the pelt may also bring to mind two other heroes renowned for their valour, Samson and Hercules. The armour, with its cuirass and chain-mail, and the helmet with the plume occur in several of the battling figures in Rubens's *Decius Mus* cycle of 1617–18, especially in the epic scene of the *Death of Decius Mus*. But the figure also brings to mind works such as the *Crowning of the Hero* in Munich, and—above all—a whole series of paintings in which Mars is represented, particularly the famous *Horrors of War* in the Pitti Palace in Florence.

Although the case has sometimes been made that this is no portrait but a generic picture of Mars or another classic hero from the Bible or mythology, there is no question in my mind that the work was intended to show a specific sitter. It is simply too individualized to be otherwise: the features—nose, hair, and the deep-set, keen, but slightly yearning eyes—are much too distinctive to be explained away on the grounds that Rubens was just using a studio model to pose for the picture of an ancient hero. In short, the work falls into the category of the *portrait historié*, in other words, a portrait of a sitter in some kind of

historical costume. Indeed, the costume here seems to be a curious mixture of ancient and comparatively modern, for we know that the helmet worn by the figure was in Rubens's own collection, and that although he himself may have thought it was ancient, it was in fact a North Italian *burgonet* of the 16th century. It may be that Rubens intended his sitter to be seen straightforwardly as a military hero without any more specific classical allusion. As always, however, the borderline between the idea of a hero and his identification with Mars is very slim, just as in the paintings showing subjects such as *The Crowning of the Hero*. The traditional title may therefore remain as an adequate reflection both of the tone of the work and of our present somewhat lacunose state of knowledge about it. No plausible sitter has yet been proposed, and art historical research has thus far confined itself to discussion of sources for the pose and problems of dating.

On the one hand, the closest parallel for the *contraposto* of the figure is offered by a work which Rubens must have admired years earlier at the Palazzo del Te in Mantua, when he worked for his Italian patron, Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua. This was Titian's half-length figure of the Emperor Titus, which formed part of the great Venetian painter's series of Roman Emperors in the Gabinetto dei Cesari in the Palazzo del Tè in Mantua. In fact, the series as a whole continued to influence Rubens for the rest of his life. On the other hand, the pose of a figure turning away from the viewer, holding a weapon in his left hand, and looking over his shoulder at the beholder also occurs in two earlier Netherlandish works which Rubens also knew, namely Lucas van Leyden's engraving of *Mars and Venus*, and Hendrik Goltzius's engraving of a half-length *Mars* of around 1585. As so often, Rubens's recollection of Italian prototypes cannot properly be understood outside the context of his roots in the Northern tradition.

There has been much argument about the dating of the picture. Given the broad contours and fluent brushwork, the light handling of the fur and the brilliant use of multiple, nuanced glazes in the armour and the red sleeve, the possibility of a dating to a period before 1620 must be excluded. The bravura handling of the feather and the way it is allowed to emerge from the plain ground that still shows through it, is hard to imagine much before then. So too is the scintillating treatment of the eyes. In short, every aspect of this work, including the lively treatment of light and shadow on the forearm and the vivid play of light on the forehead and in the delicately handled background, suggests a dating of around 1625.



# Portrait of a Man, Probably Peter van Hecke the Younger

OIL ON PANEL

114.5 × 90.5 CENTIMETRES (45 × 35<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> INCHES)

EDWARD SPEELMAN, LTD.

*and*

# Portrait of a Woman, Probably Clara Fourment

OIL ON PANEL

114.5 × 90.5 CENTIMETRES (45 × 35<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> INCHES)

EDWARD SPEELMAN, LTD.

TOO OVERWHELMED WITH commissions from Church and State, and too absorbed by his own interest in subjects from mythology and antiquity, Rubens did not often accept commissions for pendant half-length portraits of local patrons; and this pair of large paintings surely count amongst his finest in the genre. Upper-class Antwerp patrons had generally to turn to other painters, such as Van Dyck and Cornelis de Vos, if they wanted to commemorate themselves in this way, as many did. The present pair of portraits will remind modern viewers of Van Dyck's memorable paintings of Frans Snyders and his wife Maria now in the Frick Collection, and these pictures by Rubens portraits were once even attributed to Rubens's most outstanding pupil. But there can be no question whatsoever of Rubens's authorship, as all modern scholars are agreed. Here, unusually, but with characteristic flair and sensitivity, Rubens makes his own contribution to this popular form. The sitters are clearly local: the costumes, with their standard collars (elegantly soft for the man, meticulous, stiff, and slightly old-fashioned for the woman) and severe but sumptuous black garments are typical for the rich middle-classes of Antwerp in the second decade of the seventeenth century; but who exactly are they?

Only one pair of identifications has been made, and they are probably—but not certainly—right. The woman looks like a sister of two of the best known

of Rubens's female sitters, namely his own second wife, Helène Fourment, and her elder sister Susanna, both of whom Rubens portrayed on many occasions. Rubens was in constant touch with the Fourment family and had frequent business dealings with their father, the well-known silk and tapestry merchant Daniel Fourment (d. 1643). His son Daniel married Clara Brant, the sister of Rubens's first wife Isabella; and the family ties were thus very close indeed, even before Rubens finally married the sixteen-year old Helène in 1630. On the basis of family resemblance, then, the present female portrait has traditionally been identified as that of the oldest of the Fourment sitters, Clara (1593–1643). In 1612, Clara had married Pieter van Hecke (1591–1645), himself a silk and tapestry merchant, just like his father-in-law. To complete this web of family connections, van Hecke's own sister, Antoinette, married the Fourment girls' brother, Pieter. Much more than any financial motive—and it cannot have been substantial, given the huge sums Rubens was earning for his other works at just this time—Rubens would have been encouraged to do them for personal reasons. Indeed there radiates from both of these sitters a kind of warmth and accessibility—even from the slightly unprepossessing face of van Hecke—that suggests his affectionate feelings towards them. Clara's gentle smile and the frank gaze of her large eyes—exactly those of her two beautiful sisters—leave no doubt about this at all.

There has been much discussion about the date of these pictures. Held and Haverkamp-Begemann both suggested ca. 1620, but this is surely too early, both on stylistic grounds and because the Van Hecke's (assuming that is indeed they who are represented here) look a little older than they would have been at that time. Jaffe's claim that the pictures were painted "not earlier than 1627–8 and possibly about 1630–31" seems much more to the point. A black chalk study for the portrait of van Hecke survives in the British Museum, and it too is clearly to be situated in this period. Furthermore, everything about the handling of the paint in these works suggests a date of no earlier than 1628. It was only after his work on the Medici and Eucharist cycles, and his renewed contact with the great paintings of Titian in Madrid in 1628, that Rubens renounced the firm contours of his earlier portraits and took up the broad manner so characteristic of late Titian. The sparkingly light and swift brushwork of the grey backgrounds, the broad but free handling of the curtains, and the marvellously nuanced landscape, with its scudding boats and rosy glow, are inconceivable before this date. The same applies to the way in which Rubens modulated the apparent severity of the black garments of his sitters with a subtly varied sheen—something that is entirely typical of his best portraits in the last decade of his life. Overall, the general sense of pictorial





liveliness is enhanced by the way in which Rubens allows the ground to show through in passages of transparent paint and glazes, even in the bravura painting of the collars and cuffs. Clara's face bears a distinct resemblance to some of the Madonnas of the early 1630s, and the very appearance of the sitters accords well with a dating between 1628 and 1631, when both would have been in the second half of their thirties, she perhaps around 35, he a couple of years older.

Few artists could have made so much of such an unpromising format and such apparently plain material. It is not only that Rubens extracts the maximum of sensitivity from his sitters; it is also the brilliant contrast of the red curtains and chair with the black costumes they wear, and the marvellous balance of their placement within both within the picture-space and in relation to one another. Van Hecke stands commandingly, holding a hat, as if testing one of the fabrics that must so frequently have passed through his hands; but he does not dominate his wife, who, though seated, conveys every bit of much presence as he does. She wears fine specimens of the lace in which she herself dealt from 1622 onwards, and while his garment is pretty much unmitigated aside from his debonair ruff, hers is enlivened by the row of sparkling buttons, the delicate ostrich feather fan, and the splendid jewelry she wears. Particularly striking are the ruby ring and, the large pearl earring and the pearl necklace. Could these jewels all be an allusion to the "pearls of virtue" of the good wife, and to a famous passage in Proverbs? "Who can find virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall no need of spoil..." Indeed, the whole of this passage seems particularly suited to this couple, for it goes on not only to allude to the ships in the background ("she is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar"), but also quite specifically to their respective callings: "She maketh herself coverings of tapestry... Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant. Strength and honour are clothing, and she shall rejoice in time come. She openeth her mouth in wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness."

Whether or not every viewer would have thought of this most moving of panegyrics to female virtue and domestic happiness (and in seventeenth century Antwerp they most certainly would have), no viewer, present or past, could remain unmoved by the way in which Rubens has brought this otherwise unknown Antwerp couple to life. Dignified and restrained, but immensely vivid at the same time, they have a presence that far transcends the apparently undeclarative mode in which they are painted. Just as with Rembrandt, but very

differently, Rubens could turn what might at first seem unpromising material and unpromising requirements into powerful statements of his art. These are works that do not clamour for attention, and the sitters seem to keep their secrets to themselves; but Rubens's art is such that once we have engaged with their gaze it is hard to leave them, or to overlook the consummate skill with which they were painted.

PROVENANCE

Vicomtesse de Spoelberch, Belgium; [Leon Gauchez, Paris]; Baron Edmond de Rothschild, Paris (before 1890); by descent to Baron Edmond de Rothschild, Geneva; [Colnaghi's, New York].

EXHIBITED

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# The Holy Family with the Infant St. John the Baptist

OIL ON CANVAS

144.7 × 116.9 CENTIMETRES (57 × 46 INCHES)

AGNEW'S, LONDON AND NEW YORK

THIS IS THE MOST important large-scale religious work from the last period of Rubens's career to have emerged in many years. A truncated sketch for the composition survives in a collection in England. Although there was some doubt about the status of the work when it first reappeared in a collection in Brazil, now that it has been cleaned there can be no doubt whatsoever about its authenticity. It shows all the hallmarks of Rubens's own handling of the brush in his final productive decade when he retired with his young wife to the Château de Steen and both worked in that country setting and directed the studio that still remained in the metropolis of Antwerp.

The painting announces the lush natural settings and rich colouristic treatment of Rubens's most personal creations of the closing years of his life. The evocative glow in the sky and the shafts of light that break through the delicately handled trees in the background point forward to the great landscapes of the period, while the lovely *changeants* of the lilac-grey shawl the Virgin wears are more sustained than anything done before his trip to Madrid in 1628–29, when he encountered the late works of Titian for the last time. A number of other elements may also be found in works of Rubens's late period, especially the device of suspending a richly coloured fabric from an overhanging tree, which, while occasionally used earlier, seems especially close even to very late works such as the *Diana and Callisto* and the *Three Graces* in the Prado. Similar drapes are also to be found suspended from the architectural elements in the designs for the Whitehall Ceiling; but its closest parallel is to be found on the reverse of the wings of the



St. Ildefonso altarpiece now in Vienna, painted between 1630 and 1632. Indeed, the whole of the present group of figures, while far from being identical with them, bears a marked resemblance to the equivalent figures on the Ildefonso Altarpiece. And with this we enter into the difficult problem of dating the work.

This arises in a most interesting way. The group of the Holy Family itself seems to be a more compact variation of the equivalent group that is the well-known "Madonna with the Parrot" in the Antwerp Museum, which seems to have been begun around 1618 but was only completed in its present form around 1630. There are also three paintings from Rubens's studio—one in Windsor Castle, one in San Diego, and one (perhaps the best of this group) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art—which show the Holy Family with St. John the Baptist, St. Anne and St. Francis. All vary slightly one from the other; but the central group of the Virgin and Child with St. Joseph and the Infant St. John the Baptist is almost exactly the same as in the present work—with several important variations. In the painting in the Metropolitan Museum, St. Joseph, instead of leaning forward, stands upright and is seen in profile (though X-rays show that he was once painted leaning forward) and the Virgin's left arm is cast back behind her. On the other hand, the Metropolitan painting is the only one of this set to show Christ kicking forward with his left leg, as he does here. But there are at least two elements of the present work that are significantly absent from the other versions (aside from the obvious omission here of the figures of St. Anne and St. Francis). These are the charmingly genresque touch of the cradle and blanket in the lower right corner, and the exposure of so much of the Virgin's breast, including her nipple. The allusion, of course, is to the venerable iconographic type of the *Madonna lactans*, as well, perhaps, to the role in which the Virgin would much later intercede on behalf of Mankind by reminding Christ—by a similar exposure—of the maternal breast which nourished him as a Child. But none of the other versions of this composition were quite as daring in this respect: indeed, one of the many major *pentimenti* in the Metropolitan picture covered the Virgin's breast even further than originally indicated.

To complicate matters even further, the closest parallel both for the exposed breast of the Virgin and for the apple tree and the cloth hanging from it (which, along with the cradle, give the painting something of the character of a *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*) is on the rear of the Ildefonso Altarpiece; and this work, since we know it was painted between 1630 and 1632, at least offers a point of reference for the difficult problem of dating the present *Holy Family*. But when, more exactly, could it have been painted? Was it painted before or after the reverse of

the Ildefonso panels? Even this question, however, is more complicated than it may at first seem.

Despite the many elements in the painting that seem to anticipate Rubens' mature paintings of the 1630s, there are also several aspects that are clearly retrospective. The comparatively firm and robust handling of the contours of the apple tree are much more typical of Rubens's works of the 1620s than of the 1630s, while not only the type of the Madonna but the very cast of her head is characteristic of Rubens's work of the mid-1620s. Indeed, an almost identical figure is to be seen in one of the Maries who look down into the tomb of the Virgin in Rubens's great *Assumption of the Virgin* for the High Altar of Antwerp Cathedral, painted in 1626. The present work, then, is a work which is both more than usually retrospective and prospective. Since Rubens left for Spain and England in August 1628 (having spent much of the previous year travelling to Paris and Holland) and only returned to Antwerp in April 1630, it is inconceivable that it could have been done before that date. He must have received the contract for the Ildefonso altarpiece very shortly afterwards. Since in my opinion the reverse of that altarpiece was painted *after* the present work—the poses of the infant Christ and of the Virgin seem both to be a more fluid, more development of those here—the most likely dating of this work would be around 1630–31. It is a measure of Rubens's extraordinary productivity that he could have painted a work such as this at the same time as preparing so major a piece as the Ildefonso altar. And during the same period he would also have been supervising studio productions—which he probably retouched himself as well—such as the three versions of the *Holy Family with St. Anne and St. Francis*. Indeed, there are many problems relating to the order in which these works were painted, but these need not concern us here (in my view the present picture slightly preceded them all, and whatever seems *retardataire* about any of them may be attributed to the fact of studio production and the intense revision in the early 1630s of common religious themes such as the Holy Family).

There is, however, one further issue that does seem to me to be worth commenting upon, and that is the way in which Rubens appears to have developed the extraordinarily Michelangelesque pose of the Infant Christ. In a painting in the Prado of *The Holy Family with St. Anne* of around 1626–28 (where the Virgin's breast is similarly exposed), Rubens's indebtedness to Michelangelo's great Madonna and Child in Bruges is clearest of all; it is slightly freer in the "Madonna with the Parrot" in Antwerp, and there the position of the arms is changed as well; but then in the two pictures with St. Francis in Windsor and San Diego the disposition of the feet remains exactly the same, once again, as in the Prado picture. In the present

painting and in the version in the Metropolitan this tight pose is freed up even further, as Rubens recalled not so much Michelangelo's Madonna in Bruges, but rather the equally famous Medici Madonna in the New Sacristy in San Lorenzo in Florence. His memory of this work would in turn have been overlaid by a recollection of another image of the Infant Christ, namely that in the Pesaro Altarpiece of 1519–1526 by the other great master he admired, Titian. The final step in the liberation, as it were, of the pose appears in the Ildefonso Altarpiece, where Rubens invests the body of the Child with a torsion that is wholly new.

The present work shares yet another crucial feature with the Ildefonso wings. In the Metropolitan painting (and to a lesser extent in the Windsor and San Diego variants as well), the gaze of the Virgin and Child seem directed nowhere in particular; but in the present *Holy Family* and in the Ildefonso Altarpiece the tender exchange of gazes between the Virgin and Child and the Infant St. John could not be more clearly or more touchingly represented. Aside from anything else, this provides yet further proof of the priority of these two paintings (if not necessarily in terms of chronology then certainly in terms of *eigenhändigkeit*).

A number of *pentimenti* have been revealed by the recent cleaning and X-ray examination of the work. The Virgin's breast, for example, was originally covered, exactly as in the preparatory sketch, while the back of her left hand was more turned toward the spectator, just as in the sketch as well.

In the course of painting this work Rubens also altered the left nose, the forehead, and nose of St. John, the right arm and hair of the Christ Child, the cheek and mouth of the Madonna, as well as the fingers of her right hand. He painted over the right cuff of her chemise and extended Christ's loincloth over the blue robe of the Virgin. As is evident to the naked eye, he added the branches of the tree over the painting of the red cloth. All these changes in the course of the painting of the work provide further evidence not only of Rubens's authorship but also of the special care he seems to have taken with this particular composition, just at the time he was beginning to paint the great St. Ildefonso Altarpiece. We do not know for whom Rubens painted this *Holy Family*, but it offers outstanding testimony to his undiminished skills as a painter, at a time when he might have been expected to embark on a peaceful retirement, but when the market for his works was evidently as solid and as sustained as it had ever been in the course of his long and brilliant career.

## PROVENANCE

General George Wade (1673–1748) and thence by descent to his son; sold May 1765 to Charles Ingram, 9th Viscount Irwin (d. 1778), Temple Newsam, Leeds; his widow Frances Shephard, Viscountess Irwin (1734–1807); her daughter Isabella Anne Ingram Shephard, Marchioness of Hertford (1759–1834); her sister Frances Ingram Shephard, Lady William Gordon (1761–1841); her nephew Hugo Charles Meynell Ingram (1783–1869); his son Hugo Francis Meynell Ingram (1822–1871); his widow Emily Charlotte Wood, the Hon. Mrs. Meynell Ingram (1840–1904); her nephew Edward Lindley Wood, 3rd Viscount and 1st Earl of Halifax (1881–1959); his sale Christie's, 12 December 1947 (117), bt. Agnew's; sold 1948 to Count Mararazzo, Brazil; thence by descent until 1989.

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## Portrait of Vincenzo II Gonzaga

OIL ON CANVAS

52.8 × 39.5 CENTIMETRES (20¾ × 15½ INCHES)

OTTO NAUMANN, LTD., NEW YORK

RUBENS RECEIVED THE second major commission of his career shortly after his arrival in Italy in 1600 (the first was the decoration of the Chapel of St. Helena in the Roman church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme). Having entered the employ of Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga in Mantua, he was soon given the task of preparing the decoration of the *cappella maggiore* of Santissima Trinità, the newly built Jesuit church there. On the huge canvas above the altar Rubens painted Vincenzo Gonzaga and his family kneeling in adoration before the Holy Trinity. On the sides of the altar were equally large canvases showing the *Baptism* and the *Resurrection*. But it is the central canvas showing *The Gonzaga Family Adoring the Holy Trinity* that must concern us here. Vincenzo, his wife, parents, and children were all depicted in a sumptuous outdoor architectural setting beneath a scene of the Trinity, shown on a fictive tapestry stretched out by angels and suspended between giant Solomonic columns. This was the first time Rubens used the device of a tapestry suspended between giant columns to show a religious scene, and he would return to it in his designs for the Eucharist cycle of some twenty years later (see *The Four Evangelists*, pp. 59–62).

The three paintings Rubens did for the chapel remained *in situ* until the occupation of Mantua by the French revolutionary troops in 1797. At this point the *Transfiguration* was sent to France (it is now in the Museum in Nancy), while the *Baptism* (now in Antwerp) was sold two years later. The fate of the central scene was even more unfortunate. It remained in the church—which had by then become a warehouse for salt and cattle feed—until 1801, when the decision was

made to conserve the canvas. At this point the well-preserved heads of four members of the Gonzaga family, as well as that of an attendant halberdier, were cut out. The present head is the largest and perhaps the finest of the three fragments showing Vincenzo's sons, cut from the left hand side of the canvas, that survive. Although it has generally been identified as the eldest son, Francesco, born in 1586, I am inclined to identify the figure as the youngest son, Vincenzo II, born in 1594. Far from looking like the oldest of the Gonzaga sons, this figure looks the youngest of the group; he has the look of a handsome and serious 10 or 11 year old. A further argument in favour of this identification is the fact that beneath the present portrait Rubens originally painted another head, which corresponds quite closely to a drawing in Stockholm, identified on the sheet itself as Francesco Gonzaga. In any event, the boy gazes upward with a look that expresses both his devotion and his modesty in the presence of the Trinity that was once depicted in the sky above him. The other elements in the present work—the hand on a small book on the right, a carved column on the left, a pikeshaft, some armour, and a red garment—all betray its origins as a fragment of a much larger composition.

The freshness and spontaneity of Rubens's brushwork could not be clearer than in this excellently preserved fragment. Indeed, given its eventful history and the sad fate of the canvas from which it was cut, its state of conservation is all the more remarkable. The thick contours and red-prepared ground are altogether typical of Rubens's Italian period, but even at this early stage in his career—and even in this fragment of a much larger work—his mastery of the brush is complete. From the magnificently free and crisp handling of the collar, to the many glazes over the shimmering armour, from the broader handling of the hair, the sleeves, the armour in the background and the sculpted column on the right, to the creamy highlights on the face, and the marvelous touches of paint on the ear, there is nothing that is unassured in this work. Here Rubens emerges for the first time as a fully mature artist. No wonder that from hence on Rubens would be inundated with commissions; and no wonder that when Vincenzo Gonzaga wanted him to make copies of other pictures, or to go to Paris to make hack portraits of the French court, Rubens balked. He knew from the start that he was suited to greater things; and this most confident of painted heads announces his talent with extraordinary aplomb.

PROVENANCE

{45}

Santissima Trinità, Mantua, until July, 1801; Etienne-Marie Siauve (divisional commander of French military police in Mantua) until September, 1801; Private Collection, Bucharest; Private Collection, Zurich; Private Collection, London (1985).

EXHIBITED

Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, and Toledo, Ohio, Toledo Museum of Art, *The Age of Rubens*, 1993, No. 5 (as Francesco IV Gonzaga).

LITERATURE

Michael Jaffe, "Rubens's Gonzaga Altarpiece: Another Portrait Rediscovered", *Apollo*, cxxi, 1985, pp. 379-382; Julius S. Held, *Rubens: Selected Drawings*, 2nd revised edition, Mount Kisco, New York, 1986, pp. 68-69; U. Bazzotti, "Precisazione sulla Pala della Trinità di Mantova," in C. Limentani Viridis and F. Bottacin, eds., *Rubens dall'Italia all'Europa (Atti del convegno internazionale di Studi, Padova, 24-27 maggio, 1990)*, Vicenza, 1992, pp. 40-45; M.E. Wieseman, in [Cat. Exhib.], *The Age of Rubens*, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, and Toledo (Ohio), Toledo Museum of Fine Arts, 1993-94, pp. 222-225.





# The Emperor Charles V (after Titian)

OIL ON CANVAS

93 × 76 CENTIMETRES (36 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 30 INCHES)

PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK

**T**HROUGHOUT HIS LIFE Rubens admired the art of Titian. The inventory of his possessions at his death lists over thirty copies after the great Venetian master, more than of any other. Scholars have made much of the influence of Titian on Rubens's late works in particular. They have long commented on the way in which the brushwork of his *Alterstil* reflects his painterly understanding of the late works by Titian that he saw (some for the second time) on his diplomatic mission to Spain in 1628–29, especially those that were then in the fabulous Royal collections in the Escorial.

But the involvement with Titian began almost from the moment Rubens first set foot in Italy. His nephew records that when Rubens arrived in Italy in 1600, he went straight to Venice, there to study the works of the Venetian masters, Titian and Veronese above all. When he entered the employ of Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua in the same year, he could study the famous Titians in the Mantuan collections at his leisure. And then, in 1603, he was sent to Spain by the Duke, as part of a complicated diplomatic mission (the first of the many such missions that would punctuate Rubens's career) to win the favour of Philip III and of his favourite the Duke of Lerma. Perhaps the first truly great picture by Rubens was the equestrian portrait he painted of the Duke in that very year. It is a magnificent work, showing Lerma in his role as triumphant commander of the Spanish troops, freshly victorious from battle. He sits in resplendent armour on a magnificent white steed with flowing mane and tail, shown not in profile, as was more customary for such pictures, but rather in three-quarter view, stepping

powerfully towards the viewer. In this work, then, Rubens declared his independence from even the greatest of sixteenth century equestrian portraits, Titian's *Charles v at the Battle of Mühlberg*, then in the Escorial.

That Rubens studied Titian's equestrian portrait of Charles v with great care we know from the fact that he copied the head and shoulders of the Hapsburg Emperor on at least one occasion. Such a copy must have served as the basis for the pasted-on head in a preparatory drawing (in the Louvre) for his painting of the Duke of Lerma. Two versions of this copy, engraved later in the century by Theodor van Kessel (ca. 1620–after 1660) survive: one in the Prince's Gate Collection at the Courtauld Institute Galleries in London, and the present example. Müller Hofstede dated the London picture to Rubens's second stay in Madrid, in 1628–29, but most scholars believe it to have been painted in the course of his first visit there. The present copy is larger than that in London, and shows more of the bust, on the left, right, and below. It thus more accurately reflects the version shown in Van Kessel's engraving, as well as in the *Interior of a the Picture Gallery of Antone van Leyen* painted by Gonzales Coques in 1671 (Mauritshuis, The Hague).

A head of Charles v "with a plumed helmet" (*Keyzer Carel de Vijfde met een pluymhelmet op 't hooft*) appears in the Inventory of Paintings drawn up after Rubens's death, although it is there ascribed to Van Dyck. Count Seilern, following Gustav Glück, observed that "it is reasonable to assume a compiler's error that would account for the presence of Van Dyck's name in this context"; but Jeffrey Muller, in his recent book on Rubens as a collector, has maintained that this entry in Rubens's inventory *post mortem* refers to a copy made by Van Dyck after Rubens's own copy after Titian. Whatever the case, the present work stands as an important record of a painting that stimulated Rubens to produce one of the finest equestrian portraits of the seventeenth century.

#### PROVENANCE

Sale, Palais de Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 24 June, 1953, lot 36; private collection, New York.

#### LITERATURE

Gustav Glück, "Bildnisse aus dem Hause Habsburg, III, Kaiser Karl v," *Wiener Jahrbuch*, N.F., XI, 1937, p. 174; [Count Antoine Seilern], *Flemish Paintings and Drawings at 56 Princes Gate, London*, London, 1955, pp. 23–24; Justus Müller Hofstede, "Rubens und Tizian: das Bild Karls v," *Münchener Jahrbuch der Bildenden Kunst*, XVIII, 1967, pp. 72–73; [Count Antoine Seilern], *Corrigenda et Addenda to the Catalogue of Paintings and Drawings at 56 Princes Gate, London*, London, 1971, pp. 21–22; Michael Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy*, London, 1977, pp. 69 and 76; Jeffrey Muller, *Rubens: The Artist as Collector*, Princeton, 1989, pp. 110–111, under no. 79.

Oil Sketches



# The Trophy Raised to Constantine

OIL ON PANEL

37 × 29.4 CENTIMETRES (14<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 11<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> INCHES)

COLLECTION OF SAUL P. STEINBERG

**A**LL RUBENS'S PREPARATORY sketches for the paper cartoons that served as the basis for the twelve tapestries depicting the life of Constantine the Great still survive. They are amongst the finest of his sketches, from a key moment in his career. But who commissioned them, and when? Until Julius Held argued strongly that they must have been commissioned by the tapestry workshop of the Flemings Comans and de la Planche, as a private business project between themselves and Rubens, it was generally thought that the commission came from Louis XIII, the young king of France. After all, he himself came to look at the cartoons a few weeks after Peiresc and the royal counsellors saw them; and then, in 1625, he presented a set of seven of the tapestries themselves to Cardinal Francesco Barberini upon the latter's departure from Paris. Together with six tapestries later commissioned by Barberini and woven in Florence from designs by Pietro da Cortona as a supplement to Rubens's series, they now hang in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Although I am still not entirely convinced that the Constantine project originated as a business arrangement between Rubens and the Comans-de la Planche tapestry shop, Held's dating of the sketches for the cycle is surely correct. Rubens was in Paris at the beginning of 1622, and signed the contract for the Marie de' Medici cycle on 24 February of that year. Immediately he began work on that other great project of his, for the King's mother. Noting that several of the Constantine sketches use motifs for a design for the Medici cycle which was abandoned in May 1622, Held plausibly suggested that Rubens could only have begun

work on the sketches shortly after that date. As Held argued, it is unlikely that he would have used figures already intended to appear in one of the canvases for the Queen's project; and since we know that Peiresc saw some of the cartoons by the end of the year, the date for the execution of at least some of the sketches must fall between June and December of 1622. Stylistically, however, all of the sketches are of a piece, and so we may assign the whole series to this period, perhaps slightly extended into the early months of 1623.

With the exception of the present sketch (and possibly the design for *Triumphant Rome* in the Mauritshuis in The Hague, which was never actually woven into a tapestry), the sketches for the Constantine cycle all show specific episodes in the Life of Constantine. They emphasize the stages in his conversion to Christianity and his victories and achievements as the first Christian emperor. The subject matter, largely taken from the late antique *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius of Caesarea, could hardly have been more suitable for the most Christian King of France—or, for that matter, for the Papal Family of Urban VIII Barberini.

The present sketch, symbolic rather than historical, shows a young Constantine in the garb of a Roman commander, crowned by a winged victory (identified as Rome in the later engraving by Tardieu after this composition). He stands before a massive display of ancient trophies. Beneath this splendid array, and at the feet of Constantine and the Winged Victory are two bound prisoners, a favourite motif of Rubens, one a younger man, and the other an older, bearded figure, reclining like one of the ancient river gods Rubens so loved to depict. Behind him lie two shields, symbols of the vanquished enemy. Attentive as always to the trappings of antiquity, Rubens has depicted the Emperor's garb and the trophies with accuracy and precision. Constantine, for example, wears a jeweled diadem on his head, alluding to the fact that he was the first Emperor to wear a crown rather than a laurel wreath. This detail Rubens would have discovered in the relevant passages on Constantine in another work he knew and certainly consulted when painting this series: namely the great work, in many volumes, on the history of the Church known as the *Annales Ecclesiastici* by the famous Cardinal Baronio, and published in Antwerp by the Plantin Press between 1597 and 1601 and by H. Aertsens in 1617.

From Baronio too Rubens would have had the idea for one of the more macabre features of the dazzling collection of trophies, namely the head of Maxentius, the co-Emperor whom Constantine defeated at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. Along with the defeat of the Eastern co-emperor Licinius, the Battle of Milvian Bridge represented a specific triumph of Christianity over Roman Paganism. The present sketch, on the other hand, emphasizes the symbolic triumph of

Constantine over his enemies. In addition to the severed head of Maxentius (suppressed in the tapestry itself, presumably because it was a little too macabre), the trophies consist of a set of armour dominated by a fierce-looking helmet in the very center, and a grand and carefully disposed assortment of spears, axes, pikes, and banners. One standard on the left contains the imperial eagle enclosed in a wreath, another has an open hand encircled by a different wreath. Between Constantine and the winged Victory are two shields, one round, on the right, the other oblong and more fancily shaped on the left, as well as a quiver full of arrows and a robust battering-ram in the shape, just as it should be, of a ram's hand. Rubens, of course, was no stranger to the depiction of classical arms and standards, but there are few assemblages that are presented with such magnificent compactness as here. Although the sketch has suffered from abrasion in several places, the original delicacy of handling may be discerned, above all, in the drapery of the Winged Victory and in the pennants and standards both on the left and right. Typically, Rubens varied the degree of modelling within a single sketch to a considerable extent, and in this work the contrast between a light ground prepared with broad strokes of a grey wash-like paint and more heavily modelled areas—such as Constantine's armour and mantle—emerges with particularly striking effect.

## PROVENANCE

Marc de Comans (1563–after 1643); Hippolyte de Comans; Henri de Valois; Philippe, Duc d'Orleans, before 1723; Philippe Egalité, Duc d'Orleans; Thomas Moore Slate and Associates, London, 1792; Stanley sale, London, 1823 (bought in); Henry Brooksbank; Earl of Lincoln sale, London (Christie's), June 4, 1937, lot 90; H.E.M. Benn, Ilkley, Haslemere and Bognor Regis; Colnaghi, London, until 1982.

## COPIES

Nicolas Henri Tardieu, engraving (v.s., p. 219, 18, 8); Cathelin, engraving; Moncornet, engraving.

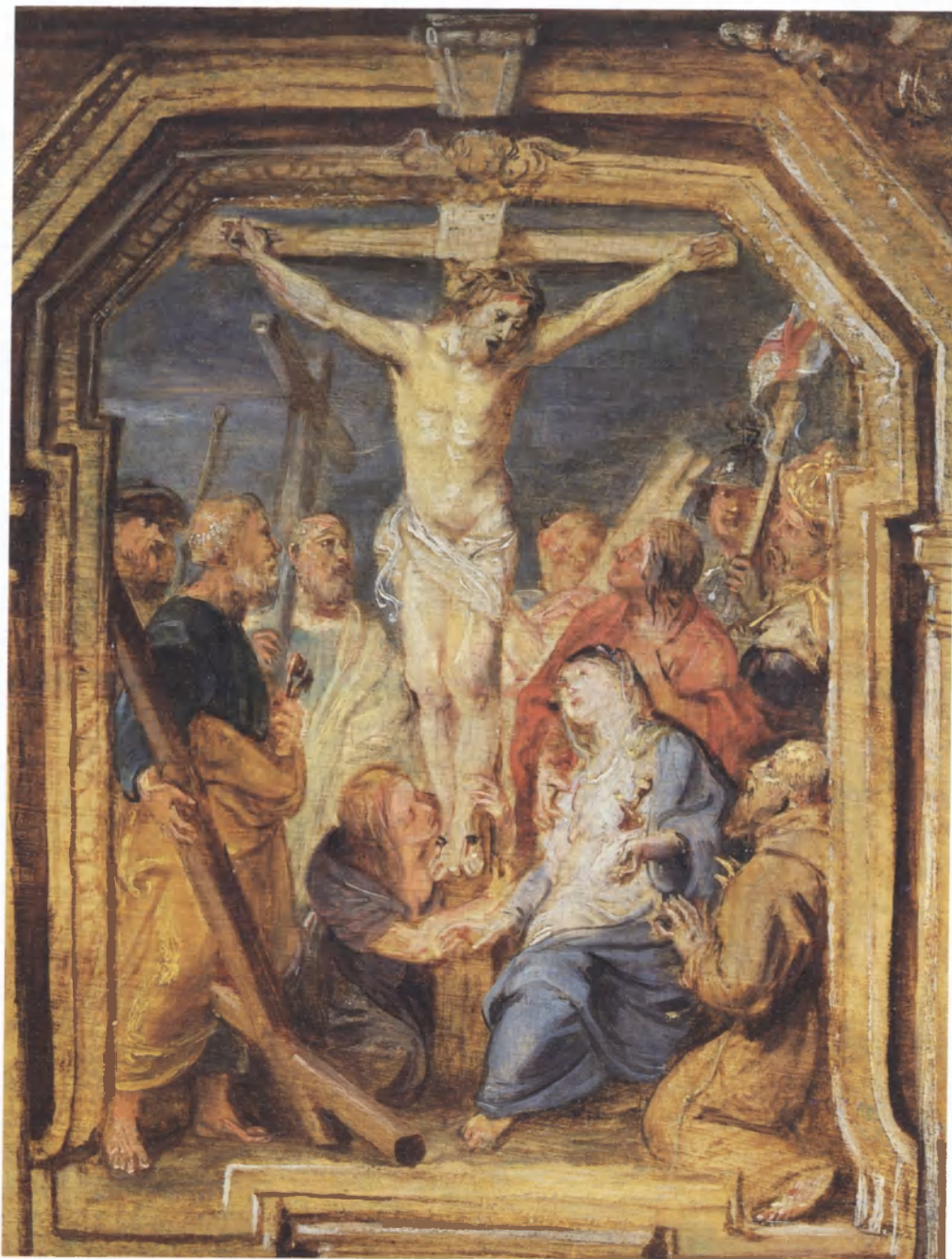
## EXHIBITED

British Gallery, 1828; King's Lynn, 1960, no. 13; London (Agnew's), 1961, no. 20.

## LITERATURE

William Buchanan, *Memoirs of Painting*, London, 1824, 1, p. 169; *Smith, Catalogue Raisonné*, II, no. 738; *Rooses*, III, p. 214, no. 725; *Puyvelde, Sketches*, p. 30, no. 30; Julius S. Held, *Rubens Drawings*, London, 1959, p. 117, under no. 52; David Dubon, *Tapestries from the Samuel H. Kress Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The History of Constantine the Great designed by Peter Paul Rubens and Pietro da Cortona*, London, 1964, pp. 86–87; John Coolidge, "Louis XIII and Rubens. The Story of the Constantine Tapestries," *Gazette des beaux-arts*, LXV, 1966, pp. 277–78; *Held, Oil Sketches*, pp. 76–77, no. 44.





## Crucifixion with Saints

OIL ON PANEL

20.3 × 15.3 CENTIMETRES (8 × 6 INCHES)

PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK

RARELY DID RUBENS compress so much into so small a space as in this sketch. Despite its tiny scale, it gives an extraordinary impression of monumentality. Enclosing the scene of the crucifixion is a grand fictive architectural frame (only revealed after cleaning in 1984), while the group of saints around the cross is disposed in such a way as to convey a sense of space within a picture that one would otherwise have hardly thought capable of containing so much. Supported by St. John the Evangelist, who exchanges a last poignant glance with Christ, the Virgin swoons beneath her expiring Son. The red of St. John's cloak is clearly an allusion to the Passion of Christ, while the Virgin's heart is pierced by a sword, referring to the iconography of the Sorrows of the Virgin. As in his most famous representation of *The Descent from the Cross* which Rubens painted in 1611–14 for the Chapel of the Harquebusiers' Guild in Antwerp Cathedral, Mary Magdalene embraces Christ feet, as if to recall to the viewer's mind the moving episode in which she washed Christ's feet at the Feast in the House of Simon the Pharisee. "She hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head," He said on that occasion; and so she would do again. In the foreground on the left stands St. Peter, not only with his usual attributes of the keys, but holding onto the inverted Cross on which he himself was martyred. Behind him on the extreme left stands another apostle, probably St. James Major with his pilgrim's staff and hat, but possibly St. Roch, patron saint of victims of the plague, whom he healed through the sign of the Cross. Then comes St. Philip with the cross on which he too was crucified.

Behind Christ and St. John the Evangelist stands St. Andrew with his X-shaped cross; while on the right are St. George in armour with his typical banner of a red cross on a white crown, and a crowned male figure who may be King David, but whose identification is not certain. Nevertheless, the fact that Psalm 22 refers to the wicked who “pierced my hands and feet”—a passage used in the Good Friday liturgy—is sufficient justification for his presence here. Finally, kneeling in the foreground is the figure of St. Francis, whose stigmata, echoing the wounds of Christ himself, are indicated by the prominent wound on his left hand.

But what could this most delicately handled of sketches have been intended for? It is enclosed by an illusionistic architectural frame, which gives even the casual beholder additional insight into Rubens’s exceptional talents as an inventor of architectural motifs. As in several other of his inventions of this kind, such as the noble sketch for a *Glorification of the Eucharist* in the Metropolitan Museum, Rubens here offers two possibilities for framing the image: a more elongated frame on the left than on the right, two different possibilities for the lower corners, different capitals on the outer frame, carved mouldings—possibly in black—on the left inner frame, plainer mouldings, possibly gilded, on the right, with the addition of a *putto* in the upper corner. Could this have been a preparatory sketch for a large altarpiece? Unlikely, since the frame would have seemed too massive and ponderous, at least in comparison with the other framing devices on the other large altarpieces Rubens designed. Could it have been—to go to the other end of the scale—a design for a book illustration or title page? Also unlikely: the sketch is so fully finished and with such clear indications of colour that one must assume that it would have been made for a fully coloured work. A tapestry? Improbable: the firm and solid architectonic element would have been difficult to reconcile with the requirements of a tapestry design. Even the major architectural elements in the cycle of Eucharist tapestries (see *The Four Evangelists*, pp. 59–62) had a kind of fantasy about them, one might almost say innate mobility, that is unimaginable as carved wood or stone, as the present frame almost certainly would have been in the final product. The most likely possibility seems to be that this sketch was intended as the design for a smallish altarpiece or devotional panel, probably in an institutional setting. It could perhaps have been for a small epitaph painting or funerary monument, as has sometimes been suggested, or a work intended for a Confraternity such as one devoted to the Holy Cross. Certainly there is enough in this work to suggest a link with some such devotion. Almost everything in it seems to stress the relationship between the saints represented and the Cross. Everywhere one looks there are parallels

between the Cross on which Christ was crucified and one or the other attribute of each of the saints. It would have been quite sufficient for St. Peter to be identified by the colours of his garments and the traditional keys which he carries; yet the cross of his martyrdom is one of the most prominent elements within the work. St. Philip is not often represented with so large a cross, and even the banner of St. George with its blood-red cross is raised to an emphatic height. In the case of the Virgin, St. Francis, and King David, the association with the wounds of Christ is clear, while even the wood of St. James's (or St. Rocco's) staff serves to remind the view of the holy wood of Christ's own Cross. It is perhaps worth recording here that these are precisely the kinds of associations that were expanded at sometimes exaggerated length and often tedious detail in a number of treatises on Christ's cross, such as his friend Justus Lipsius's *De Cruce* or Benedict van Haeften's *Regia Via Crucis*, whose title page Rubens himself designed.

Whatever the motivation for these iconographic elements, however, there can be no question of the brilliance with which Rubens used them to give a remarkable sense of depth to what could so easily have been an almost airless composition. Space is expanded in a variety of ingenious ways. The forward edge of St. Peter's cross—already held in such a manner as to suggest outward pressure on the frame—projects right out into the beholder's space, while the crosses of St. Philip and St. Andrew, emphasized by the staff on the left and the banner on the right, project far back into the space beyond. The saints seem to be arranged in a circle round the cross, rather than aligned parallel with the picture plane, while St. Francis, tucked, as it were, into the right hand corner, serves to open up this group even further. It is hard to imagine a more effective solution to the problem of maximizing space within a limited compass, and here Rubens offers one of the most accomplished models in all of his art.

Various dates have been proposed for this sketch. Relating it the sketches for the Eucharist cycle (see *Allegory of Hope*, pp. 63–66), Jaffé suggested ca. 1626–28. Held, on the other hand, placed it closer to the many compositions showing the Crucifixion or related subjects of the second decade, notably the sketch for a large *Descent from the Cross* in Ill, where the Magdalene clutches the foot of the Cross in a similar fashion. My own view is that the work is to be placed at the end of the second decade, perhaps just after the completion of the sketches for the Ceiling paintings of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, and around the time Rubens was engaged in two important works for the Church of the Recollects in Antwerp: the famous painting of around 1620 known as the "*Coup de Lance*" (now in the Museum in Antwerp), which also shows the crucified Christ, and the *Last*

*Communion of St. Francis* of 1618–19. These were years in which Rubens was particularly involved with the Franciscan order, and it may indeed be the case that the commission for the present work is to be sought in such a context.

## PROVENANCE

"Property of a Lady" (Christie's, London, December 2, 1977, no. 21); Private Collection, Madrid (in 1977–78); [Joseph Guttmann, Los Angeles]; Private Collection, New York.

## EXHIBITED

*Pedro Pablo Rubens (1577–1640)*, *Exposicion Homenaje*, Madrid, Palacio de Velazquez, 1977–78, no. 84; New York, Schmidt Bingham Gallery; Memphis, The Dixon Gallery and Gardens; and Knoxville, *L'Alta Fantasia: Saints, Angels, and Other Heavenly Creations*, The Knoxville Museum of Art, 1990–91.

## LITERATURE

Michael Jaffe, "Exhibitions of the Rubens Year—III," *Burlington Magazine*, CXX (1978), p. 346 (no. 84), claiming that "cleaning has confirmed" a dating ca. 1627–28; Julius Held, "New oil sketches by Peter Paul Rubens," *Burlington Magazine*, CXXIX (1987), pp. 581–83, figs. 15, 16.

# The Four Evangelists

OIL ON PANEL

63.8 × 68 CENTIMETERS (25 × 26¾ INCHES)

THE SUDELEY CASTLE TRUSTEES

IT WAS PROBABLY in 1625 that the Archduchess Isabella Clara Eugenia, Regent of the Netherlands, commissioned Rubens to provide the designs for a series of tapestries showing the *Triumph of the Eucharist*. After the death of her husband the Archduke Albert in 1621, Isabella became a member of the Order of the Poor Clares, and it was for their convent in Madrid, the Descalzas Reales, that the tapestries were destined. Although there is good reason to believe that Rubens must have begun working on his designs between August 1625 and February 1626 (when he resided in Brussels quite close to the manufactory that would produce the tapestries), the first clear date we have for their completion is July 19, 1628, when two wagons full of tapestries and other works of art were sent to Spain. For his efforts Rubens was paid the very large sum of 30,000 florins; but the tapestries themselves were valued at 100,000 florins—a clear indication of the high valuation placed on tapestries in those days.

A complete suite of eleven tapestries still hangs in the sumptuous convent of the Descalzas Reales in Madrid, but their original location within the complex of Church and monastic buildings remains a mystery. In designing the tapestries, Rubens proceeded with unusual care and deliberation. First he made a series of small, almost monochromatic sketches, or *bozzetti*, with the designs orientated in the same direction as the final tapestries. Then he prepared a set of much larger and more fully coloured *modelli*, intended to serve as the basis for the cartoons used to weave the tapestries themselves. The *modelli*, therefore, were orientated in the opposite direction (because the tapestries were woven from the back).



Almost every one of the sketches is a complex baroque allegory relating to the subject of the Eucharist. Not all their iconographic details are clear. Subjects such as *The Triumph of the Eucharist over Pagan Sacrifices*, the *Victory of Eucharistic Truth over Heresy*, the *Triumph of the Church over Ignorance and Blindness*, and a number of other elaborate compositions could only have been designed by someone with a profound knowledge of both Christian and antique symbolism. Only the Sudeley *modello* (and its related *bozzetto* in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge) presents almost no iconographic difficulty. It shows the Four Evangelists: first St. Luke (appropriately enough the patron saint of painters) accompanied by his ox, followed by St. Mark with his lion beside him. St. Mark turns to look back at the angel of St. Matthew who follows him, while at the end of this compact group comes St. John, holding up his chalice and snake.

It is hard to imagine a more forceful representation of this most traditional of almost all Christian companies. Often the Evangelists are shown as more or less static groups; but not here. Rubens has invested them with an extraordinary sense of

movement and power. The abundant garments of the Evangelists, with their sumptuous and generous folds, billow in such a way as to emphasize both the forward movement of the group and their grand volume. This sense of powerful but compact movement is enhanced by the magnificent portrayal of the lion, stalking vigorously beside St. Mark, but moving into the composition towards the solid ox. Everything is about movement here, both projected and recessed, giving this particular sketch a sense of depth and of controlled mobility. The role of the Evangelists as the original disseminators of the Word of the Lord is emphasized by the prominent role of the books in the very centre of the composition, one tucked under the arm of St. Mark, and the other held loosely open by St. Matthew. With one hand the angel above St. Matthew points to his book; with the other he gestures upward, to the source of inspiration of the Divine Word. Every one of the Evangelists, with the exception of St. John, turns to look at the radiant messenger of that Word.

Along with its swift brilliance of technique, this sketch shows Rubens at the height of his pictorial and inventive powers. Even the twisting Solomonic columns from which the fictive tapestry is suspended adds to the vigour, strength, and sense of movement pervading the composition. Indeed, throughout this series of designs Rubens put his knowledge of architecture to extraordinarily effective use. Each one has an elaborate architectural structure, with columns to each side, an elaborately detailed architrave and cornice above, and robustly carved detail below. The plainer columns, whether of the Doric or Tuscan orders (for Rubens knew better than almost anyone of his time how to vary the traditional rules of architecture), were used to frame the scenes on the lower register of tapestries; the twisted Solomonic ones for those on the upper register.

But there is more. Adapting a device he had used in his Mantuan altarpiece of over twenty years earlier, Rubens painted his scenes as if represented on fictive tapestries suspended between columns and held up by *putti*. The final effect, of course, was even more astonishing than in that early work, for here the spectator would have been treated to a twofold illusion: a real tapestry, suspended from real architecture, showing a vibrantly unfurled tapestry that was itself a fiction suspended from illusionistic architecture. And emphasizing the fiction in each case was a piece of illusionistic carving at the base, where the tapestry was painted as if curling over it in giant folds, just as a real tapestry would. In the Sudeley *modello* this carving is a large scallop, with a dolphin on the left and a cornucopia on the right. This is perhaps the only iconographic detail in the work that is not immediately apparent, though when we look at Bolswert's more or less contemporary print after this design, its meaning could hardly be more obvious: the Word of the



Lord will be spread by the Evangelists over both Land (the cornucopia with the fruits of the Earth) and Sea (the dolphin), or, as the inscription on the print puts it, "Both land and sea proclaim the truth of God's word."

## PROVENANCE

Perhaps one of the works belonging to Don Gaspar Mendez, Marques de Carpio y Heliche, viceroy of Naples (1629–1687); purchased from his estate between 1689 and 1691 by Charles II of Spain; a painting with this subject saved from the fire of the Madrid Palace in 1734, and brought to the house of the Marques de Bedmar, Inv. No. 1097; in the Buen Retiro Palace in 1748 (Inv. No. 1097) and 1794 (Inv. No. 56); Royal Palace, Madrid, 1772; brought to England by G.A. Qallis on behalf of William Buchanan; Alexis de la Hante, sale, London (Phillips), 2–3 June, 1814, lot 67; purchased by Pinnell; Edward Gray, London; after his death in 1838 sold privately with other pictures of his collection to William Buchanan; sold by Buchanan in 1840 to James Morrison, London; Charles Morrison, 1900; Archibald Morrison, Basildon Park, 1914; the Morrison Trust.

## COPIES

(1) Oil on panel, 86 × 91, Madrid, Prado, No. 1702 (K.d.K., p. 298); (2) Oil on panel, 86 × 91, Madrid, Prado, No. 1709; (3) Engraving by Schelte a Bolswert, published by N. Lauwers (V.S., p. 62, No. 461; Rooses I, pl. 18); further painted and engraved copies listed in *De Poorter*, I, p. 358.

## EXHIBITED

*Exhibition of Pictures by Masters of the Flemish and British Schools, Including a Selection from the Works of Sir Peter Paul Rubens*, London, The New Gallery, 1899–1900, No. 123; *Third National Loan Exhibition. Pictures from the Basildon Park and Fonthill Collections*, London, Grosvenor Gallery, 1914–1915, No. 16.

## LITERATURE

W. Buchanan, *Memoirs of Painting, with a Chronological History of the Emportation of Pictures by the Great Masters into England since the French Revolution*, London, 1824, II, p. 248; *Smith, Catalogue Raisonne*, II, p. 141, No. 505; IX, p. 297, No. 192 (wrongly as "Triumph of the Christian Faith over Idolatry and Paganism"); *Waagen, Treasures*, II, p. 261; IV, pp. 109–110; Rooses, I, p. 67, No. 50 bis; E. Dillon, *Rubens*, London, 1909, p. 234; "Old Masters at the Grosvenor Gallery," *The Connoisseur*, XLI, 1915, p. 50; "Mitteilungen aus ausländischen Kunszeitschriften," *Kunstchronik*, N.F., XXVI, 1914–15, No. 33, col. 423; *Van Puyvelde, Esquisses*, p. 31, No. 10; *Van Puyvelde, Sketches*, p. 33, No. 10; E. Tormo, "La Apoteosis Eucarística de Rubens: Los tapices de las Descalzas Reales de Madrid," *Archivo Español de Arte*, xv, 1942, p. 130; El Marqués de Saltillo, "Artistas madrilenos (1592–1850)," *Boletín de la Sociedad española de excursiones*, LVII, 1953, pp. 234–5; V.H. Elbern, "Die Rubensteppiche des Kölner Domes, Ihre Geschichte und ihre Stellung im Zyklus "Triumph der Eucharistie", " *Kölner Domblatt*, 10, 1955, p. 79; Michael Jaffe, "Rediscovered Oil Sketches by Rubens, II," *The Burlington Magazine*, CXI, 1969, pp. 537–538, No. 72; C. Scribner III, 1975, "Sacred Architecture: Rubens's Eucharist Tapestries," *Art Bulletin*, LVII, 1975, p. 524; *Held, Oil Sketches*, p. 157, No. 108; *De Poorter*, I, pp. 357–360, No. 14b.

# Allegory of Hope

OIL ON PANEL

16 × 19 CENTIMETRES (6¼ × 7½ INCHES)

RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO., NEW YORK

IN PREPARING BOTH his sketches and his paintings on panel, Rubens characteristically began with a brown ground lightly washed with grey. Very often he allowed this delicate treatment of the ground to show through the composition; and in no other sketch in the present exhibition does it do so more effectively than here. It serves to enliven the sea and the sky, the billowing sail, and the whole of the fictive tapestry suspended between the columns. It emerges through the painting of the boat and the stormy sea, and, by contrast, makes the brilliant touches of highlighting in gold, yellow, and white seem even more sparkling and emphatic than usual. The sketch is one of Rubens's smallest, and the paint is handled with incomparable lightness and delicacy. The little *putto* that hangs with sprite-like weightlessness from the sail is indicated with the very lightest of touches of white, yellow, and pink, while the base of the architectural frame is animated by only a few quick strokes of the brush, in order to suggest something of the ornament that one must suppose would have adorned it in the final composition. Rubens was also an expert at architectural design, and one of the most remarkable aspects of this sketch is the way in which he has given the impression of a monumental structure even with so small a compass. The architectural frame is deliberately asymmetrical: on the left it is terminated by one column; on the right, however, Rubens adds not only another column, he even continues the precisely moulded entablature round the corner, to give a sense of massive solidity and depth. Above the two columns he adds an equally well-detailed cartouche, and the whole structure—originally outlined by firm black strokes in chalk, as can be seen below and to the left—is rendered all the more vivid by the indications both of architectural ornament and of scintillating highlights in golden and white paint. The exquisite refinement of which Rubens was capable



both in terms of the handling of the brush and of colouristic treatment here reaches great heights. Its closest parallels are to be found in the *bozzetti*, preserved in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and the Musée Bonnat in Bayonne, for the cycle of Eucharist tapestries commissioned in 1625–1626 by the Archduchess Isabella for the Convent of the Descalzas Reales (Discalced Carmelite Nuns) in Madrid (see *The Four Evangelists*, pp. 59–62).

From an iconographic point of view the sketch presents a number of unresolved problems. It shows a boat propelled by a favorable wind and by four female figures (angels?) who row it along. Two *putti* clamber in the rigging, a slightly older one—perhaps it is an angel—rushes towards the mast, and a winged female figure, clothed in white with a golden nimbus round her head, stands at the tiller. Beneath the oars are oval shields, which were probably intended to carry emblematic designs, in the manner of the very similar composition of the *Majority of Louis XIII* in the Medici Cycle. All the female figures are winged; the figure at the tiller holds a flowering branch in her left hand. At the head of the boat is a large lantern. But what does all this mean?

It has generally been suggested that the standing figure represents Hope. Although winged female figures can also represent Fortune, Time, Victory, Peace, and Memory, the association of Hope with a ship and with a flowering branch—in this case almost certainly a lily—was a long one. The boat, of course, may also represent the Ship of State, or the Ship of the Church, and it is this latter identification that is reinforced by the gleamingly-painted lantern on the prow of the boat. The lantern is obviously not realistic, for in the seventeenth century lanterns were generally placed at the stern of the boat; here the lantern clearly alludes to the monstrance of the Eucharist (which it resembles) and to the line in John 8:12 “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life”. The lantern thus symbolizes the light of Christ and at the same time suggests the monstrance that contains the Host of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

All these identifications are underscored by another crucial feature of the sketch, namely the way in which the scene is shown as a tapestry hung asymmetrically between a set of beautifully rusticated Tuscan columns. Now this manner of showing scenes with Eucharistic relevance as fictive tapestries hung from an architectural frame is characteristic of the whole cycle of oil sketches done by Rubens in 1625–6 as preliminary designs for the Eucharist tapestry series. It is clear that the present sketch or *bozzetto* formed part of this series, even though no tapestry is known to have been woven from it. Scholars have convincingly suggested that while this design may originally have been intended as part of a group of tapestries representing Faith, Hope, and Charity, or possibly of the Triumphs of the Church, Faith, and Divine Love, the decision was taken to drop it for another theme of more directly Eucharistic significance. It was probably replaced by the design for the classic Old Testament prefiguration of the Eucharist, the *Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek*, where Abraham’s offering of bread and wine to King Melchizedek had long been taken to refer forward to the central ceremony of the Mass.

But several problems still remain. One must suppose that the oval shields on the side of the boat were intended to carry designs, just as they did for the sketch showing the *Majority of Louis XIII* in the Medici Cycle. There they show emblems of Fortitude, Religion, Justice, and Friendship; but here no clues are given as to what they were supposed to represent. Then there is the question of why the rowers face the prow of the ship, rather than its stern. Was it just because Rubens was “not entirely familiar with the manner in which a boat must be propelled

by oars," as Held suggested? This seems unlikely. And why, as Held also asked, does Hope seem to look backward, when, as we all know, Hope always looks forward? Still, she guides the tiller, and firmly holds the flowering branch forward. And her winsome gaze, one could argue, seems less to suggest a lingering on the past as a sense of leaving it reflectively behind, and moving on. This may be to read too much into the expression of the figure; but with Rubens we may be sure of one thing: his inventions were never idle; they always had their reasons; and if we cannot discover them now, it is only because we have not yet fully reclaimed the context in which they would once have been clear.

## PROVENANCE

Victor Wolfvoet, Antwerp, Inventory of 24–26 October, 1652: "Een schetsken van Rubens daer engelkens in een schipken varen, op paneel, in ebben lystken" ("A small sketch by Rubens in which small angels travel on a boat, on panel, in ebony frame"); Samuel Woodburn; Rev. Thomas Kerrich (d. 1828), purchased from Woodburn, September 29, 1825; Rev. R.E. Kerrich (by inheritance); Albert Hartshorne (grandson of Rev. Thomas Kerrich); bequeathed by Hartshorne to his cousin, Mrs. Wyatt; by bequest to Oliver E.P. Wyatt, sale, London (Sotheby's), April 19, 1967, lot 13; purchased by Weitzner; David Koetser, Zurich; Brod Gallery, London; Dr. A.B. Ashby, London; Dr. Michael Ashby, FRCP, London, sale, London (Sotheby's), December 11, 1974, lot 29.

## EXHIBITED

*P.P. Rubens, 1577–1640*, Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, 1977, No. 75.

## LITERATURE

Jan Denucé, *De Antwerpsche "Konstkamers", Inventarissen van kunstverzamelingen te Antwerpen in de 16e en 17e eeuwen*, Antwerp, 1932, p. 150; Julius S. Held, "Rubens' 'Triumph of the Eucharist' and the Modello in Louisville", *J.B. Speed Art Museum Bulletin*, xxvi, No. 3, 1968, pp. 13, 21; Justus Müller Hofstede, "Neue Ölskizzen von Rubens", *Städel-Jahrbuch*, II, 1969, pp. 202–5; Jacques Thuillier and Jacques Foucart, *Rubens, La Galerie Medicis au Palais de Luxembourg*, Milan-Paris, 1969, p. 90; Charles S. Scribner III, "Sacred Architecture: Rubens' Eucharist Tapestries", *Art Bulletin*, LVII, 1975, pp. 524–525; Nora de Poorter, *The Eucharist Series (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, II)*, Brussels, 1978, No. 21, Pl. 220; Held, *Oil Sketches*, no. 119.

# Clytie Grieving

OIL ON PANEL

14 × 13.3 CENTIMETRES (5½ × 5¼ INCHES)

P. & D. COLNAGHI & CO. LTD., LONDON AND NEW YORK

THIS LITTLE WORK of 1636 is Rubens's sketch for one of the smaller canvases (about one metre square) that were sent from his studio to decorate Philip IV's hunting lodge, the Torre de la Parada, outside Madrid. A number of these pictures by Antwerp artists are now in the Prado, but the final version of *Clytie* is lost. The great majority of the sixty-one or sixty-two compositions that Rubens designed for the Torre represent subjects taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Rubens's profound knowledge of classical literature, not least Ovid, led him in many of the Torre pictures to revise, adapt, and change a host of previous pictorial formulations in favour of fresh interpretations of the text. In numerous examples, including this one, Rubens's long experience in rendering human emotions also resulted in unprecedented images. Indeed, the subject of the present sketch remained unidentified (it had previously been called an *Ariadne Abandoned by Theseus* or even a *Repentant Magdalen!*) until Alpers recognized that Rubens here illustrated one of Ovid's most poignant tales.

As Ovid tells in the fourth book of the *Metamorphoses*, Clytie, the daughter of King Orchamus of Babylon, was loved by Apollo. But then he turned his affections to her sister Leucothoe. In a fit of jealousy, Clytie denounced her to their father, who ordered Leucothoe to be buried alive. Apollo transformed her into a shrub of frankincense. Still unable to rekindle Apollo's ardour, Clytie went mad, and sat for nine days out in the open, following the sun with her gaze. She became rooted to the spot and changed into a sunflower, or heliotrope ("turned to the sun").



The sad figure of Clytie puts one in mind of a whole range of grieving or mournful female figures painted by Rubens. One thinks in particular of the pensive young woman in the sketch for *Occasio* (or *Opportunity*) in Liechtenstein (Held, *Oil Sketches*, no. 261), of the unforgettable grieving nymph in *The Victims of War* also in Liechtenstein (Held, *Oil Sketches*, no. 270), and of the crouching figure of melancholy at the right of the sketch for the *Meeting of King Ferdinand of Hungary and the Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand at Nördlingen* in a private collection in New York (Held, *Oil Sketches*, no. 147). These are figures that must surely count amongst Rubens's most poignant inventions, and Clytie, gazing wistfully but in vain at her radiant beloved expresses the same kind of profound inward sentiment as do her sisters in this group.

Although most of the oil sketches for the Torre project are now in northern European museums (those in Bayonne, Brussels, and Rotterdam each have several examples), almost all of the series went to Spain at an early date. Forty-six oil sketches by Rubens with mythological subjects were in the Duke of Infantado's collection in 1800. The 1620 contract for Rubens's ceiling paintings in the Jesuit Church of Antwerp stipulated that he either turn over the thirty-nine oil sketches or supply (as he did) an extra altarpiece. Could it be that Philip IV himself expressed a similar interest in the Torre sketches?

#### PROVENANCE

Possibly the Duke of Infantado, Madrid (in 1800); possibly by descent to the 13th Duke of Infantado (in 1841); Michel van Gelder, Uccle (by 1910; sale 1930); A. Neuerburg, Hamburg (in 1930); [Knoedler and Co., New York]; William Suhr, Mount Kisco, New York (from 1952).

#### EXHIBITED

*Exposition d'art ancien: l'art belge du XVIIe siècle*, Brussels, Musée du Cinquantième, 1910, no. 373, as *Penitent Magdalen*.

#### LITERATURE

Paul Fierens-Gevaert, ed., *Tresor de l'art belge au XVIIe siècle*, vol. 1, Brussels and Paris, 1912, p. 92, Pl. 39; Michael Jaffe, "Esquisses inédites de Rubens pour La Torre de la Parada," *La Revue du Louvre*, XVI (1964), pp. 320, 322, fig. 13, as *Ariadne Abandoned*; Svetlana Alpers, *The Decoration of the Torre de la Parada (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, Part IX)*, London and New York, 1971, no. 11 a, fig. 84; *Held, Oil Sketches*, no. 178, Pl. 187.





# Allegory of Justice

OIL ON PANEL

65 × 44.5 CENTIMETRES (25<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> INCHES)

DAVID CARRITT LTD. (ARTEMIS), LONDON

**A**T FIRST SIGHT the subject of this evocative sketch seems straightforward enough. With her raised sword and pair of balances, the standing female figure looks like a typical personification of Justice. As so often with Rubens, however, things are not always quite as obvious as they seem. While the jewelled diadem she wears may just be explicable in terms of the traditional iconography of Justice, how is one to account for the sheep, the serpent, and the animal that bounds away to the right?

For iconographic puzzles of this kind the usual approach is to turn to one of the seventeenth-century handbooks which Rubens himself would have known, especially the *Iconologia* by Cesare Ripa, first published in an illustrated edition in 1603, and much reprinted thereafter. A partial solution is offered by Ripa's description of *Giustizia Retta* or "Right Justice": "A Woman with a sword held high and a pair of balances, crowned with a regal diadem. On one side a serpent, signifying hatred, and another side a dog, meaning friendship. The sword held high signifies that Justice ought not to be swayed either by friendship on the one hand, nor by hatred on the other...." But what about the sheep at her side (as well as those grazing peacefully in the meadows beyond), and is the animal on the right really a dog?

Held correctly suggested that this figure of Justice must have been intended to carry a religious reference. There can be no doubt that for Rubens a serpent trampled underfoot frequently meant sin or heresy (as—amongst many possible examples—in the sketch in the Metropolitan Museum showing *Christ*

*Triumphant through the Eucharist*). The sheep must surely allude to the Christian faithful (as in the parable of Christ as the Good Shepherd), here securely protected by the figure of Justice. The animal darting away to the right is thus probably a fox, as Held proposed, symbolizing heresy. All this is reinforced by the brilliant evocation of sunlight breaking through the dark that threaten to envelop the figure but are now dispelled by what seems to be the golden promise of celestial intervention. More than in almost any other of his later landscapes, the luminous glow of the sun on the horizon and in the sky seems to be symbolic, carrying the clear promise of hope and calm.

It would be wrong, however, simply to call this sketch an allegory of Divine Justice, as has sometimes been the case. Ripa clearly describes Divine Justice as blindfolded and dressed in white and accompanied by a number of other attributes that are not present here. The present sketch formed a pendant to another, now in the National Museum in Tokyo, showing a seated and crowned female figure with *putti* collecting the abundant fruit of an inverted cornucopia. This work, in other words, represented *Plenty*, but it too, with a smiling sun above, and a trampled purse of worldly possessions below, carries religious connotations, suggesting the *Plenty* that comes as a consequence of Faith. The full allegorical meaning of the present sketch, therefore, must be "Justice Triumphant over Sin and Heresy through True Faith."

It seems likely that this sketch, like its companion piece in Tokyo, was intended as a design for a tapestry. Unless intended for a tapestry (or an engraving, which seems much less likely), the figure would hardly have held an upraised sword in her *left* hand. In both cases the sketches have been extended by vertical painted additions (by Rubens himself) to both sides, perhaps in order to give prospective clients the possibility of a slightly broader composition (or perhaps simply to fill in a broader wall space available for a tapestry). In the figural type and in the handling of paint the sketch is probably to be dated just after the completion the Medici cycle (in both cases the sketches show a strikingly effective handling of lead white), possibly about the same time as the sketches for the Eucharist cycle (see *The Four Evangelists*, pp. 59–62; and *Allegory of Hope*, pp. 63–66). A dating of around 1626–1628 therefore seems the most likely. Indeed this was just the time in which Rubens was most involved with allegorical themes relating to the defeat of heresy and sin through true Faith; but for whom the present sketch was intended must remain the subject of further research.

PROVENANCE

{73}

Charles-Henri, Comte de Heym; Beauvais sale, London, 1739; James Harris (1709-1780); his son, 1st Earl of Malmesbury (d. 1820); by descent to the 6th Earl, Greywell Hill, Basingstoke, Hampshire; [E.V. Thaw & Co., New York, from 1972].

EXHIBITED

*Pictures from Hampshire Houses*, London, Agnew's, 1957, no. 12; *Oil Sketches and Smaller Pictures by Sir Peter Paul Rubens*, London, Agnew's, 1961, no. 34; *P.P. Rubens: Paintings, Oil Sketches, Drawings*, Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 1977, no.83 (with pendant).

LITERATURE

Benedict Nicolson, "Pictures from Hampshire Houses," *Burlington Magazine*, xcix (1957), p. 274, fig. 34; Michael Jaffe, "Unpublished Drawings by Rubens in French Museums," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, lxxv (1965), p. 177, fig. 3; Egbert Haverkamp Begemann, *The Achilles Series (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, Part x)*, London, 1975, p. 46; *Held, Oil Sketches*, 1980, no. 273, Pl. 267 (no. 274, Pl. 268, Colorplate 15 for the pendant).



# The Holy Family under the Apple Tree, with the Infant Saint John the Baptist, Elizabeth, and Zacharias

OIL ON PANEL

30 × 35 CENTIMETRES (11<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> INCHES)

AGNEW'S, LONDON AND NEW YORK

RUBENS INAUGURATED THE last decade of his life with one of his greatest triumphs in the field of religious painting: The St. Ildefonso Altarpiece now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Painted in 1631–32 for the chapel of the Brotherhood of St. Ildefonso in the Church of St. Jacob op den Coudenberg in Brussels, Rubens deliberately returned to the old-fashioned format of a triptych for one of the most resplendent of all his altarpieces. It was commissioned by the Archduchess Isabella (see *Triumph of the Eucharist* oil sketches) in memory of her deceased husband the Archduke Albert, who had founded the Brotherhood in Lisbon in 1588, and in Brussels in 1603 after he became Regent of the Netherlands. When opened, the altarpiece shows the miracle of St. Ildefonso, receiving a chasuble from the Virgin in thanks for his defense of the Immaculate Conception. On the wings Rubens painted the Archduke with his Patron Saint, St. Albert of Louvain, and the Archduchess with hers, St. Elizabeth of Hungary. When closed, the wings come together to present a single image of the Holy Family with St. John the Baptist and his parents, Elizabeth and Zacharias. It is a delightfully sylvan scene of the two families, in which age and infancy are enchantingly combined, all the more touching because of the striking contrast it forms with the sumptuously formal and solemn representation of the vision of St. Ildefonso on the interior. The present work is the preparatory sketch for this scene, but still more informal—it seems quite homely—than the final result. There the figures appear more static than those in the sketch: particularly Elizabeth, eager to present her son to the Holy Family, is here invested with a sense of forward movement that is only enhanced by the torsion of the chubby body of the infant St. John. Rarely had Rubens—always an expert at depicting lively young children

and babies—showed so charmingly playful an interchange between the infant Christ and baby Baptist. At the same time Zacharias holds out a branch of the apple tree to the Infant Christ, while Joseph—here much more rustic than the grave figure on the altarpiece—looks on intently. In this way Rubens achieves a remarkable interchange of gazes between the two children and between their two aged fathers. St. Anne's gaze also seems to be one of great intensity; the only figure not quite engaged in this interchange is the demure Virgin, who casts her eyes downwards—though perhaps she too directs her look, in this case to the eager St. John.

The apple branch offered by Zacharias is presumably an allusion, as Held noted, to Christ's resolve to take on himself the burden of original sin in order to redeem man (the fact that it is indeed an apple branch is made much clearer in the final painting, where Zacharias offers the branch with two very clearly depicted apples). Held also correctly pointed out the likelihood of a simultaneous allusion to the passage in the Song of Songs so often taken to evoke the love of the Virgin for Christ: "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste...."

Several differences between the sketch and the final painting have already been noted. But the very format of the sketch—almost square compared to the high composition of the altarpiece—suggest that it might have been painted when Rubens (or his patrons) had still not decided to make a triptych, and had thus not yet thought of the composition as having to be divided across two separate panels. It may be that there was another intermediate stage, with a modello closer to the final version that would have been provided to the studio. If so, it is lost, and we are left with this most informal of sketches, where the painting is still very free, particularly in the broad and briskly vigorous brushwork in the tree, in the flowing garments, and in passages such as the heavy white strokes indicating the cloth in which the Infant Christ is held. As usual in the works of the last decade, contours are very broad indeed, and the landscape and sky are treated with a glowing and brilliantly nuanced range of colours. Little concerned with physiognomic precision, Rubens here conveys all the warmth and vitality that characterize some of his best and most intimate works.

#### PROVENANCE

Somers-Cocks family; Sir Charles McGrigor (Christie's, London, June 25, 1971, no. 11); Private Collection, London.

#### LITERATURE

Michael Jaffé, "Rediscovered Oil Sketches by Rubens—II," *The Burlington Magazine*, cxi (1969), pp. 533–34, fig. 8; Hans Vlieghe, *Saints (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, Part VIII)*, London, 1972–73, II, no. 118; *Held, Oil Sketches*, no. 413, Pl. 402.

# Diana and her Nymphs Hunting Fallow Deer

OIL ON PANEL

23.5 × 52.6 CENTIMETRES (9½ × 20¾ INCHES)

COLLECTION OF MR. AND MRS. A. ALFRED TAUBMAN

THE LAST MAJOR commission Rubens received before his death in 1640 was to design a series of eighteen paintings of hunts and related subjects for the *Bóveda de Palacio* in the Royal Palace in Madrid. On June 22, 1639 Philip IV's brother, the Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand, informed him that work had already begun on the series; while a month later he noted that all the sketches, by Rubens himself, had already been done. It is clear from the documents that the final paintings were to be executed by the workshops of Rubens and his friend, the famous animal painter Frans Snyders. As in the case of the decoration of the Torre de la Parada, Philip VI's new hunting lodge built on a hill nine miles from Madrid, Rubens supplied the oil sketches for the paintings but had no part in the final execution himself. At least fifty-four oil sketches survive for the Torre de la Parada commission, all painted around 1636; but only seven for the Hunts series for the *Bóveda del Palacio*. The present sketch thus supplies particularly precious testimony not only about the commission, but for the extraordinarily fine and delicate quality of Rubens's oil sketches at this late stage of his life. Other artists often show signs of old age—a wavering hand, for example, or a patchy application of paint, whether deliberate or not—in their late works, but not so Rubens. The Hunt sketches, like those for the Torre de la Parada, are assured and scintillating works. As the Taubman sketch so clearly reveals, Rubens prepared his small panels by the broad application of a thin brown wash over the whole surface of the ground. Then, using the point of the brush and a darker brown, he swiftly sketched in the main elements of the composition. After this he enlivened the whole by adding





crucial suggestions of colour at strategic points within the composition—here the lovely purple grey of Diana’s billowing cloak, the salmon pink of the nymph rushing across the scene in the foreground, the browns of the deer, the grey and white of the leading hound and the one at the rear, and charming suggestion of greenery around the nymph at the right. Finally, with his characteristic *savoir-faire* Rubens added the thicker touches of white that so enliven the work as a whole, and the brilliant hint of sky on the horizon. In terms of vigour and flair such a sketch takes one back to the very best of Rubens’s sketches for his earliest hunt scenes, above all those painted for the Elector Maximilian of Bavaria around 1615–1616. There is no discernible falling off of his pictorial powers in this late work of the middle of 1639. Compared to a sketch such as the London *Lion Hunt* for example, the present work is perhaps less economical in its descriptive detail (though it is economical and suggestive enough), but in many ways it is more charming, particularly in the suggestion of atmosphere and landscape detail, both of which especially appealed to Rubens in the last decade of his career. As Held noted, this treatment of Diana hunting, a subject which Rubens painted in one form or another throughout his life, is “the most graceful and the least sanguinary.” The group on the extreme right of a nymph holding three hounds on a leash and clinging to a tree with her left arm is borrowed from a composition—preserved in a drawing in the British Museum—by one of Rubens’s favourite sixteenth century artists, Giulio Romano.

A large painting of this scene survives in the Museum at Nîmes; it is probably not the original canvas sent from Rubens’s workshop in Antwerp to Madrid in 1640, but rather an early copy of that work. Furthermore, as in the case of several other sketches for this series, a tapestry based on it also survives. Coming from the large seventeenth century manufactory of Daniel Eggermans in Brussels, it now belongs to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

The *Hunt of Diana* was certainly intended as a pendant to a *Death of Actaeon*, that pitiless story from classical mythology which shows the punishment of Actaeon for unwittingly having come across Diana bathing with her nymphs. Both huntress and goddess of chastity, an angry Diana changed the young huntsman into a deer, who was then torn apart by his own hounds. In the sketch that was made to accompany the present one, Rubens chose to show not the moment of transformation from huntsman into deer, from hunter, in other words to hunted (as was usually the case), but rather the still crueler moment in which Actaeon, already shown as a magnificent deer, is assailed by his own dogs. The present *Hunt of Diana*, then, provides a kind of respite from this grim event, as it shows the Goddess and her attendant nymphs occupied with one of her most characteristic activities, shown, as so often, in a wooded and pastoral setting. The other surviving sketches from this series are divided between mythological subjects and more straightforward hunts: a *Death of Adonis*, a *Death of the Stag of Silvia* (a subject taken from the Aeneid), a *Hercules Strangling the Nemean Lion*, a *Bear Hunt*, and a *Hunt of the Wild Bull*.

## PROVENANCE

Miss E. Dickens (?) sale, London (Christie's), 31 March (anonymous part of the Beauchamp sale), lot 113; purchased by Fenouil; Tomas Harris, London; purchased by John Nieuwenhuys, Brussels (d. 1982) in 1955; sale, London (Sotheby's), New York, 2 June 1989, lot 17.

## EXHIBITED

Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, October–December 1965, No. 203a.

## LITERATURE

Svetlana Alpers, *The Decoration of the Torre de la Parada (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, IX)*, Brussels-London-New York, 1971, p. III, note 237; Erik Duverger, "Tapijten naar Rubens en Jordaens in het bezit van het Antwerps handelsvennootschap Fourment van Hecke," *Artes Textiles. Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis van de tapijt-, borduur- en textielkunst*, VII, 1971, p. 141; Held, *Oil Sketches*, no. 223; Wolfgang Adler, *Landscapes and Hunting Scenes I (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, XVII, vol. 1)*, London-Oxford-New York, 1982, p. 150; Arnout Balis, *Landscapes and Hunting Scenes II (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, XVIII, vol. 2)*, London-Oxford-New York, 1986, Cat. Nos. 21 and 21a; Arnout Balis, "Rubens' Jachtaferelen: Bedenkingen by een Onderzoek," *Academia Analecta, Mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België*, XLVII, 1986, 1, pp. 118–120 and fig. 6.



# The Last Supper

OIL ON PANEL

61.8 × 21.5 CENTIMETRES (24¼ × 19 INCHES)

COLLECTION OF MR. AND MRS. A. ALFRED TAUBMAN

BY THE END OF 1632, Rubens had been paid 1,000 guilders for an altarpiece of the *Last Supper* for the chapel of the Holy Sacrament in the church of St. Romuald in Mechlin. The altarpiece consisted of a *Last Supper* which now survives in the Brera in Milan, and two predella panels showing *The Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* and *Christ Washing the Feet of the Apostles* both still preserved in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon. It has correctly been assumed, on both stylistic and documentary grounds, that the altarpiece was begun in 1631, when Rubens must have received the commission from Catherine Lescuyer to paint a work that would double as an altarpiece for the above mentioned chapel and as an epitaph painting for her father, Pauwels Lescuyer. A preliminary sketch for the *Last Supper* survives in Moscow, while the present sketch was made by Rubens after the final painting to serve as a *modello* for an engraving of the work by Boethius a Bolswert. Since Boethius died on March 25, 1633, the sketch can hardly have been painted later than 1632.

Rubens often made *modelli* after his paintings to serve as the basis for engravings, which then disseminated the fame of his works even further, and were adapted by other artists to serve as the basis of their own compositions. Such *modelli* took a variety of forms: sometimes the task of copying the original work was assigned to a pupil (or even to the engraver himself), and Rubens would then correct or alter the preliminary drawing by retouching it himself; sometimes the preliminary drawing would be entirely by his own hand; sometimes he made a *modello* in oil on paper stuck to panel or canvas; and most rarely of all—as in the

case of the Taubman sketch—he prepared a highly finished grisaille sketch on panel. Such sketches, generally from the last decade of his life—count amongst the most beautiful of his preliminary works for engravings after his own compositions. The comparatively monochromatic handling of these sketches has generally led to them being called *grisailles*, but in fact—as is clear from the present work—the black and grey tonalities are subtly and variously modulated by the addition of a very beautiful range of blue, lilac, and purple hues. The whole is then brilliantly enlivened by Rubens's characteristic additions of cream and white highlights. The overall shimmering effect is further enhanced by the fact that as so often Rubens allowed much of the yellow-brown ground to show through, with the result that the surface of the paint itself varies from very thin, where the exposed ground serves to lighten the overall darkness of the scene, to dense and thickly painted areas, most notably the sources of illumination such as the candles and their reflections both on garments and glass.

Rubens's indebtedness to his Italian sources has generally been commented upon; but his relationship with his native Flemish tradition has often been overlooked. In the case of the present sketch he reaches back into the tradition in two significant ways. There can be no question that in preparing a subtly modulated *grisaille* sketch to serve as a *modello* for an engraving he was recalling two of Peter Bruegel's most beautiful small paintings, the *Death of the Virgin* (Upton House, Oxfordshire) and *Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery* (Courtauld Institute of Art, London, Princes' Gate Collection). Both of these works were used—and intended to be used—as the basis for engravings; and Rubens himself owned the *Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery*. And while the striking nocturnal setting (along with the youthful apostle on the left balancing Judas) reflect his study of works by Caravaggio such as the *Calling of St. Matthew*, the placement of the apostles in a circular fashion round a square table has very strong Netherlandish roots. To some extent the idea reaches far back, to Dirk Bouts's great *Eucharist* triptych in St. Peter's in Louvain; but its most direct precedent is in fact to be found in a work by Rubens's own teacher, Otto van Veen. It is much more van Veen's own nocturnal *Last Supper* of 1593–94 (just about the time when Rubens was apprenticed to him) for the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament in Antwerp Cathedral that influenced him, rather than any work by Caravaggio or the 1591 *Last Supper* by Ludovico Cigoli in Empoli, which has also occasionally been cited as a source. Of course the variety of expressions that animate the faces of the Apostles—attentiveness, alarm, anxiety, devotion, and fear—reveal Rubens's own

study of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, but nothing could be more different than the setting of the two works, or the disposition of the figures round the table.

In this work Rubens has chosen to show two very different aspects of his subject. On the one hand, as befits a work destined for a chapel dedicated to the Holy Sacrament, the moment in which Christ blesses the bread, with the chalice of wine before him, is depicted. It shows, in other words, the central moment of the Eucharistic sacrifice. On the other hand, this Last Supper also portrays the moment in which it dawns upon the apostles that one amongst them is about to betray Christ. Judas looks away from the holy scene and out of the picture in terrible perturbation, while the pointing finger of the apostle next to St. Peter singles him out as the guilty one. The scene thus represents a perfect conflation of the theological significance of the Last Supper and those passages in Matthew (26, 20–26) and Mark (14, 17–22) which announce the imminent betrayal of Christ by Judas. “And as they did eat, he said “Verily I say unto you one of you shall betray me.... Then Judas which betrayed him answered and said, Master is it I? He said unto him, Thou hast said. And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body.” At the height of the mystery, then, Judas, in full awareness of his rupture of faith, turns away from Christ and the other apostles, his dark and menacing form unable to obscure the candle that symbolizes Christ as the *lux mundi*, the light of the world. Only Rubens could have made so much of the purely pictorial juxtaposition of the intense darkness of the crook of his arm, and the brilliant flame of the candle that extends its light across the table to both the bread and the wine and finds its counterpart in the golden aureole that encircles Christ's head.

Julius Held has rightly commented on the distinctive, elaborate, and rather unusual setting of this *Last Supper*. But whether he was right to claim that within this solemn and vaulted setting there are clear references to Jewish religious practices is less certain. Held suggested that the high table at the right with the open book placed between two candles “is obviously meant to be understood as the almemar, from which the Holy scriptures are read,” and that the porticoed shrine further back “is surely the tabernacle in which the sacred books (actually scrolls) are kept.” Perhaps such elements do indeed allude to aspects of synagogue architecture; but it seems unlikely that Rubens would deliberately have intended his *Last Supper* to be read as taking place in a synagogue—however appealing it may be to read the work as standing, in medieval fashion, for the replacement of *synagoga* by *ecclesia*, of the old dispensation by the new, of the Era before Grace by the

Era of Grace, at the moment of the Institution of the Eucharist. Whatever the case, this is a grand and solemn setting, testifying once again to Rubens's high architectural inventiveness. The effect of introducing such a setting, with its clear references both to Italian Renaissance architecture and to Roman triumphal arches, would have been all the more striking within the medieval architecture of St. Romuald in Mechelen; but even within the compass of the small sketch one cannot fail to be struck by the power, intensity, and drama of a scene that had so often, in the hands of lesser artists, been reduced to a stale and bland formula. Even in as unpromising a subject as this, Rubens was capable of wholly reinvigorating one of oldest and most familiar subjects in all of art.

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Jacques de Wit, Antwerp, by 1722; Jacques de Wit sale, Antwerp, May 15, 1741, lot 102; Jeronimus Tonneman sale, Amsterdam, October 21, lot 7; Gerrit Braamcamp sale, Amsterdam, July 31, lot 196, bought by Jacob J. de Bruin; de Bruin sale, Amsterdam, September 12, 1798, lot 44, bought by Beekman; William Toward sale, London (Christie's), May 5, 1826, lot 49; Anonymous sale, London, 1849, bought by John Smith, and sold to T. Gambier Parry in 1850; Sieland family, Leipzig; acquired in 1937 by Wassily Mertens, Frankfurt am Main; Peter Mertens, Frankfurt am Main; Mertens sale, London (Sotheby's), December 12, 1984, lot 47.

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# The Triumph of Henri IV

OIL ON PANEL

49.5 × 83.5 CENTIMETRES (19½ × 32⅞ INCHES)

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

RUBENS ONLY COMPLETED one half of the largest commission he ever received; but it was through no fault of his own. In 1622, he signed the contract to deliver forty-eight large paintings to decorate two galleries in the newly constructed Palais de Luxembourg in Paris. They were commissioned by the Queen Mother of France, Marie de Medicis, and were intended to glorify and justify her regency and the reign of her deceased husband, Henri IV of France. The first cycle of twenty-four paintings—the renowned Medici cycle—was devoted to the Queen Mother herself, and was completed and installed by February 1625; but Rubens had hardly begun painting the second cycle, relating to the Deeds and Triumphs of Henri IV, when Marie was banished from France in 1631. Work had constantly been stalled on the project, thanks to the machinations of men like the Cardinal de Richelieu, not only against Rubens but against the Queen herself. Richelieu was determined to set her son, Louis XIII, against her, and he was all too aware that Rubens's own political interest in effecting a peace between England and Spain ran counter to his own plans. No wonder, then, that Richelieu strove to find an Italian artist to paint the Henri IV cycle; but even as late as 1630, Rubens was still working on his designs for the project, and had even begun to paint some of the final canvases. To no avail, however, for at the beginning of the next year Marie was banished from Paris to Compiègne, and when it became clear that Richelieu's plans for Louis XIII excluded her entirely, she fled from France and ended her life in exile. In this way the grand plans



for Rubens to adorn the second gallery in the Luxembourg palace with a cycle devoted to the Life, Deeds, and Triumphs of Henri IV came to nought.

Fortunately a series of ten oil sketches and five large paintings survive to give some idea of the grandeur of the projected cycle—so grand, in fact, that Rubens himself worried (as early as 1625) that “the theme is so large and magnificent that it would suffice for ten galleries.” The surviving paintings are for the most part rather mediocre studio productions; the best is perhaps the huge *Triumph of Henri IV*, measuring 380 × 690 centimetres (that is approximately 12½ by 22½ feet), in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. It was intended to adorn the end wall of the East Gallery in the Luxembourg Palace, as the culminating scene of the King’s glorious deeds and victories. This was to be shown, as the contract of 1622 stipulated, “in the manner of the triumphs of the Romans.”

There has been much discussion about how best to interpret this magnificent procession, with Henri carried in triumph on a giant chariot drawn by splendid horses, crowned with the conqueror’s wreath by victory, followed by bound prisoners, and surrounded by a train of muscular men carrying trophies and blowing the instruments of victory. The whole cavalcade moves towards a triumphal arch *all’antica* (there was nothing quite like it in Paris at the time), while in the foreground there cowers a group of admiring awestruck women and infants. In his representation of the trophy-bearing train Rubens clearly recalled the powerful impression made upon him by Mantegna’s great cycle showing the *Triumphs of Caesar* which he had first seen in Mantua a quarter of a century earlier, and which had just been acquired by Charles I of England just a few years before he began painting the Henri IV cycle. But, as always with Rubens, there are other sources too, notably a relief by Giambologna of the *Triumph of Cosimo de’ Medici* on the base of the *Equestrian monument of Cosimo I* in Florence, and the famous triumphal reliefs on the Arch of Titus in Rome. It was certainly from the latter that Rubens derived the great *quadriga*, the Roman chariot on which Henri is carried in triumph, and the many standards that billow beside him. The great arch in Rubens’s painting itself recalls the Arch of Titus, while for the details of the soldiers, attendants, and bystanders Rubens not only remembered the Roman triumphs depicted on ancient cameos and gems, but also in the book by his old mentor Justus Lipsius, the *De militia Romana*, published in Antwerp in 1602. As in the case of his earlier paintings showing faithfully accoutred Roman soldiers and musicians—such as those in the Decius Mus and Constantine cycles—Rubens would also have consulted a number of other well-known



sourcebooks for such matters, such as Robert Valturius's much reprinted *De re militaria*, and the antiquarian Onofrio Panvinio's late sixteenth century work on Roman triumphs. All these elements are already visible in the Metropolitan sketch. It corresponds very closely to the final version in the Uffizi, and clearly served as the guide to Rubens's studio assistants in preparing it. There, under Rubens's supervision, they added a few more winged geniuses and *putti* in the sky, fleshed out the adornment of the triumphal arch, and changed. At the same time, Rubens was obliged to eliminate the foreground area still shown in the sketch, since the available space for the painting was changed at the last minute—just one more obstacle in the way of completing the cycle. Though a relatively minor difficulty, Rubens confessed that “I felt this keenly...so many obstacles at the beginning of this work seemed to me a bad omen for its success.”

It was not as if he neglected to labour with extraordinary care in working out this extraordinary recreation of an ancient triumph. In fact, no fewer than three other oil sketches preceded this one. The first, recently come to light in a private collection, shows Henri mounted directly on a single horse, but from the second sketch (in the Wallace Collection) onwards, Rubens shows him mounted on an ancient *quadriga*. At each stage the King grows in prominence. In the Wallace Collection sketch, which must date from early 1628, the relief-like procession still seems to recall Rubens's recently completed design for the *Triumph of the Church* in the Eucharist cycle, but the next sketch, in Bayonne, shows him grappling with the problem of intensifying the classical elements within the scene. He also added

the group of women and children on the left. Finally, in the Metropolitan sketch, Henri is shown as a fully-fledged Roman *imperator*, returning in triumph from a successful campaign.

There has been some debate about whether Rubens here intended to allude to one or the other of the French King's victories, such as the capture of Mantes or the Battle of Ivry. Held rightly noted that at least in the seventeenth century the victory at Ivry over the group of his French opponents known as The League was seen as the turning point in Henri's career. From then on he could devote himself to the affairs of peace rather than of war, and it is indeed significant that the first three sketches show Henri holding the palm of victory, while in the final sketch and in the painting he bears the olive branch of peace, thereby announcing the final non-military sequence in the gallery. But in the present sketch there are no specific allusions to Ivry whatsoever, and it seems clear that in it Rubens intended to recreate an ancient triumph in all its splendour, with Henri as its modern protagonist. No other sketch by him—not even his *Triumph of the Cardinal-Infante* for the entry of the King of Spain's son into Antwerp in 1636—shows such careful attention to the details of a Roman triumphal procession, and none so successfully conveys its pomp, grandeur, and vitality. The standards billow in the wind, the horses neigh, and one even seems to hear the sound of the ancient trumpets—reconstructed by Rubens with typical accuracy—as they announce the return from victory of the conquering hero.

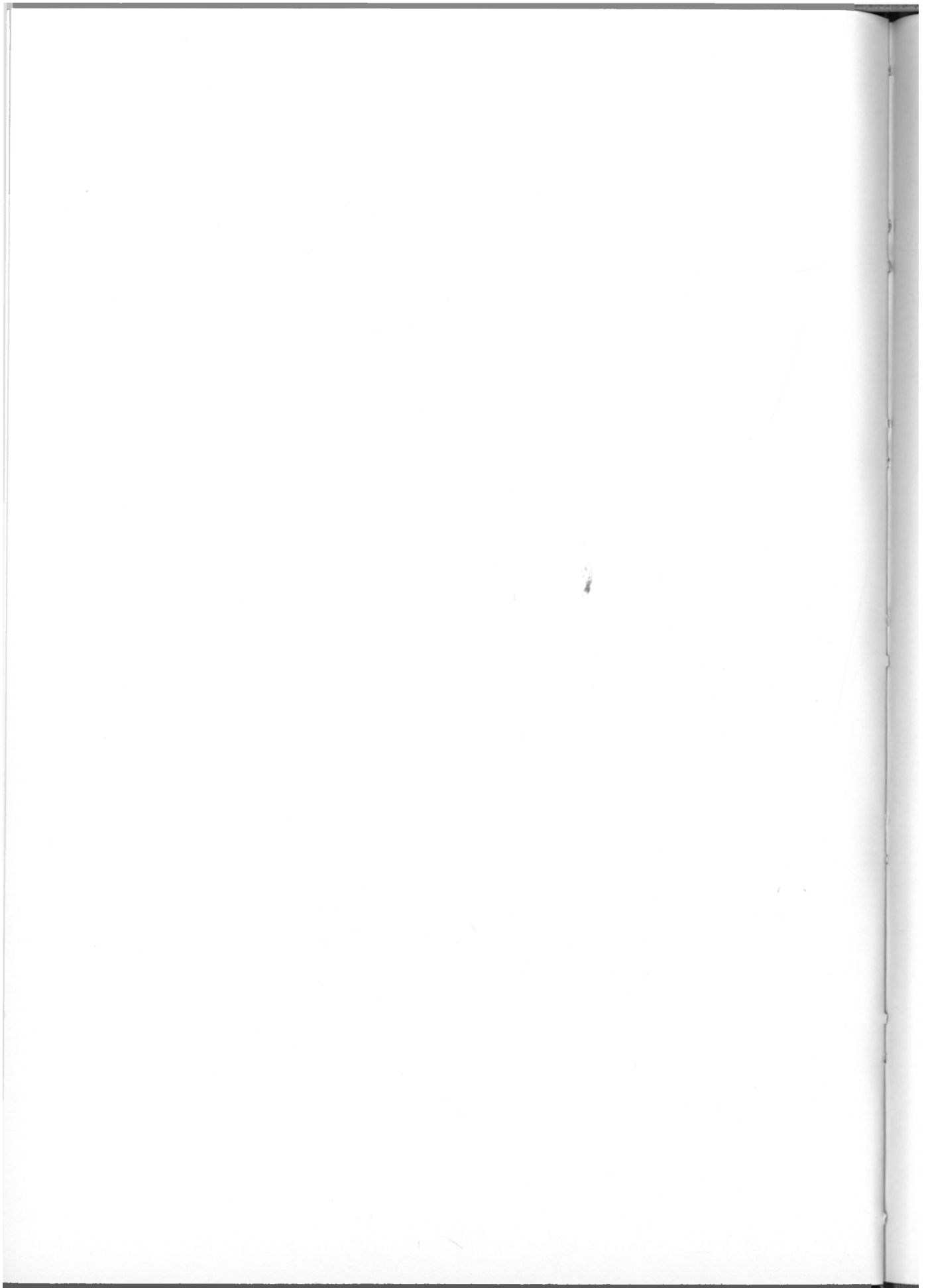
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