

PETER PAUL RUBENS

Flemish school, 1577 - 1640

Rubens, ^{the leading Flemish master of the seventeenth century} was born at Siegen in Westphalia on June 28, 1577. His father was Jan Rubens, an Antwerp lawyer who had left Flanders because of the prosecution of the Protestants. After his death in 1587, Rubens's mother returned to Antwerp and made the young boy into a page. In 1598, having received his training there from Tobias Verhaecht, Adam van Noort and Otto Venius, Rubens became a master in the Saint Luke's Guild of Antwerp. From 1600 to 1608 he was in Italy, entering the service of Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, in 1600. He stayed in Venice, Mantua, Rome and Genoa, where he painted portraits of the nobility, including the Spinola, Doria and Grimaldi families --and made copies after works by Michelangelo and Correggio. In 1603-4 he went to Spain for the first time, in the service of Vincenzo Gonzaga; he did works for the Duke of Lerma and made copies after paintings of Titian's. In 1608 he returned to Antwerp, and settled there after the death of his mother ; and the following year he was appointed painter to the Brussels Court of the Archduke Albert and the Infanta Isabella, and married Isabella Brant, by whom he had three children. Between 1609 and 1621 he did numerous paintings for churches in Antwerp and won international fame. Between 1622 and 1625 he paid visits to Paris, in connection with the cycle of paintings commissioned from him by Marie de Medici for the Luxembourg Palace. The cartoons for the tapestry series of the Story of Constantine (see below) also date from this period. Isabella Brant died in 1626. In 1625-27 Rubens did cartoons for the tapestry series depicting the Life of Achilles and in 1627-28 for the Eucharist series. In 1628 he went back to Spain on a diplomatic mission. He did portraits there of Philip IV, who appointed him Secretary of the Netherlands Privy Council, and of other members of the Spanish Royal Family. In 1629-30 he visited London as envoy to Charles I, who knighted him ; and in 1630 he married the sixteen-year old Helena Fourment, by whom he had five children. In 1630-34 he did sketches for the Whitehall Ceiling in London.

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In 1635 he purchased the Castle of Steen, and this estate, to which he virtually retired during the last years of his life, and the countryside around would become the inspiration for his most important landscape paintings. At the same time in 1636-38 he did paintings for Philip IV's hunting lodge near Madrid, the Torre de la Parada. Following his death from a paralytic stroke on May 30, 1640, an inventory was taken of the extensive collection he had formed, and of the paintings remaining in his studio. He maintained a large workshop, particularly in the Antwerp house that he occupied during his middle years --employing numerous assistants and specialist collaborators. His letters show him as a many-sided man -- diplomat, statesman and humanist as well as a painter.

The Triumphant Entry of Constantine into Rome

oil on panels; 20 x 25½ ins.

Condition

Good

Provenance

(?) Louis XIII of France (1622-23 ; see below) ; Saint-Marcel tapestry shop, Paris : Marc de Comans (1623) - François de la Planche (1627)⁽¹⁾ ; (?) Henri de Valois (died 1676)⁽²⁾ ; Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, Palais Royal, Paris (before 1723 ; sold in England, 1793)⁽³⁾ ; Earl of Liverpool, London ; sold Christie's, May 25, 1829, no.63 ; John Smith, England⁽⁴⁾ ; Hon.G.J.Vernon, England ; Newhouse Galleries, New York. Acquired by Dr Clowes in 1956.

Literature

(Dubois de Saint-Gelais), Description des Tableaux du Palais Royal, Paris, 1727, p.409, no.VI ; J.Smith, Catalogue

Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters, 9 vols., London, 1829-42, II, 1830, pp.204f., no.739⁵; A.von Hasselt, Histoire de P.P.Rubens, Brussels, 1840, p.284, no.583; G.F.Waagen, Treasures of Art in Great Britain, 3 vols., London, 1854, II, p.502, no. 14; A. Michiels, Catalogue des Tableaux et Dessins de Rubens, Paris, 1854, p.21, no.510; M.Rooses, L'Oeuvre de P.P.Rubens, 5 vols., Antwerp, 1886-92, III, 1890, p.213, no.723; D.Dubon, cat. of exhb., Constantine the Great, The Tapestries, the Designs, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Oct.-Nov. 1964, no.4a, ill., and (b) ~~vide~~, Tapestries from the Samuel H.Kress Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Phaidon Press, 1964, p.112, under cat.no.4, and pl.80; E.Williams, cat. of exhb., Gods and Heroes, Baroque Images of Antiquity, Widdenstein, New York, Oct.1968 - Jan.1969, under no.43.

Exhibited

(Exhb. of Orleans Gallery), 125 Pall Mall, London, Apr. 1793, no.61; British Institution, London, 1815, no.121⁶; Ind., 1959, no.50; A Benten Exhibition, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, Mar.-Apr. 1962, no.43; Northern European Painting, The Clowes Fund Collection, Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, Indiana, Mar.-Apr.1963 (no cat.); Philadelphia, 1964 (see lit.)

Versions

A copy is recorded by L.Puyvelde (Les Esquisses de Rubens, 1948 ed., p.28, no.6) as being on the Brussels art market in 1947 (ca. 40 x 60 cm.)⁷

The tapestry version woven from the cartoon (lost) in the Saint-Marcel shop in Paris in 1623-25 and given by Louis XIII to the Cardinal Francesco Barberini in Sept. 1625 is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Dubon, 1964, book, 1964b, no.4, ill.p.112. In reverse, central panel 10 ft.9 ins X 12 ft. 4 1/2 ins.). At least nine further sets of the tapestry series were made in Paris in the seventeenth century (ibid., pp.22ff.) One is in the Mobilier National, Paris (see Dubon, 1964 cat., p.42, fig.20 for the Entry). The composition

Versions, cont.

was engraved by N. Tardieu (1674-1749)⁽⁸⁾ and by Lorieux for J. Couché's Galerie du Palais Royal.⁽⁹⁾

This is one of a series of twelve preliminary oil-sketches made by Rubens between 1620 and 1625, as the basis for a set of tapestries woven for Louis XIII in Paris, depicting the story of Constantine.⁽¹⁰⁾ They were inventoried in 1627 as being from Rubens's own hand,⁽¹¹⁾ and their consistent technical brilliance confirms that he painted them himself. The exact circumstances of the commission and the date of execution of the sketches are not entirely clear, but it appears most probably that they were ordered directly by Louis XIII, either for himself or in his capacity as patron of the Saint-Marcel tapestry shop; and they are documented as being in the possession of Marc de Comans, co-director of the shop, by mid-January 1623.⁽¹²⁾ They were still in the Saint-Marcel shop in 1627, and subsequently passed into the Orléans Gallery. Henri de Valois may have owned them intermediately in the seventeenth century (see under provenance). In 1793 the set was sold in London, and was thereby broken up.

The subject of the Entry into Rome appears to have come fifth or sixth in the series as originally planned --after the Marriage of Constantine, Apparition of the Monogram of Christ, Laberum and Battle of the Milvian Bridge, and either before the Trophy (Victory crowning Constantine) or right after it, concluding the first half of the series.⁽¹³⁾ Eusebius's description in his Life of Constantine of the Emperor's triumphal entry into Rome after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 A.D. was in all probability the basis for this subject.⁽¹⁴⁾ As Constantine advances on horseback with a diadem on his head --followed by the mounted Imperial guards, one of whom carries the banner bearing the monogram of Christ, and by a man on foot carrying the Imperial fasces -- he is met outside an archway by the goddess Minerva, who holds in one hand a statuette of a winged victory; and a winged victory simultaneously places a laurel crown on his head. To the rear ¹⁵ a circular building appears, which may represent the

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Castel San Angelo, and fragments of Roman architecture appear in the foreground.⁽¹⁵⁾ Rubens appears to have based his design as a whole here on Roman Imperial reliefs, such as the one from the Arch of Constantine showing the triumphant entry of the victorious general;⁽¹⁶⁾ and he correspondingly used a relief-like composition, in order to evoke the look of antique triumph.

Notes.

1. The two were co-directors of the Saint-Marcel shop. For the first date, see below. The inventory taken at François de la Planche's death in Aug. 1627 shows that all twelve of the sketches for the Constantine series which had been brought to Paris were in his possession then ("douze petitz desseings peintz en huile sur des planches de bois, de la main de Pierre Paul Rubens, representant l'Histoire de Constantine"), as well as the twelve cartoons (referred to as "les dessins peintz à destrampe sur papier"); see J.J. Guiffrey, "Notes et Documents sur les Origines de la Manufacture de Gobelins et sur les Autres Ateliers Parisiens, pendant la première moitié du dix-septième siècle", (first pub. in Mémoires de la Société de l'Histoire de Paris, 19, 1892, pp.43ff.), in M. Fenaille, Etat Général des Tapisseries de la Manufacture des Gobelins depuis son origine jusqu'à nos jours, 5 vols., Paris, 1903-23, I, 1923, p.46. In the subsequent inventory of Sept. 1661 only the cartoons are listed (ibid., p.61). According to L. Burchard (Loan Exhibition of Works by Peter Paul Rubens, Kt, Wildenstein, London, Oct.-Nov. 1950, p.21, under cat.no.19), the sketches passed into the collection of Hippolyte de Comans, son of Marc, who succeeded his brothers Charles and Alexandre as the third director of the shop; but there appears to be no documentary support for this assumption.

2. His seal, or that of Adrien de Valois, is affixed to the back of the sketch from the series for the Battle of the Milvian Bridge now in the Wallace Collection, London (no.520; Wallace Collection Catalogues, Pictures and Drawings, London, 1920, pp.273f.). These two were successively historiographers to the French court in the
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Notes, cont.

3. See. for the sale of the present work, W. Buchanan, Memoirs of Painting....., 2 vols., London, 1828, I, pp.168f., no.6 ; C.Blanc, Le Trésor de la Curiosité, 2 vols., Paris, 1858, II, p.151 ; and C.Stryiński, La Galerie du Régent, Paris, 1913, p.188, no.478 (where the present sketch is referred to as being in the colln. of H.Lanquin, Paris, and as exhibited at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, 1887, no.199, which appears to be an error). Philippe died in 1723, and his descendant Philippe Egalité was responsible for the sale, which was conducted through the agency of Thomas Moore Slate and associates.

4. The art historian (see below, under lit.)

5. For further refs. to the sale of the work from the Orléans colln., see n.3

6. See A.Graves, A Century of Loan Exhibitions, 1813-1912, 5 vols., London, 1913-15, III, p.1159.

7. See n.12 below for the possibility that this may have been one of a complete set of replicas made by Rubens's assistants (high quality replicas of other sketches in the series are known).

8. C.G.Voorhelm Schneevogt, Catalogue des Estampes Gravées d'après Rubens....., Haarlem, 1873, p.219, no.18.7

9. 3 vols., Paris, 1786-1818, II, [p.113].

10. For the series as a whole, see also the following additional literature : E.Michel, Rubens, his Life, Work and Times, 2 vols., London-New York, 1899, II, pp.26f., 31, 33f. ; J.Burchardt, Rubens, Phaidon Press, 1938 ed., p.142 ; H.Gerhard Evers, Peter Paul Rubens, Munich, 1942, p.258 ; L.van Puyvelde, Rubens, Paris-New York, 1942, pp.141f. and 209f., n.138 ; Burchardt, 1950, cat., entry cited in n.1. ; Olivierfschetsen van Rubens, Museum Boymans, Rotterdam, 1953, pp.60ff., cat. nos. 37-41 (under no.41 there, part of the provenance for the present work).

Notes, cont.

is transferred to the Triumph of Rome sketch, but this appears mistaken) ; J.Coolidge, "Louis XIII and Rubens, the Story of the Constantine Tapestries", Gazette des Beaux Arts, 6^e ser., 67, 1966, pp.271ff.

11. See n.1 above. Apart from the thirteenth sketch of the Triumph of Rome, about which Guiffrey is said to have expressed reservations (see Fenaille, op.cit., I, p.245, n.3), the attribution to Rubens has never been doubted. It was strongly affirmed by, for example, Michel (see n.10). The fact that no tapestry was made from the thirteenth sketch suggests that it was rejected by Louis XIII and the Death of Constantine added in lieu (see Rotterdam cat., 1953, no.40, where this suggestion was first made, and Dubon, 1964b, p.10)

12. See Pieresc's letter to Rubens from Paris of Jan.13, 1623 (M.Rooses-C.Ruelens, ed., Correspondance de Rubens...., 6 vols., Antwerp, 1887-1909, III, 1900, pp.114ff.), where "Sgr Colmans" is reported as having admitted that he had in his possession "i disegni dei Cartoni".

According to the traditional view on the subject, arrangements were made for the designing of the tapestries while Rubens was in Paris in Jan.-Feb.1622. Dubon (1964b, pp.5ff.) considered it most likely, in default of more concrete evidence, that the commission was made specifically for the Saint-Marcchal shop. In his interpretation of the documents, the first four sketches -- rather than the first four cartoons -- had arrived in Paris by Nov.4, 1622 (The works in question are, however, specifically called "cartoni" in the relevant docs. ; see Pieresc's letters of Nov.24 and Dec.1, Correspondance, III, pp.78ff, 83ff.). Others were then received in Jan.1623, (with perhaps some following later). The cartoons were made up in Paris, by workers attached to the tapestry shop. Seven tapestry panels were ready by Sept.1625 (see under versions), and the remainder making up the Philadelphia Museum set were completed in Paris by Nov.1630

According to J.Coolidge's reconstruction, on the other

Notes, cont.

hand, (op.cit., pp.273ff.), Louis XIII commissioned the series between Nov.7, 1620 and April 11, 1621, probably suggesting the subject. Rubens painted the sketches himself, in Antwerp, and must have had his assistants make up a complete set of replicas. He arrived in Paris at the beginning of 1622, at the command of Marie de Medicis, bringing the original sketches with him. Louis had the sketches explained to him on his return to Paris, paid Rubens and kept them (for a year, before ceding them to the shop). Rubens, back in Antwerp by early March, then had assistants work up the full-scale cartoons (in tempera on paper ; cf.n.1) from the replicas. I am grateful to John Coolidge for discussing this reconstruction with me (1968) and amplifying the way in which he believes that it is implied by what can be extrapolated from the documents. For the political connotations of the series and the related question of contemporary figures being included in historical guise, see the contrasting interpretations by him and Dubon.

13. Dubon, 1964 cat., p.9 and 1964b, p.10, numbers this as the fifth subject ; Coolidge, op.cit., proposes the ^{but it came sixth,} ~~letter~~ position for it, with supporting arguments.

14. Bk.I, ch. XXXIX ; see Dubon, 1964b, p.34, for the suggestion of this source.

15. The imagery is exactly the same in the Philadelphia Museum tapestry, but framed there within a border that was also designed by Rubens himself.

16. See Dubon, 1964b, pp.26, 112 (comparing the Triumph and more especially the Clementia relief panels of Marcus Aurelius, ca. 176 A.D., Museo dei Conservatori, Rome) ; and for the more general question of Rubens's use of antique sources in the Constantine series. cf. F.Goeler van Ravensburg, Rubens und die Antike....., Jena, 1882, pp.185ff. ; E.Kieser, "Antikes im Werk des Rubens", Münchener Jahrbuch der Bildenden Kunst, 10, 1933, p.126. In the Clementia relief the movement is from left to right, as in the

Notes, cont.

present sketch ; whereas in the tapestry version the composition is reversed. The putto blowing a trumpet recalls similar winged figures in the spandrels of the arches of Titus and Septimius Severus, which Rubens evidently knew (see Williams, 1968, citing two ^{Rubens} drawings of about 1620 for the sculptor who decorated the portal of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, discussed in ^{the} cat., Rubens Drawings and Oil Sketches in American Collections, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Univ., 1956, no.19). The figure of Minerva, absent from the Aurelian reliefs cited by Dubon, is to be taken as an invention of Rubens's own. For the reasonable authenticity of the antique armor shown in the Constantine series, see H.D.Rodee, "Rubens' Treatment of Antique Armor", Art Bull., 49, 1967, p.227.